



THE SEDER COMPANION

2021/5781

A Project of NCSY's
International Teen Board



NCSY is the international
youth movement of the OU

Welcome

from NCSY's International Board President

Hi!

My name is Nili Fischer, the 2021 NCSY International Board President.

The NCSY International Board is proud to present this seder companion filled with divrei Torah written by teen leaders from across the U.S., Canada and Israel.

When reading the Haggadah on Passover, we discuss the story of the Jews being enslaved in Egypt and then ultimately being freed by G-d. We are commanded to tell the story over to our children. I always ask why we do this each year. Doesn't it seem repetitive?

I learned once that the goal of reading the Haggadah is not to just read another thriller. Our purpose in doing this commandment is to relive the Passover story and connect with our Jewish roots. As the teen leaders of NCSY, we feel that it is our responsibility to take part in this mitzvah by sharing our divrei Torah with our larger NCSY family.

We hope that you have a beautiful Passover and internalize the messages shared in this seder companion by NCSY teen leaders from all over the world.

Chag Sameach!

Nili Fischer

President, NCSY International Board

Class of 2021



Liel Alter

Ben Gamla Charter School
Southern NCSY



Every year when the month of Nissan comes around, G-d commands the Jewish people to recall a specific historical event in Jewish history. That event was the time where the Jewish people left slavery in Egypt: today we call it Passover. But we are supposed to recall this event not just once a year, but every single day of our lives. It is a commandment in the Torah. Every single day we are supposed to remember how G-d took us out of slavery from Egypt and brought us to the freedom of the Promised Land.

But why? Isn't it interesting that G-d commands the Jewish people to recall a specific historical event on a daily basis? The reason is that past events are far more than just historical, they repeat themselves in our daily lives. Why does G-d want us to remember, every single day of our lives, the day the Jewish people left Egypt? Because the journey of the Jewish people from the slavery of Egypt to the freedom of the Promised Land is the journey every single one of us is supposed to go through in our lives.

The path to freedom is the human journey. It is the path that anyone who wants to live freely must travel. Without the will to travel this path, we will remain in a constant state of victimhood and servitude to our desires and to other people's opinions. This human journey involves leaving the boxes that we trap ourselves in and exploring the infinite.

You see, we look back at this historic event and see it as just that: a part of our history. But it is so much more than that. There is a reason why the Creator of the Universe commands us to recall this event daily. It is because He knows that in reality we are all suffering from an internal struggle, and that it is not just a thing of the past. We all deal with being slaves to different aspects of life, whether to social media, junk food, or our own impulses. The story of Passover is trying to remind us that we are meant to pick ourselves up, walk in the desert, and reach the freedom of the Promised Land.

No one said it would be easy. After the Jews left Egypt during their 40 years in the desert, they often complained to Moses and asked to go back. It might seem baffling that they would ever want to go back to Egypt. In fact, they had a very good reason for it. It's much easier to live a life that never requires you to take responsibility. To be free, we must walk into the unknown. We must have emunah (faith). And we must take responsibility for our lives. This takes hard work. But the Jews didn't get to the Promised Land overnight. It took them 40 years.

This is the reason we are told to remember this pivotal point in history. To remind us that when Moses demanded that Pharaoh set the Jewish people free, it was not just a freedom from the tyranny of Egypt, but freedom to serve the Creator Himself. Every year, Hashem gives us this holiday to refresh—to realign ourselves with our purpose; to remind ourselves that we have the ability to choose freedom. It is the gift G-d gave us with Passover. Take responsibility for your life. Step outside of those boxes, and tap into your unlimited potential.

Kaden Balkany

Derech Emunah
West Coast NCSY



You've made it to hour six. Your eyes are glassed over, your left sock is gone, and the distant yells of an empty stomach asking for some nutrients become muted as you instinctively press the "continue to watch" button. The plot is finally coming together, characters are becoming increasingly more confident, and the couch seems comfier than usual. The copious amounts of homework sitting on your kitchen table seem to disappear as you slowly become enveloped in the screen. It seems as though time doesn't serve a purpose in the grand scheme of the final season.

It is now hour eight. Hanging on the edge of your seat, the villain's plan of murdering all of the main characters has finally been sprung into action. The lack of food and emotional stress leads you to tears as you begin to lose hope that they will survive. The music turns somber as you prepare for the blatant dissatisfaction that the last eight hours has led you to. Two seconds away from abandoning the TV to not witness the death of your favorite characters, they successfully overtake their enemy. Jaw touching the floor, you try to piece together how they narrowly avoided their death sentence.

I like to imagine that this is how the angels reacted when they watched the Jews leave Egypt. The consistent persecution, power struggle, and ultimate redemption reminds us that the best director is none other than G-d. With a physical or spiritual **בִּיד חֲזָקָה וּבְזֵרוּעַ נְטוּיָה** (strong hand and an outstretched arm) we are constantly reminded that losing hope amidst the chaos is never an option. As the series of our heritage continues, it is important that you try to appear as a guest star in at least one episode.

