

Another American Passover

By William Rabinowitz

Our local Jewish newspaper, the Boynton Beach Jewish Week always amazes me. They have a special weekly article profiling a typical Boynton Beach Jew. Sometimes it is a woman. Sometimes it is a man. Sometimes it is a secular person and sometimes, but rarely, a religious person. What do they do, or did, for a living, what sort of Jewish life do they lead, and how do they express their Jewishness is important. Do they attend synagogue or not isn't considered important. Have they, or have they not saved the whales is important. The most Jewishly important piece of information about the BBJOTW, Boynton Beach Jew of the week, is what is their favorite holiday.

Some say Chanukkah, or Purim, or perhaps Rosh Ha'Shana is their favorite Jewish holiday. A few strange ones will say Yom Kippur.

Pulling splinters wedged under my fingernails, with rust frozen tweezers is more fun than Yom Kippur.

But then there are a few *meshuggahs* who give the ultimate answer. What Jewish holiday is their favorite? It is incredible – but some actually say that Pesach is their favorite holiday.

If it is a guy who is profiled, I can easily understand why.

Incredulous, I think to myself, what planet do these people come from? Alzheimer's must have set in. They remember a time from up North that is some other sort of reality. They remember what they thought was, not what was.

Here is what actually happened – an American Pesach.

He comes home late, bangs the door open and announces, "Honey, I'm home. Did you have a nice day cleaning, scraping, searching every crack and crevice in the house for *chametz*? Hope it was not too stressing lugging the Passover dishes from the basement up the steps, clearing out the pantry, washing the shelves, blow torching the oven, bathing the dog, shopping, cooking the food, preparing the table, arranging the chairs, varnishing the wood floors, beating the Persian carpets, yelling at the kids and seating your parents as far away from me as possible."

His lovely bride smiles with loving eyes and gently says to him,

"I do this every year because I love God, Pesach and being Jewish."

Astutely he observes, the "I love part" did not include him.

The wiser part of valor tells him, better not to get too close to her at this moment. Carefully, he extends a large bouquet of flowers for her to cut the stems, arrange and place on the Seder table

prepared for 23. Jews are not totally stupid. He keeps an eagle sharp eye on the hand behind her back, just in case there is a knife in it.

Thank God for potato vodka, even if it was made in Poland. Mix it with some orange juice, sugar for a quick energy and diabetic fix, and he toasts his wife's Seder table accomplishment. Without much encouragement she swills it down in two gulps.

Somewhere in the Torah doesn't it say something about saving life in an emergency? Who would have thought that something Polish would save a Jew's life? A mild glazed look creeps into her eyes. Thank God....

The table is set. The candles are lit. Background Pesach music fills the home from the stereo – old Negro Spirituals – Go Down Moses and Dayenu intermixed with Yanni.

Yanni – didn't the Greeks try and enslave the Jews? That is another story.....

The doorbell rings, the dog barks, the host and hostess gird their loins. Typically, a half hour after the requested time the house is filled with Pesach revelers, smatterings of grandchildren, anxious parents and relatives of every religious color. Parents are filled with dreaded memories of when they were kids falling asleep at their grandparent's Seder table. Their heads were plunked down on peppery homemade gefilte fish with a slice of carrot that no one liked but it took grandma three days to cook, so you ate it. All the while the Seder droned on in unintelligible Hebrew.

But this is modern America. The Haggadahs are no longer the freebies from the Manischewitz Matzah Company. We no longer drink from recycled Yahrzeit glasses. Today we all have the finest mass produced Haggadahs with Hebrew on one page and English – that does not exactly translates or conveys the meaning of the Hebrew - on the other. They are printed in China.

Grandpa has been warned by his grown children. "Make this fun and make this quick. The kids have a schedule. They have to eat and they know the story. We watched Cecil B. DeMille's 1956 epic, *the Ten Commandments*, on T.V. with them last night. Charlton Heston played Moses and Yule Brenner played Pharaoh. Talk about a dysfunctional family, Pharaoh's home life was a mess. He needed a good therapist."

Everyone is seated. The head of the house intones the usual welcome and an introductory explanation of the Pesach story before the short attention span of the guests wane. "Let all who have nowhere to go for Seder or are hungry let them come and join us tonight."

The front door is never opened for that one. If a stranger did show up, they have no more room at the Seder table anyway. The guests, shuffling in their folding chairs, murmuring in discontent, are trying to protect their personal space and keep the elbows of their neighbor away from their plates. No one is paying attention.

Clanging on a wine glass with a spoon, the head of the house announces again, "Let us Begin!"

