



## Pesach

**Jeremy Benstein**

Pesach is upon us, and thoughts turn naturally to two things: freedom, and of course, food. Interestingly there is a connection between the two that is expressed in the way we celebrate the festival, which we also see in the other great pilgrimage festival, Sukkot. For in the same way that Pesach, with its unleavened bread and arduous dietary restrictions is clearly in some profound way about food, Sukkot, second only to Pesach in quantity and type of strenuous preparations, focuses on where, in what and how you live—it's theme is shelter. We have here two of the central components of human existence, food and shelter, and most significantly, each holiday requires us to experience them in their most basic, elemental and transient forms.



Crackers and huts are made in a hurry. Both chagim mandate a form of enforced poverty – eating matzah, the bread of affliction; living in a shack, the most modest of dwellings. These holidays are great social equalizers: fulfilling their two central obligations make the wealthy more like the poor, and no one, rich or poor, is excluded by the celebrations.

Sukkot and Pesach are also paradigm examples of the Jewish synthesis of history and nature, in theory and practice. For instance, matzah, the mandatory unleavened bread, is the poor bread of affliction and slavery, or the hastiness of the flight to freedom, yet it's also the new grain, as yet unfermented in the nascent springtime. Likewise, the booths of Sukkot hark back to the temporary dwellings of the children of Israel wandering in the desert, as well as representing the shacks field workers use bringing in the fall harvest.

The experience of living on matza for a week, or living in a sukka for a week, is an intense focus of observance, and each has its own combination of material humility and spiritual richness. I would like to suggest that the real challenge in these observances is

not whether or how we do them, but rather, what we do after them that has a huge effect. For many, the cleaning and preparations for Pesach, the clearing of the house of all the 'undesirables', are the essence. But how many of us give thought to the return to 'normalcy' after the fact, the rush to consume all the delicacies that we may have done without for a week? The restocking of our pantries? What comes back, what stays out: and since matza is traditionally seen as a symbol for character traits and behavior, I'm not just referring here to carbohydrates.

Pesach is a good time to think about these basics in life, which in many ways are the essence of freedom. Freedom for the Israelites meant a very frugal life in the desert, often dreaming wistfully of the fleshpots of slavery. One of my favorite little explanations for things at the seder is the element of the haroset. This pasty concoction of fruit and nuts with the consistency of mortar is meant to symbolize the hard work of slavery. But unlike the maror which is bitter like slavery, haroset is sweet. How is that? To remind us that sometimes slavery too has its sweetness and seduction, and to remind us to ask ourselves: to what seemingly pleasurable or comfortable things are we enslaved, or addicted, or simply have made a part of our routine despite their deleterious effects? These questions have their psychological and also environmental implications, and answering them as part of our spring cleaning can be an enriching experience this season.

*Dr. Jeremy Benstein is Deputy Director of The Heschel Center and author of The Way into Judaism And the Environment.*