Avi Cunningham

JEC High School
New Jersey NCSY



In the story of the Exodus from Egypt, Hashem brings ten plagues to the land of Egypt in order to convince Pharaoh to let the Jews go free. Once Pharaoh finally agrees, the Jews leave and are then chased by the Egyptians to the sea of reeds.

One would think that the story of the Exodus would contain the ten plagues and conclude with Pharaoh freeing the Jews. The Yerushalmi, however, disagrees. The Yerushalmi says that the Exodus from Egypt wasn't fully complete until after the splitting of the sea. What still needed to be done after Pharaoh released the Jews from slavery?

Rabbeinu Bechayei and the Ramban both say that prior to the splitting of the sea we still felt like slaves to Egypt. What did the splitting of the sea really change? In order to complete the transformation from being slaves of Pharaoh to becoming servants of Hashem, we needed to express our trust in Hashem through our mesiras nefesh of jumping into the water.

By jumping into the water, the Jews took a step towards freedom independently, separate from what Hashem had done for us. For the first time since the Exodus began, we were working with Hashem and taking an active role in attaining our freedom. We learn from this that in order to attain something, we must work with Hashem: by both taking initiative and action into our own hands, while also praying and asking Hashem to help us get to where we need to be.

Moshe Davidovics

Margolin Hebrew Academy (Feinstone Yeshiva of the South)
Southern NCSY



Every single kid at a seder can tell you about the four sons. They have been taught to us for as long as we can remember, and we talk about them on Pesach. However, a closer look at the words that we say about the four sons causes some confusion. The pasuk (Deuteronomy 6:20) says:

כִּי יִשְׁאַלְךָ בֶּןְךָ מָחָר לֵאמֹר מָה הָעֲדָת וְהַחֻקִּים וְהַמִּשְׁפָּטִים אֲשֶׁר צִוָּה ה' אֱלֹהֵינוּ אַתְּכֶם

Because in times to come, your child will ask you, "What do the decrees, laws, and rules mean, which God our G-d has enjoined upon you?"

This, of course, is the exact question the chacham, the wise son in the Haggadah, asks. We are instructed by the Torah to answer this child by saying (Deuteronomy 6:21):

עֲבָדִים הָייְנוּ לַפְרֹעָה בְּמִצְרַיִם וְיוֹצִיאָנוּ ה' מִמִּצְרַיִם בְּיָד חֲזָקָה

We were slaves to Pharaoh in Egypt and God freed us from Egypt with a mighty hand.

In the Haggadah though, we see that the answer we give the wise son is to instruct them in the halachos of Pesach, and that you don't eat after the afikoman. Why does the Haggadah not give the same answer that the Torah gave?

The answer stems from the fact that the chacham's question deserves two different types of answers: an answer as to what it is we are doing and an answer as to why we are doing it. Really, the chacham's question was already answered in part when we recited Avadim hayinu, after the Ma Nishtanah because, in reality, the Ma Nishtanah questions are the chacham's questions. As proof, look at the content of the question. The questions are all intellectual, thought-out questions regarding what we are doing at the seder table. Now that we had already answered why we are doing the seder, this second question comes to ask for the what. The chacham asks what the laws are pertaining to the holiday of Pesach and, therefore, we answer him with the halachos of Pesach.

Gregory Eiseman

Southern California Yeshiva High School (SCY High)
West Coast NCSY



At the end of my eighth grade year at Hebrew Day, as a class, we went on a trip to Israel. One of my own personal highlights of the trip was when we stopped in a city called Holon, at the Blind Museum, which many of you have been to or heard of. In this museum, you go through different settings in a completely pitch-black room as if you were blind. Visitors go through different environments such as a grocery store, a car, a bar, and many other places. In this museum, I felt a different type of darkness than I've ever felt before. For me, I can't go to sleep without my room being pitch black: lights off, and the door closed shut. However, this kind of utter darkness that I felt in the blind museum was a type of darkness I've never felt before.

ויאמר ה' אל משה נטה ידך על השמים ויהי חשך על ארץ מצרים וימש חשך

Then God said to Moses, "Hold out your arm toward the sky that there may be darkness upon the land of Egypt, a darkness that can be touched" (Exodus 10:21).

This is the first pasuk that really introduces us to the plague of darkness. Due to Paroh being stubborn and not letting the Jews go for what seems like the 100th time now, G-d instructs Moshe to hold out his arms to bring darkness upon Egypt. What sticks out in the pasuk is how it says "a darkness that can't be touched". What does that mean? How can a darkness be touched? How can you feel something that you can't see? The Midrash Tanchuma understands this by stating that the darkness was "exceedingly thick" or hard. Because of the darkness being thick, the Egyptians weren't able to move. The Midrash Shemot Rabbah adds that the darkness was as stiff as a coin—meaning that they were stuck in the places that they were in.

