

Looking Forward to Looking Back
Shemini Shel Pesach 2026
Magen Avot – Daniel Greenberg Derashah

“Mah Nishtanah” – what stands out more in our minds as we sit at the seder table: how different it is to other nights, or how similar it is to other years?

What characterised the first seder of all? A hasty flight from Mitzrayim in a state of uncertainty, of personal vulnerability, and of communal and national fragility – grabbing a parcel of matzos from the table and running out into the darkness. But it was not an “everyone-for-themselves” chaotic rabble: each family unit took a package of that simple unleavened dough, and when we reached our first resting place we huddled together under the desert sky and shared our meals with frugal dignity. And each unit expanded to share with others until no one was left out: the Korban Pesach eaten with the matzah is the only mitzvah for which sharing is of the essence – says the Torah in Shemos 12:4 if the family unit is too small for a whole lamb, don’t get a smaller lamb – get a larger family – expand the family unit with guests – with kol dichpin yeisei ve’yechol – until everyone has someone with whom to share.

And what characterised so many sedorim this year, in reality in many places in Israel and in our thoughts throughout Israel and around the world? The sirens sounded and people stood and left the seder table for the bomb shelters – a hasty flight in a state of uncertainty, of personal vulnerability, and of communal and national fragility. But again, in instinctive reenactment of Pesach Mitzrayim, wherever a seder was disturbed, nobody took a single piece of matzah for themselves: they snatched up a box or two, and the shelters were filled with extended families and their new unexpected guests sitting on the floor and sharing the matzah in that same spirit of frugal dignity; and it has perhaps never been easier for celebrants to fulfil the commandment of seeing themselves as if they were really leaving Egypt all over again.

And not just the first Pesach and the most recent Pesach – b'chol dor vador, in every generation “mah nishtanah” – how insignificant have been the differences of scenery compared to the essential similarity of the play that is acted out year after year on the stage of the unbroken thread of sederim through the ages.

In the Nazi death camps of the 1940's, for months beforehand precious Jewish malochim – many of whom never saw themselves as religious in the slightest way – risked their lives to acquire a few spoons of flour to make a few crumbs of matzoh. Which each of them then took back to eat in secret in a safe corner? No: that would have been a mockery of matzah – they sat on the ground and shared their matzos in frugal dignity, and the stars that lightened the darkness of their tortures were the same stars that watered the ground of the desert with the dew of God's tears at Pesach Mitzrayim.

In the Soviet labour camps of the 1950's and 1960's, for months beforehand precious Jewish malochim – refuseniks imprisoned for love of the Jewish homeland, the Land of Israel, many of whom never saw themselves as religious in the slightest way – risked their lives to acquire a few spoons of flour to make a few crumbs of matzoh. Which each of them then took back to eat in secret in a safe corner? No: that would have been a mockery of matzah – they sat on the ground and shared their matzos in frugal dignity, and the stars that shone dimly through the bars of their prison cells were the same stars that watered the ground of the desert with the dew of God's tears at Pesach Mitzrayim.

B'chol dor va'dor – in the dungeons of the Inquisition, in the persecutions and torments of every generation – Jews have risked their lives to reenact the seder; and in happier times too, Jews who have wandered in prosperity far from their religion and their people and their God, have come back year after year drawn more by the simple sharing of a slice of matzah around the table than by any other Jewish ritual or occasion.

And all this started because we left Egypt in a hurry. But we didn't have to! In that moment of supreme Divine intervention in the world with *nisim giluim* – open miraculous demonstration of Hashem's omnipotence – if Hashem had wanted us to walk out at a snail's pace, with fully baked individual *challoh* rolls and everything we wanted to put inside them, who could have stopped us? But Hashem wanted to create an enduring memory of a vulnerable people who had nothing, but who shared that nothing with each other. “*Zocharti loch, chessed n'urayich – ahavas klulosayich, lechteich acharai bamidbar*” – the verse that we invoke every year in our closeness to God at the *Yomim Noro'im*, “I remember to your account the naivety of the Jewish nation at its birth – the love you showed each other as you followed me out into the desert wastes”.

“*Ki b'chipozon yotzosem mi'Mitzrayim*” – we had to leave in a hurry not out of practical necessity but simply in order to create a memory of haste that we could replicate down the centuries: *matzah* represents not the actual memory of a practical necessity, but the spiritual necessity of creating memories.

Memories are so precious and so powerful. In a moment, when we start *Yizkor* some of you will leave the *shul*, as a gesture of respect leaving the rest of us to our precious memories. And there is no time in the year more evocative of memories than *Pesach*: as we prepare the home each year, every plate, or cup or butter dish we unwrap brings back the faces of loved ones and the memories of shared excitement round the seder table. Every polished soup spoon shows in its shining reflection the faces not only of those with whom we sit now, but of family and friends long past, whose smiles and tears live on as fresh in our memories as they ever were. When we think “*mah nishtanah*” – how insignificant are the differences of time and fashion, and how similar those sedorim have been through the ages in everything that matters. And it is not difficult to feel connected with those whom we have known and lost personally, but also to see ourselves leaving *Mitzrayim*, sharing the vulnerability that has

never left us and the love that makes it precious. The love that shone in the desert at Pesach Mitzrayim, in the bomb shelters this year, and at every seder table in the long chain in between.

For those who are leaving us for Yizkor, please go out and create loving memories of your own – a memory in every smile and laugh you share with friends, family and with every other human being you encounter: but know this – that no memory you create today will shine more brightly or more permanently than the inextinguishable memories that we create and perpetuate every year when we share the matzah at the seder table in the frugal dignity of lechem oni.

B'chol dor va'dor, our enemies have pursued us with hatred and division; and we have fought back – and must always fight back – with the love and compassion that has sustained us since the days when Avrohom Ovinu discovered the very concept of chessed – of loving kindness as the foundation not merely of humanity but also of Divinity – the concept which we took with us into the desert, to our eternal credit, and through all our travels and travails since: the love of humanity that is the soul and essence of the Divine.

Yehi rotzon milifnei Ovinu Shebashomayim that our love will finally conquer the hatred – yitamu chato'im min ho'oretz u'rshoi'im oid einom – so that in every corner of the world every human being will abandon foolish dreams of superiority and division – will say as we say each morning in Shacharis “mah kocheinu, mah gevuroiseinu” – how insignificant are differences of physical supremacy and political philosophy – and every nation and people throughout the world will be liberated so that we can care for each other in an atmosphere of humanity and love, with all creation – kol asher neshamah b'apo – recognising only the kingdom of the Master of the Universe – until all humanity can live together in the spirit of sharing our slices of matzo with frugal dignity, ad sheyovo Melech, Goel u'Moishia, bimheiro b'yomeinu omein v'omein.