

The Pesach Lesson: To Pass Over

By Rabbi Bernard S. Raskas
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These are days of wine and matzos. Passover, in the uniqueness of its flavors and tastes, truly is set apart from all of the other Jewish festivals. Central to it all, of course, is the seder ritual and experience.

Every Jew strives to be with family or at least fellow Jews to participate in this great spiritual event which marks our decisive beginning as a people.

This feeling has been recognized by the U.S. Army, which arranges for every Jewish soldier to attend a seder. It is the practice for the Christian soldiers to take over for these Jews, and the favor is returned on Easter.

In connection with this is a delightful story that occurred during World War II. A Jewish sergeant was given permission to leave his heavily guarded base to attend a seder in town. He returned late at night, swaying slightly because he had imbibed more than the traditional four cups of wine. The sentry, who happened to be his friend, challenged him with "What's the password?"

The sergeant answered sleepily, "Seder."

At which point the sentry replied, "Pass over."

Passover, in fact, is an accurate English translation of the Hebrew "Pesach," because God did pass over the homes of the Hebrew people, enslaved in Pharaoh's Egypt, to save their first-born children. The word "Passover" is worthy of further consideration.

To begin, consider the many occurrences in our life that we should learn to pass over. We should school ourselves to pass over slights and imagined insults. All too often, because we cannot control our anger and pass over a minor conflict, it rages like a fire out of bonds and devours everything in its path. It is in this sense that we use the phrase, "Our wrath consumes us."

I recall the story of a husband and wife who were quarreling bitterly. He did not like a new recipe. Her pride hurt, she shouted her indignation. His intelligence was insulted and he roared out his wounded feelings.

Suddenly their son, age five, entered the room. He carried a large hair brush and he fixed his reproving eyes on both of them. There was a long, hushed seriousness, and then the tot said, "I don't know which one needs to be spanked." Shamed and caught in their folly, the parents

broke into laughter.

I have seen life-long partners, successful business people, destroy themselves in one burst of anger. I have witnessed brothers and sisters seal their lips permanently over the non-sense of a quarrel. I have observed friends change overnight into bitter enemies because of a chance remark.

All because they could not pass over one incident. All because they did not know that seder means order and harmony, not just for one or two nights of Passover, but every night. All because they did not understand that the wind of anger blows out the lamp of intelligence.

Another important lesson we might learn this week is to pass over the outward differences of people to see their true inner quality.

Is it not about time that we understood that the color of a person's skin has nothing to do with the color of his or her brains?

Is it not about time that we realized that the shape of a person's nose has nothing to do with the shape of the soul?

Is it not about time that we accepted the fact that the slant of a person's eyes has nothing to do with his or her slant on life?

It is said in the Talmud that when two persons, one rich and one poor, appeared before the court of Rabbi Ismal ben Elisha, he would order them to dress alike so that the judges would pass over external differences and concentrate on equal justice.

This practice has its counterpart in the story of the president of a small railroad who once sent a complimentary pass to the president of a large railroad and asked him to reciprocate. The recipient immediately returned the pass with the following note: "How dare a president of an 11-mile-long railroad compare himself to the president of a railroad empire whose tracks stretch for thousands of miles?"

The president of the little railroad responded, "It is true that the tracks of your railroad are much longer than my railroad, but my tracks are just as wide."

Finally, I would like to suggest that the most important attitude that any person can learn is to pass over personal troubles.

The fact is, everyone has problems. It is well put in the Yiddish saying, "Yeder einer haught sain peckeleh" (Every human being has his or her own personal pack of troubles). But the essential difference between people is how they learn to bundle the pack. Some tie their troubles loosely

and are continually falling over them. Others tie up their troubles tightly and simply pass over them to more important things.

Here's a very personal example. This past year I was chaplain to the Minnesota State Legislature. I went daily to offer the opening prayer. As soon as the prayer ended, the room would come alive with action and parliamentary procedure. But one legislator would sit completely calm and collected.

He never left his seat, and yet he was one of the most respected of the legislators. He had muscle paralysis due to polio, but his fine mind and honest heart held him in good standing with his colleagues. He didn't have to rush around to influence others, they came to him for counsel.

He would receive no sympathy because he simply didn't want or need it. He had developed an inner strength and will to carry on and make his life useful. He had risen above his troubles, and he commanded a position far superior to most of his colleagues.

This man is a daily inspiration to me of what a person determined to pass over troubles can do. There is not a person alive who could not do the same if he or she so willed it.

On the seventh day of Passover it is traditional to read "Shir Ha-Shirim" (the Song of Songs). The reason is to be found in the following verses, which incidentally constitute my favorite biblical poem:

"For lo, the winter is past/The buds appear on the earth/The time of singing is come/The voice of the turtle dove is heard in the land/Arise, my friend, it is time to come away."

For lo, we must pass over our quarrels, pass over our inequalities, pass over our troubles. It is a time to sing a joyful song. Arise, for it is a time for new life, new hope, the immortality of the earth.

(Rabbi Bernard S. Raskas serves Temple of Aaron, St. Paul, Minn., and is the author of the trilogy "Hearts of Wisdom.")

GENEVA (JTA) — Israel is participating in the first United Nations conference on peaceful uses of nuclear energy. The Israeli delegation to the conference which ended April 10 is headed by Hannan Baron, former deputy director general of the Foreign Ministry. Ambassador Mohammed Ibrahim Shaker, the Egyptian representative to the United Nations here, was elected president of the conference.



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Passover

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