The next two pesukim are interesting:

ויט משה את ידו על השמים ויהי חשך אפלה בכל ארץ מצרים שלשת ימים

Moses held out his arm toward the sky and thick darkness descended upon all the land of Egypt for three days. (Shemot 10:22)

לא ראו איש את אחיו ולא קמו איש מתחתיו שלשת ימים ולכל בני ישראל היה אור במושבתם

A man couldn't see his own brother, and for three days no one could get up from where he was; but all the Israelites enjoyed light in their dwellings. (Shemot 10:23)

Looking at pasuk 23, a question can be asked as why the Torah uses the specific wording **לא ראו איש את אחיו**, a man couldn't see his own brother. Why does the Torah use such specific wording as "A man couldn't see his own brother"? Why couldn't it have just said that no one could see? Or it could have just not said anything, since in the previous pasuk it already says that "darkness descended upon all the land of Egypt." The Ramban approaches this by saying that the reason it states that "a man couldn't see his own brother" is to show us how this wasn't any ordinary darkness. This darkness wasn't just a darkness for which one could just light a candle and they could see again. Rather, the darkness was so thick that if an Egyptian tried to light a candle, it would be blown out instantly.

Over the past year or so we've all gone through a time of darkness, as a society and as individuals. Going through a global pandemic, one would think that as a society, we'd work together to beat this virus once and for all. Wrong. The world became as divided as ever—in particular, the political world.

All of this division has created a barrier of darkness between a man and his brother. As Jews, we are meant to be united with one another, working together to defeat anti-Semitism and all of life's challenges. However, the political divide has created a layer of darkness between Jews. This darkness, created by divisiveness, blows out anything in its way, which in this case is our Judaism. We are unable to see our fellows for who they really are because of this darkness and division. We don't want to reach a point of darkness where everyone is so stuck on their own views that not only can they not get along with people from the other side of the political spectrum, but they cannot even get along with people from their own side, due to people being so stringent about their beliefs.

Now, what causes people to be so stringent about their own beliefs? If we dive deeper into what the Midrash Shemot Rabbah said about the darkness being as stiff as a coin, we can derive that such a darkness, or divisiveness in this case, is caused by prized possessions. Often, what gets between us and achieving our life mission is our own possessions and our rigidity. But if we can look through the darkness and not become stuck on physical things, we can unite as a nation and work together to defeat whatever we'd like.

Sara Elyassian

Great Neck North High School
New York NCSY



Once the Jews went through the split sea and successfully passed, Hashem closed it off for the Egyptians, and they began to drown. However, Pharaoh surprisingly survived. How did he survive? Simply because he uttered these words: “Mi Kel Kamochah Hashem”—something we say every morning right before Shemoneh Esrei. “Who is like You among the supernal beings, Hashem? Who is like You, glorious in holiness, awesome in praises, doing wonders?”

Pharaoh was very far from a connection to G-d; he was a huge rasha (wicked person). In fact, he was such a huge rasha that Hashem took his free choice away. However, we are taught here that no matter how assimilated or “off the derech” you are, Hashem is always listening to you and is always ready for you to come back to Him; and that is exactly what teshuvah is. Teshuvah is often translated as repentance, but it comes from the word shuv which means to return. Hashem is always ready to accept you with open arms. You, as an eved Hashem, just have to take those steps to connect. Actions speak louder than words: if you take that first step, whether it be davening in the morning, lighting candles, wrapping tefillin, saying Shema at night, etc., Hashem will never reject you. He is always listening to you and wants to build a connection with you. Although Hashem took Pharaoh’s free choice away—which is a very rare occurrence, because Hashem always gives us free choice—this goes to show that He will always give us a chance to return from our unholy attitudes or actions, or to even take our first steps into our Jewish roots.

Nili Fischer

Denver Academy of Torah
Southwest NCSY



Often lost amidst all the cleaning, cooking and other tedious preparations for Passover, is a focus on the central theme of the holiday: the story of the Jewish people becoming a nation. For my family, Pesach used to be the one time of year that the “Fischer” side would gather together at my Zaidy and Savtah’s house in Baltimore. Pesach for us meant lots of fun with my many cousins, aunts and uncles, and grandparents. It also meant a very crowded house, long sedarim lasting until about 2 a.m.—filled with singing, laughing, delicious food, and dancing in the street (!)—and also a bit about the story of the Exodus.

This past Tu B’Sivat, marked the third yahrtzeit of my Zaidy, z”l. One of the key lessons I learned from him is the importance of achdut—loosely translated as “unity.” Each seder night, my Zaidy would share with us one of his favorite divrei Torah from the great Chasidic Rebbe of Belz. During the Magid portion of the seder we read in V’hee she’amdah the following: “שלא אחד בלבד, עמד עלינו לללותינו” — For not just one alone has risen against us to destroy us, but in every generation, they rise against us to destroy us; and Hashem saves us from their hand!”

My Zaidy would remind us—his grandchildren—that moving the comma in the sentence leads to an entirely different interpretation. By moving the comma to after the word אחד, the verse now reads like this: “שלא אחד, בלבד עמד עלינו לללותינו” — That we are not one—that we don’t have achdut: that alone rises against us to destroy the Jewish people.”

This message from the Belzer Rebbe teaches us that it is not an external force that threatens us. Rather, it is, “שלא אחד”—that we, the Jewish people, are not united.

The story of Pesach is about an enslaved and disjointed people, being miraculously taken out of Egypt by Hashem. Through this process, we became a unified nation, ultimately culminating in our receiving the Torah at Har Sinai.

