

Shabbat Pesach

Pesach – The Holiday for Extended Family Celebration

Break Up in the Family Tradition

The countdown to Pesach is winding down and my head has consistently been in the kitchen cabinets the entire week. As I emptied the entire contents of the drawer filled with assorted knives, wooden spoons and spatulas, deciding which ones I no longer need, the jarring ring of the phone interrupted me. "Do you have a few minutes," I heard my friend Alona's teary voice ask from the other side of the line. "Sure, of course, I'll always make time for you," I replied with my most comforting voice. "What's going on?" My friend's voice was cracking up, "I don't know....eh..." I could hear that Alona was trying very hard to control herself from breaking down into uncontrollable sobbing. "It's ok, it's ok, tell me what's the matter," I encouraged. Alona is a very dear friend. We have a lot in common, being *Ba'alei teshuva* (returnees to Judaism), who left our family abroad to live a Torah life in Israel. We are both blessed to have a sister who also lives a Torah life in Israel. "I don't know where I will be having the Pesach Seder," Alona blurted out. "What do you mean?" I asked. "I know that each year, you and your sister get together for the first day of Pesach- every second year by you, and every other year by her. Weren't you by her last year? Why wouldn't she be coming to you this year?" I asked with disbelief in my voice. "I did invite my sister and all her children and grandchildren, like two years ago, when it was so special to host everyone together," answered Alona. "But, now, she told me it was not convenient for her children to come to us since they have more children. They want to come to her and stay a couple of days, which I totally understand but..." "So couldn't you go to her then?" I interrupted Alona. "I got the feeling that she wanted to be alone with her children, this year. Then, I tried to invite good friends to our home, but when no one could come, I turned to my sister again and offered to find our own place to stay, if only she would include us in her Seder," Alona explained. "It was really hard to have to beg her like this, but it was even harder to receive her cold rejection. For more than 25 years, we have celebrated Pesach together. It was wonderful for our children to have a close relationship with their cousins. I believe, like my grandmother, in the importance of bringing the cousins together. I thought my sister did as well, but I was in for a surprise when she told me, 'For the Seder, we are full!' With these words, she broke our decades long family tradition and withheld the opportunity for our family to celebrate Pesach together." I could hear the throbbing pain in Alona's voice and I wished I could put my arm around her and give her a consoling hug. "You are more than welcome to join our Pesach Seder" I consoled Alona. "Celebrating Pesach with close friends is the next best alternative to a family Seder."

Make an Effort to Get Together with Family During the Holidays

Why is it so important to celebrate Pesach with our family? Originally, we would slaughter the Pesach sacrifice and share it with our extended family as the Torah commands:

ספר שמות יב:כא ויקרא משה לכל זקני ישראל ויאמר אליהם משכו וקחו לכם צאן למשפחתכם ושחטו הפסח: "Draw out, and pick out a sheep for your families and slaughter the Pesach sacrifice" (*Shemot* 12:21).

A lamb feeds many mouths. Since we are not supposed to keep any leftovers from the Pesach offering, on a practical level, the sacrifice had to be shared with the extended family. There is something special about family. Not just brothers and sisters, children, parents and grandparents. We also have a special bond with aunts, uncles, and cousins. I remember fondly the Pesach Seders at my Aunt Busse and

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Uncle Moses' home, with the gefilte fish made from scratch and the special kosher for Pesach candies. Most of all, I remember getting together with our cousins and even playing with our cousin's children. Today, nearly fifty years later, I am still close with some of my cousin's children and we make an effort to call each other every year before Pesach. Whereas, Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur are solemn holidays more for internal reflection, and Sukkot is a time where many Torah observant Jews remain in their own Sukkah and focus on the nuclear family, Pesach and Chanukah afford the main opportunities to get together with uncles, aunts and cousins. Today, in our fast-paced society, we hardly find the time to spend with our immediate family, let alone with our extended family, unless we make a special effort to get together during the holidays.

Include Whoever is Hungry and Lonely in your Pesach Seder

The Pesach Hagaddah opens with raising the tray of matzot while proclaiming: "This is the bread of affliction that our fathers ate in the land of Egypt. Whoever is hungry, let him come and eat; whoever is in need, let him come and join the Pesach Seder." With these words, we declare that anyone off the street is welcome to our Pesach Seder. We learn from these words of the Hagaddah, that it is a special mitzvah to include the hungry and the poor in our Pesach Seder. Witnessing my friend Alona's predicament, I realized that being hungry and poor is not limited to physical hunger. Especially today, spiritual and emotional hunger is rising in the world. In spite of having a network of friends on social media, an increasing number of people, whether young or old, find themselves lonely and left out when the holiday comes around. It is, therefore, a special mitzvah to reach out and invite extended family, singles, and those who live away from family for Pesach. Next time, when anyone asks to come for our Seder, even if it is not someone in the family, we may think twice before answering, "For the Seder- we are full." Otherwise, how can we recite the opening words of the Hagaddah, "Whoever is in need, let him come and conduct the Seder" without feeling like a hypocrite?

Family Unification Brings Redemption

Rabbeinu Bachaya confirms the importance of inviting our relatives for the holidays, in his commentary on the verse describing the Pesach sacrifice that we cited above:

רבנו בחיי על שמות פרק יב פסוק כא למשפחותיכם. מכאן שחייב אדם לקרב קרוביו כדי שישמחו עמהם בימים טובים, וכן בימות הגאולה הבטיחנו הקב"ה להתקרב איש אל משפחתו שנאמר (ירמיה ל, כה) בעת ההיא נאום ה' אהיה לאלקים לכל משפחות ישראל:

From here, we learn that we are obligated to bring our relatives close in order to rejoice together with them during the holidays. Likewise, in the time of *geulah* (redemption), Hashem promised to bring each person close to his family as it states, "At that time, says Hashem, I will be a G-d to all the families of Israel" (*Yirmiyahu* 30:25); (Rabbeinu Bachaya, *Shemot* 12:21).

There is nothing as important as family, even if we may have different values. As Rabbeinu Bachaya teaches in connection with Pesach, we need to get together with the family since this is Hashem's will. Then He "will be a G-d to all the families of Israel." Perhaps, we can understand from this verse in the prophets, that Hashem will only bring redemption when we are connected with our extended families. Since our extended family has other extended family and so on ad infinitum, through connecting to our extended family we will ultimately unify with all of Israel. In the merit of reaching out to family around Pesach time, we eagerly await redemption during this month, as it states, "In Nissan we were redeemed and in Nissan we will in the future be redeemed (*Babylonian Talmud, Rosh HaShana* 11b). May we merit to become unified families sacrificing the Pesach sacrifice at the Temple!