“We Jews are unique in the history of the world,” he begins. “We are unique in human experience. No other people have ever been singled out by God, any God, delivered from slavery to be his people in a land he chose for us. Muslims, and at one time Christians, believe anything they conquered by sword, blood or otherwise in the world, is God given to be theirs. Not us. When we came to the land that God promised us, anyone there was free to leave if they did not want to live with us in peace or become Jewish.”

“Become Jewish?” Cousin Rudolf asked. “You mean we forced people to become Jewish or we forced them off their land.”

“No, we did not force anyone to become Jewish” was the response. “They had the option of becoming Jewish if they chose to, or they could move on.”

Rudolph must have come looking for a fight. “Well, this whole fairy tale of a story had nothing to do with me. Were you standing there when this happened?” He continued argumentatively.

“To be honest, yes I was Rudolph. You must have been late to the events at Mt. Sinai – waiting for your bread to rise,” the head of the house retorted.

Reaching across the table, he picks up the Matzah and says – this was the bread of affliction. Our people were in a hurry to get out of Egypt. They could not stay and wait for the bread to rise. They did not want to be slaves – so their bread was flat and cooked quickly into Matzahs like these. Now, let us read the story. “

Rudolph looked on crossly but remained quiet.

From across the table, the head of the house’s daughter looked at him crossly. She made a squiggled face and secretively pointed at the son. “He learned the four questions in school” she proudly announces. He wants to read the four questions.”

It is a little bit early for that but another cross look from the wife and he says, “o.k. this is the Seder plate, we can skip all the parts about dipping. None of us are sure what that part is for anyway.”

“Conner, can you read the *feir kashas* (four questions) for us. Why are we here tonight? Is there anything special about tonight?”

Conner stares blankly at his grandfather.

“Conner do you want to sing the *feir kashas*?”

Conner just stares blankly.

“Dad, why do you have to be difficult – can’t you just say the four questions, the *Ma Nish Ta*

Nah questions like a normal person, not like some old Yiddish speaking European Jew who just escaped from the Ghetto,” his daughter sharply jumps in.

“Conner, Grandpa is asking you to sing the *Ma Nish Ta Na*. Look, I will sing it with you.”

The grandchild starts to sing the four questions, falters; the mother starts with him and falters. All the assembled join in and sing together. Get that cup of wine down real fast.

Around and around the table they take turns reading from the Haggadah in English. They come to the four sons. As the protests of the evil son are read, Cousin Rudolph turns a dark shade of red.

Slowly the reading continues in English, no one has any clue why they should care or count how many *machos* (smacks) God gave the Egyptians. How many fingers of God vs. how many knuckle sandwiches he gave the Egyptians are just skipped – no one really understands what the counting part is about. In the back of every mind is the same yearly question – God smacked the Egyptians around for Pesach but was not around during the Holocaust when the Nazis really needed a smacking. 1/3 of our people became *luftmenschen*.

Singing the Seder? What singing, not even the Rabbi at the Temple knows the melodies.

From the far side, the wife glares at the head of the household – hurry it up, get to the sandwich part. You know the part about the Earl of Sandwich and the mixing of the Matzah and bitter herbs with the *haroset*. Everyone wants to eat already.

He has been married long enough to know a deadly threat when he sees one.

Any pretense of following the Seder’s prescribed order has long been abandoned.

“We eat the bitter herbs to remind us how bitter slavery was” he says.

Three of the invited guests are vegans. They only eat lemon grass and raw seaweed. The horseradish tastes good to them. The other guests sort of nibble, with watery eyes.

They mix the horseradish with the *haroset* and make a sandwich between pieces of Matzah. The *haroset* is supposed to be symbolic of the cement gluing the huge blocks of stones schlepped by our ancestors when Pharaoh forced us to build his cities, temples, pyramids and places of Egyptian ill repute. No Jew could go to any Egyptian place of ill repute. Actually, some of us might have gone but we were not welcome.

The *haroset* is a mixture of fruit, especially those things with laxative qualities such as prunes, nuts and wine. It is very sweet and quite enjoyable.

Is this really what the Rabbis intended to convey? The sandwich of Matzah, bitter herbs and cement is actually a tasty appetizer. Let me get this straight, the symbols of slavery are tasty?

Moses would have had a canary!

Together, everyone recounts the ten plagues that God beset upon the Egyptians – this is the interactive part. *Damm* (blood), *Tzefardeyah*, *Kinnim*... Each person, un-hygienically with the finger of their choice, dips into their wine cup and after each plague is announced, spills a drop upon their dinner plate. With the words, *machos bechoros*, the slaying of the first born, the plague recitation is over. Half the crowd licks their fingers clean. The head of the house tries to stop them, but it is too late.