It is our job, as NCSYers, to internalize this message and do all we can to help build achdut amongst our families, our friends, and all of klal Yisrael.

This Pesach, in addition to all the cooking and the cleaning, during our sedarim all over the world, let’s read V’hee she’amdah and let us plan to actualize the message my Zaidy would share with our family: let us work on building achdut throughout! Chag sameach!!

Liel Guttman
Yavneh Academy of Dallas
Southwest NCSY



Every year during Pesach we commemorate the Exodus and remember the freedom the Jewish people received as they left Egypt. As we sit together with family and friends reading the Haggadah, we reach the part of the seder called magid. At this point, we start to tell the story of the Exodus, to teach the children at the seder about our Jewish history and our journey to freedom.

Usually, the youngest child recites the Mah Nishtanah asking, "Why is this night different from all the rest?" Then, the child continues asking about the unusual behaviors at the seder, which include why we are eating matzah, eating bitter herbs, dipping our food twice, and reclining. This way, the child becomes curious and the adults are able to connect the past generation with the future generation by explaining the story of the Exodus.

Everyone becomes curious about the customs, but some of the most common questions asked include: Why four? What's so special about having four questions? Why not fewer or why not more questions?

Some commentators have connected the four questions to the four expressions of redemption that G-d uses in Exodus 6:6-7, which states that G-d will take us out, save us, redeem us, and take us as a nation. Meanwhile, other commentators have associated the questions with completion. This shows us that we actually don't know everything and there isn't always one answer. As Jews, we should continue asking questions even if there isn't one simple answer.

The Mah Nishtanah and the four questions make us aware of the freedom that the Jewish people have achieved, and these questions allow us to connect with our heritage. As the year of 2021 began, we continued to experience uncertainty in the world as a global pandemic spread across and no one was able to answer what was happening or how long this would last. We were all so curious about the event occurring, but there wasn't a simple answer. Connecting this to our lives, the story of the Exodus teaches us the importance of living a meaningful Jewish life. There is so much uncertainty in everything we do, but we should continue questioning our actions in order to grow and continue our freedom as a nation.



Parker Han

Westmount Collegiate Institute
Canada NCSY



Imagine this: You're an Israelite in ancient Egypt. It's the night of the tenth plague, and soon you will be free. As instructed by Moses, you've painted your doorway with a lamb's blood, roasted the lamb for dinner, and prepared some matzot to eat with it. But there's one more thing on the menu: maror (bitter herbs).

Why maror? Well, according to the commentator, Rashi, the maror is to remind us of how bitter our lives were in Egypt. OK. But, the first Passover seder was still in Egypt! Why would the Israelites need to be reminded of how bad their lives were then? And why do we continue to eat maror today? This is what I'll try to answer.

To start, when thinking of maror, I am reminded of the slogan for Buckley's Cough, Cold and Flu medicine: "It tastes awful. And it works." Even though it tastes bad, the effects of the medicine are extremely efficient. There's no sugar coating there.

Similarly, we can see that maror has to have some kind of positive reason for being on the seder plate, because G-d wouldn't tell us to do something that was harmful. Even though it represents hardship, there must be a good reason to remember that.

To find this reason, let's take a look at a current example of remembering Jewish struggle. The Holocaust had such a devastating effect on world Jewry that many people have a difficult time grappling with it. However, it is remembering those stories that is crucial to the survival of the Jewish people and the fight against erasing our history. We have struggled through thousands of years, but we have endured because, like the Holocaust, we never forget what happened to us back in Egypt.

You can see this concept exemplified on Yom Hazikaron, Israel's day of remembrance for fallen soldiers and victims of terror. We make sure that no loss is forgotten and we honour them. Then, something strange happens. The next day, Israel lights up in celebration for its independence day. The order of those days is no coincidence. It tells the world, "Look how far we've come despite all that you throw at us!"

Likewise, Pesach is not just a celebration, but it's not just a somber memorial either.

Hence, maror is a tool to remind and educate us that in every generation we have faced and will face bitter times, but we will carry on. Even leaving Egypt was bittersweet, because many Israelites died earlier or stayed behind. And what's the best way to educate someone? With physical, tangible evidence. Then, what's the most Jewish way to teach this idea, and connect to the past? With food, of course!

To end, going back to the beginning: Imagine you are about to leave Egypt and you know that your children, grandchildren and many generations later will face even more affliction. The maror you just ate reinforces that idea, that some struggle is inevitable. However, the generations after Egypt will, too, be freed from their suffering. And they, too, will be sitting around a seder table, telling our story and eating the maror. So, take a bite of your lettuce, horseradish or whatever else you use, and savour it, because the bitterness won't last forever. Chag Sameach.

Bram Hoffman

Shaker Heights High School
Central East NCSY



In late March of last year, Rav Herschel Schachter made the decision that Megillat Shir HaShirim, Song of Songs, should not be read on Pesach. In normal times, it is read publicly on the seventh day of Pesach or on Shabbat during chol hamoed.

At times the connection between Shir HaShirim and Pesach is quite obvious. For example, “Who is she that comes up from the desert,” referencing the Jews (Shir HaShirim 8:5). Unlike Megillat Esther, which the individual is obligated to hear, Rav Schachter cited the Vilna Gaon, who felt that reading Shir HaShirim was a communal responsibility, an impractical goal then or now. In publicizing Rav Schachter’s opinion, the Rabbinical Council of America (RCA) remarked that reading Shir HaShirim privately “... would not constitute a fulfillment of the original minhag (custom).”

Shir HaShirim is an intense personal story between two lovers, personifying the Jews and G-d. Why would reading it privately not fulfill the minhag, if all eight chapters are about a relationship? Printed in many Haggadahs, some Jews even have the custom to recite all of Shir HaShirim on the night of the seder!

The answer has to do with how Shir HaShirim relates to the holiday of Pesach. One such connection is via the Shirat HaYam—Song of the Sea, sung after the Jews saw their oppressors drown in the Red Sea. Who sang it? All of B’nei Yisrael, in unison. The Torah explicitly states that Moshe and Miriam led the men and women in song to praise Hashem for their redemption. It certainly wasn’t the clandestine exchange of poetry we find in Shir HaShirim.

But if remembering the Exodus and the Splitting of the Sea is a communal event, why does the Torah use the first person singular “you” when commanding the Jewish people to remember the Exodus? (Deuteronomy 16:3). I believe Da’at Mikra has the answer. In addition to connecting Shirat HaYam with Pesach, he notes that towards the seder’s end we also sing many songs that in some way connect to the Exodus. Even those who read the individual-minded Shir HaShirim on the night of the seder juxtapose it with singing in groups together. Symbolically, the songs we sing represent the individual who experienced the Exodus, within the context of Am Yisrael’s experience. The expression of love between ourselves and Hashem can only truly be achieved when the community experiences Pesach together, sorely lacking when Shir HaShirim is recited alone.

Sydney Hoffman

Bi-Cultural Hebrew Academy
Northeast NCSY



While reclining to our left during the Pesach seder, we drink four cups of wine. The first cup is to be had after reciting Kiddush; the second as we recall the Exodus story; during the Birkat Hamazon we drink the third; and over the fourth, we sing Hallel. While this is a well-known tradition, many do not know the reasoning behind the four cups of wine.

Wine, a royal drink, is meant to symbolize the freedom that we are celebrating. By remembering our history, we are able to connect it with the challenges we have overcome and how they define our lives. We drink four glasses of wine because in Shemot 6:6-8, Hashem promises to take the Israelites out from Egyptian slavery by stating:

1. “I will take you out...”
2. “I will save you...”
3. “I will redeem you...”
4. “I will take you as a nation...”

Sitting with our families and friends, we appreciate all we have and, as the Midrash suggests, we remember the liberation of the Israelites and the birth of our nation. There were four main components to our redemption, and for each glass of wine we celebrate a specific stage. Firstly, when the plagues began we were saved from labor. When the Jews left Egypt and arrived in Raamses, we were saved from servitude which is the next stage. Next, the Splitting of the Sea is when we no longer feared being recaptured. Finally, becoming a nation at Har Sinai was a critical point for the Jews. At our seders, we are able to experience these factors of our redemption spiritually through the wine which symbolizes freedom.

While there are many reasons for the four cups of wine we drink, overall, it is important to remember our transformation from slavery to freedom and to appreciate our ability to currently live safe, joyous, and healthy lives as Jews. As we sit at the seders surrounded by family and friends, we are grateful for our lives and pray for others to be rescued from the tyranny and poverty that remain today.

Dina Kalker

Oriyah High School, Efrat
NCSY Israel



Why is telling the story of Passover such a big mitzvah?

There are many stories that happened to the Jewish people over the years—many things that shaped us as a nation—and yet we don't have a commandment similar in scope and intensity to retell the story of the Chanukah miracle or the Destruction of the Temple.

This is perhaps because, while we can relate to and find something to learn from every story from our past, the story of what happened to us in Egypt and post-Egypt is so applicable and relatable every single day.

How is this so? I'm assuming that none of us have ever actually been enslaved in Egypt, so how is this story relatable to our everyday lives?

During the seder we have four cups of wine. These four cups of wine symbolize the four words of redemption that G-d said to Moses. G-d told Moses the order of redemption from Egypt, **וְהוֹצֵאתִי, וְהַצַּלְתִּי, וְגִאֲלֹתִי, וְלִקַּחְתִּי**: "I will take you out, I will rescue you, I will redeem you, I will take you to me." The first three steps of redemption were leaving, saving, and redeeming. This is the process. Only by the fourth step are we really going towards something better rather than away from something bad.

So, too, in our lives, when we are trying to get to a better place in our life—whether that be in relationships with people, in our connection to G-d, or in any other kind of personal improvement—the first step is leaving the bad habits behind: understanding that you can put aside all the things that were holding you back. Only then can you really step towards your goal. Oftentimes, we try to "have the best of both worlds"—we keep the thing holding us back, while trying to move forward towards our goal.