A smart ass almost always quips at this point, “is it time to eat yet? We are hungry. They tried to kill us, we won, let’s eat.” Smart ass always ignores the story of Pesach – without God, we would not have won.

The din at the far end of the table is getting louder and louder. The wife, her cousin Bella and her sister Amy are talking and talking. The Seder is an increasing inconvenience to their visiting.

Frustrated, the head of the household belts down another cup of wine and says – Dinner.

The wife jumps up and disappears into the kitchen. Immediately the two illegal Hispanic girls, who she hired for the Seder, begin emerging with plates of chopped liver, followed by sweet gefilte fish, then Matzah ball soup.

A voice chirps in complaint, “where is the farfel?”

The Hispanic girls had forgotten to put it on the table – the wife is irritated.

Aunt Clara starts borchers loudly. “Where is the sweet tongue I made? Uncle Howard went to the Kosher Mart special to get it. He even skinned it. You know I hate the sight of those things – but for you darlings – I made it.”

The wife explains “there was not enough to go around, so I saved it for later.”

“Saved it for later!” Aunt Clara protests, insulted. “Everyone should have a least a spoon full of my sweet tongue,” she announces loudly.

In a pique the wife jumps up and returns with a small jar of Aunt Clara’s sweet tongue and a single spoon. “Anyone who wants a taste, help yourself.” Aunt Clara and the wife glare at each other.

The baby begins crying, Cousin Rudolph is in a heated argument with Morty Shapiro about the Israelis taking Palestinian lands. The Kosher for Passover wine from the heights of the Golan are popped open to soothing, slurping gurgles. The brisket shows up smothered in onions and flowing with gravy. It is followed by chicken, stuffing, vegetables, potatoes, asparagus and watery Jell-O. God forbid if anything is forgotten. The story of the going out of Egypt is set aside.

God has been forgotten a long time ago. It is all about the food.

The meal over, most of the guests have filtered away. A few return, pick up the Hagaddahs and join to sing their favorite after eating songs they learned at summer camp a long time ago- the Birkat Hamazon. The thought they are saying thank you to God never really enters their minds. Hallel follows, because it is in the book. They skip through as quickly as possible to those parts that the few melodies are remembered.

Conner is sent to the front door opening it for Eliyahu who may be there to announce coming of the Messiah. Everyone hopes no one is standing there. It could be a burglar. The idea of the Messiah is so very alien in most American Jewish homes. We hear Messiah, we think Christian.

And now comes the highlights of the evening – singing the *Dayenu* and the other songs.

The table of 23 has shrunk to a table of six. For the six left it is actually fun to sing and sing and try and see who can sing the fastest. The table cloth is a mess and they forgot to look for the Afikomen. Grandpa slips Conner a five dollar bill. No one wants to eat any more Matzahs anyway. Not even the dog hiding under the table, waiting for a scrap of food to accidentally on purpose fall to the floor, will touch Matzahs. Even a dog has its standards. They certainly cannot get Fido to eat the gobs of compote, overflowing with more prunes, to prevent serious gastric distress caused by Matzahs. Who said Jews were smart? Small wonder we spent 40 years wandering in the desert. We all had problems in the lower regions – Matzahs, manna, prunes, OY!.

The *Had'gad'yah* is sung – faster and faster until only two people can keep up. The evening ends with the Hatikvah. Everyone says aloud, without any real desire, the last lines of the Haggadah, *L'shana Habaah b'Yerushalayaim*, Next Year in Jerusalem. The Hatikvah brings a tear to the eye of a few still– almost none care about spending next year in Jerusalem.

The guests depart. The dining room is a disaster. The dishes are piled high. The illegal Hispanic girls will require overtime, as well as hazardous duty pay.

The guests leave with kisses, warm wishes and a thought – thank you God, I did not have to do all the cooking.

Boynton Beach, with its huge population of Jewish expatriates, has it right for Seders. They are communal. Even the Westchester Public Golf course on the corner of Jog and Pipers Glenn advertises a Seder. Someone else does the cooking, the cleaning and the borchering. \$36 bucks and all is a mechayah, a pleasure.

The kids will have to make their own Seders from now on.

L'Shana Ha'Baah b'Boynton Beach – Next year in Boynton Beach, the second fastest growing Jewish community in America. I wonder if the Bagel Den is open tomorrow.