But until we let go of whatever is holding us back, we won't be able to really achieve our goal.

This may be a long and hard process, but we have learned from the Passover story that you can redeem yourself even from the lowest of lows.

Adiel Khalili

Great Neck North High School
New York NCSY



During the reading of Magid, there is an obligation to say these three words: "Pesach, matzah, u'maror. If one does not say these three words, he has not filled his seder obligation. But what is so important about these three words? And how do they connect to my everyday Jewish identity?

Pesach—During the times of the Beit Hamikdash, our ancestors gave the Passover offering to G-d. Nowadays, we place a shank bone on our seder plates. This represents the fact that G-d passed over the houses of the Jewish nation, while the houses of the Egyptians were struck by the last plague. In this plague, makat bechorot, all the first-born boys of the Egyptians were killed. The Jews placed the blood of the sheep on their doorposts, and G-d passed over the Jewish homes.

Matzah—Matzah represents the fact that the Jews had limited time to make bread while rushing to leave Egypt. They did not have time for the dough to rise, so their bread became matzah.

Maror—Maror translates to the word bitter in English. This represents the bitter struggles and hardships that the Jews went through under Pharaoh's rule in Egypt. We eat maror with charoset as a sign of all the work they did. The charoset represents the mud and the maror reminds us of their bitter lives.

Connection to Jewish Identity—Our identity defines who we are. As Jews, our identity has played a big role in how we act, talk, and live our daily lives. Many times we go through our personal marors or struggles that keep us down and bitter. There are two options from there. Either we could give up, or get up. We as Jews should learn to take our time and be the best we can be. Unlike the "matzah that didn't have enough time to rise, Hashem wants us to actually "rise" and grow to the highest potential. Instead of being bitter and sad like the "maror," we should quickly rush to get up and do something about it. As Jews, we need to stop letting things prevent us from our goals and dreams. G-d is showing us that He wants us to get up and grow to be better. He doesn't want us to wait until our "dough has finished rising"—He doesn't want us to wait till things get better. He wants us to grow and show the world that we are able to overcome our challenges and reach our goals.

Sarah Kline

Whitfield School
Midwest NCSY



At the seder, we drink four cups of wine (or grape juice). But why? What is the significance of 4?

Well, as we know, there is always a reason for every little detail. At the seder, a lot of things happen around the number four: the four sons, the four questions from Mah Nishtanah, etc. So, what is the significance of the number we keep seeing?

In Bereishit (15:13) Avraham was talking to Hashem, and he was told that the Jewish people would be strangers in a land that was not theirs and they would be slaves for 400 years. Then in Parshat Bo, it says that B'nei Yisrael lived in Egypt for 430 years, but that count is starting from the Bris bein Habesarim.

The Jews actually only stayed in Egypt for 210 years and were only really slaves for 86 years, which started at the time of Miriam's birth. "Miriam" means bitter because when she was born, the Egyptians started being bitter and cruel towards the Jewish people. The Toras Chaim explains that the 86 years were only one-fifth of the 430 years they were supposed to be in Egypt. The Jewish people were redeemed from the other four-fifths. This is why we drink four cups of wine at the seder. The word kos, which means cup, has the gematria 86, which goes back to show the kindness of Hashem: that he only had us enslaved for 86 years, which was one period of kos.

We show gratitude to Hashem by drinking four kosot in gratitude for the four-fifths of enslavement that we didn't have to do. All of these parts of the seder that connect to the number four, and just the concept of Pesach entirely, is all about freedom and how grateful we are to be free.

Carol S. Kornworcel

Katz Yeshiva High School
Southern NCSY



During the Pesach seder, we sing the upbeat song Dayenu, expressing gratitude towards Hashem for all He has done for us. But besides screaming the word dayenu a million times, the words we say are pretty interesting. For example, "If He had given us the Torah but not brought us into Israel, it would have been enough." Pretty odd, right? I would like us to delve into the meaning of why we say "It would have been enough," but I would like for you to keep the following question in mind: What is more important—the journey or the destination? We'll get back to this later.

If we observe the structure of this piyyut, we can see that many of the lines follow the pattern of the Jewish people being given something important by Hashem, and our less than fully grateful response towards Hashem in return. An example of this is how we say "If you fed us the manna, it would have been enough," but we read in the Torah that it wasn't enough for the Jewish people, and that they complained about the manna. This pattern repeats itself during the song, reflecting the lack of our gratitude towards all that Hashem has given us, which is why we say dayenu now. We use this opportunity to thank Hashem for all that He gave us, saying that it was enough for us to be even more grateful for it.

If we are given a gift and don't take time to acknowledge what was done for us to receive that gift, then we are just enslaving ourselves into our selfishness. The Midrash says, "He who has no gratitude is like one who negates the existence of G-d."

So let us return to our original question: What is more important—the journey or the destination? We cannot enjoy the final destination if we do not take the time to appreciate all that went into the planning. Imagine that you were planning a family road trip, spending hours of your own time to make sure it goes perfectly. Once you arrive at those places, you will be more appreciative of them because you know what went into the planning and you did the driving to get there. But if you are instead given a plane ticket to get to those places, you may not have as much respect or excitement for the trip.

Dayenu is about our gratitude and about how important it is to be appreciative of what we have and what we are given. This Pesach, take the time to acknowledge all that went into planning and preparing your family seder. Take the time to say thank you and appreciate all that you have, because what you don't do today won't be easily resolved tomorrow. Tomorrow you will realize how important it was to be grateful for what you have, and it may be too late.

I wish you all a fantastic, healthy, and inspiring chag Pesach! Chag Sameach!

Yael Marcus

Chashmonaim, Chorev High School
NCSY Israel



In the beginning of magid, the part of the seder that goes through the story of the Exodus from Egypt, a question arises: Why do we start magid with a mention of matzah in **הא לחמא עניא**, and not of Pesach and maror?

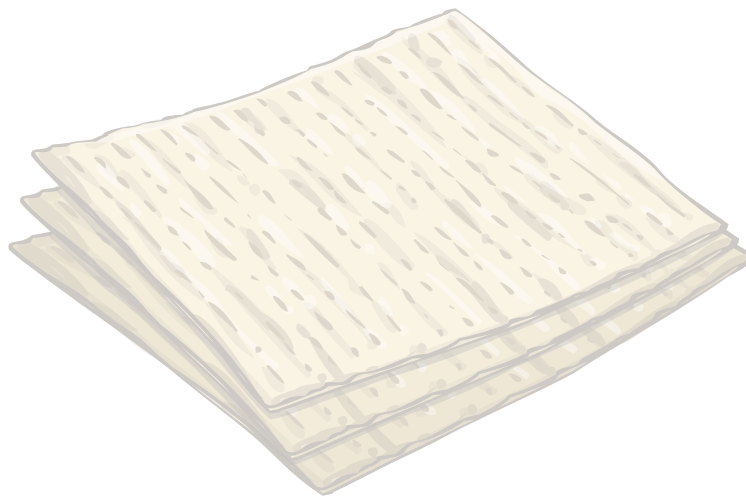
The reason that some mefarshim give is that matzah embodies the whole story of **יציאת מצרים**. On the one hand, matzah symbolizes our redemption because we had matzah when we left Egypt. Our dough didn't have enough time to rise because of our haste to leave Egypt, which is how we ended up with matzah. On the other hand, matzah represents our enslavement in Egypt. Matzah is **לחם עוני**—poor man's bread, that we ate as slaves. We eat matzah to remind us of the plight of our forefathers in Egypt, and this allows us to better appreciate Hashem's salvation.

In addition, **הא לחמא עניא** mirrors how the Jewish people feel in exile: we were redeemed from Egypt, but the redemption is not yet complete. The final redemption has not yet come. When we eat matzah, we can relate to the subservience, poverty, and exile that our forefathers went through in Egypt because we, too, experience this in our own exile. This is what we are portraying when we invite the poor to join us and eat at our seder during **הא לחמא עניא**. What we are trying to stress is that we are in exile, which is why we can invite people during the seder. In the times of the Temple, only guests who were invited beforehand could have a share in the Pesach sacrifice.

Furthermore, part of the reason that we were exiled was due to people being negligent of the poor. We hope that by inviting the poor to our seder in **הא לחמא עניא**, helping them, and showing them kindness, we will merit to experience the final Redemption speedily in our days.

Pesach is not only about remembering the story of how Hashem redeemed us from Egypt and the transmission of this story from generation to generation by way of mesorah. It is also about the hope for the future Redemption because we realize that the story of the redemption from Egypt is not yet complete. Throughout the Haggadah we see this hope. In **הא לחמא עניא**, we say, "This year, we are here; next year, may we be in the Land of Israel! This year, slaves; next year, free men!" Towards the end of the Haggadah we say "Next year in Jerusalem!"

This is the hope of the generations of thousands of years past, and this hope should be felt by Jews even today at our seders. May we all merit to witness the return of all Jews to Israel and the final Redemption.



Nessa Moussadji

Westmount Collegiate Institute
NCSY Canada



In every fairy tale, you know that the credits are about to roll when the protagonists hop on their horse and proceed to ride off into the sunset together. Ask any kid that has seen a Disney movie, and they'll tell you that a happily-ever-after occurs when the prince and princess share a true love's kiss or end up marrying each other. After that, we assume that the rest of their lives are as happy as the story's ending.

In contrast, the ending that the Jewish people experience in the Passover story hardly seems like a happy one. In short, they're told, "Congratulations!! You've just been freed from 210 years of slavery! Now please go to the empty desert to wander for 40 years. And no, you cannot celebrate with bread, but enjoy these weird cracker-like snacks that taste like cardboard!" When you think about it like that, you may start to think about whether the Jews are even getting a happy ending at all. And yet, in the Haggadah we praise Hashem for that ending. This hints to us that the ending was clearly a happy one; but to understand how, we first have to understand the Jewish perspective on happiness.

According to Western society, happiness is a result of what you acquire in life. The happy endings of fairy tales clearly follow this philosophy, with the princess typically acquiring true love and maybe even a castle by the end of the movie. According to this ideology, these riches should be enough to grant her unlimited happiness for the rest of her life.

Judaism, on the other hand, believes that happiness comes from striving towards achieving something. Through this lens, true happiness comes actions that may include experiencing a feeling of discomfort. Even though there may be difficult moments throughout the process, the "pain" is seen as pleasurable because it directly reflects the progress of building that which you've set out to achieve.

At face value, this concept of happiness seems to make no sense. You may be thinking, "In what world could pleasure possibly equal pain!?" To illustrate this, I'd like to share the following example: When a little kid is given a toy from their parents for no reason other than to receive the toy, they are overjoyed and they play with it for about five minutes before getting bored and moving on to the next thing. However, if a child has begged and pleaded and has done extra chores in order to earn that toy, it will become a lot more meaningful to them. They will take care of it, play with it, and enjoy it much more. The same thing happens with happiness. If you struggle to obtain a goal, you'll feel real pleasure in the journey and the achievement of that goal, which will result in true happiness.

Once you recognize that Judaism views happiness as proportional to the effort you put in, you can begin to understand how the Jews are being given a happy ending. When Hashem freed the Jews from Egypt, he imbued them with a sense of purpose by giving them an end goal of getting the Torah and settling in the Land of Israel. He gave them the opportunity to strive to get there and become close to Him in the process.

Even though there were challenges along the way, and living in the desert was by no means easy, these experiences allowed the Jewish people to put more effort into reaching their goal. Ultimately, the short-term pain they experienced will contribute to the long-term pleasure they receive when they finally make it into Israel.

In life, it might seem exhausting to always have something to work towards. But the truth is, without anything to work towards, the likelihood is that you will become bored within days. This does not mean that you should never take vacations, but once they are over you know that there will be a goal to strive towards when you return.

So, the next time you are struggling to take that next step to reach your goal—whether it is picking up an extra shift to make more money, or eating a cucumber instead of chocolate—try to reframe the experience in your mind. Tell yourself that even though it is hard, this will contribute to my overall happiness, so that when I finally reach the end goal, my happily-ever-after will be all the more sweet.

Good luck, and have a happy Passover!!

Emily Seligson

Bi-Cultural Hebrew Academy
Northeast NCSY



Partway through magid, around the time everyone starts zoning out and thinking about matzo ball soup, we reach the four sons: the wise, the wicked, the simple, and the son who doesn't know how to ask questions.

Growing up, I always thought of the wicked kid as a wild, out-of-control kid, ripping Haggadahs left and right and playing pranks on everyone. However, he's not doing any of these things. When looking at the Haggadah, you see that all he says is, "מָה הָעֲבֹדָה הַזֹּאת לָכֶם?" "What are these things to you?" Why is this considered to be so wicked? By saying "to you," the wicked child is erasing his Jewish identity and setting himself apart from the Jewish community.

Time and time again, forces including the Greeks, the Babylonians, and the Nazis have tried stripping us of our Jewish identities. Today, too, there's still an alarming amount of anti-Semitism. The best thing we can do to fight back is embrace our Judaism and work as a community. We can't divide ourselves, nor can we be an outsider to the community.

Here's a task: Try and break a Popsicle™ stick. Easy, right? Now, hold two together and try and break them. Still possible, but getting a little harder. Now, hold one hundred Popsicle sticks together and try to break them. The Popsicle sticks aren't going anywhere.

Now imagine the Popsicle sticks as the Jewish people. If we step out of line and separate ourselves from the Jewish community, like the wicked child, we will become weak and easily broken. Instead, we must stick together as a kehilah—a community, embracing our identity in order to combat the rising anti-Semitism in the world.

Dina Zemble

Ilan High School
New Jersey NCSY



Ever since I was a kid, my favorite part of the Passover seder has been nirtzah, the finale. Sleep deprived and probably delirious by the time it rolls around at 2 a.m., my family would suddenly get a second wind as we sang the songs outlined in the Haggadah. What is it about this part of the seder that catches everyone's attention?

Maybe it's the fun tunes to the songs, or the anticipation of who will last longest at the table. Or maybe it is the message it imparts on us on this holy night.

Nirtzah, the last component of the seder night, is often translated as acceptance. However I would like to examine its other translation: wanting. What is it that we want? As a nation, the Jewish people constantly strive for growth. We don't want this night to end; that's why we continue to celebrate even after we say birkat hamazon and drink the last cup of wine.

This idea is not just represented in the Passover seder; we can see it across Judaism. We continue to relearn all the parshiot, even after we finish them each year, because we don't want to stop; we know there is so much more we can learn. This embodies the ideal of a Jew: to know there is no end to what you can accomplish. In fact, Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Liadi wouldn't include the paragraph of "Chasal siddur Pesach—We have completed the order of the Pesach seder," because he knew how important it was that the message of Pesach not end with Pesach.

This time, when you're almost asleep in your chair and start to hear the familiar tunes of nirtzah, you don't have to wonder why we are saying it. You will know that it is because we never want to stop. We want to strive for the highest level we can and keep going no matter what. Because that's what it is to be a Jew.



לשנה הבאה בירושלים

