



# Pesach and the Holocaust

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## Pesach – 14<sup>th</sup> of Nissan

- Pesach commemorates the freeing of the people of Israel from slavery.
- Deliverance from the yoke of centuries of slavery.



## Pesach – 14<sup>th</sup> of Nissan

- Four expressions of redemption:
  - 1) I will bring you out.
  - 2) I will take you.
  - 3) I will rid you of...
  - 4) I will redeem you.



## Pesach – Holiday of Redemption

- The first month of the Hebrew year.
- The month of redemption.
- The beginning of spring and the renewal of nature.



## Pesach – Holiday of Redemption

Before the holy day, the house is completely cleaned, to get rid of all the leaven - *Hametz*. This is to remind us that children of Israel did not have time to properly bake bread.

It also serves as a reminder that spring is coming.



## Pesach – The Seder

The focal point of Pesach is the Seder.

Every father is commanded to tell his children the story of the redemption.



## Pesach – The Seder Plate

On the Seder plate:

- Charoset
- Bitter herbs
- Lamb's shank bone
- Hard boiled eggs
- Four glasses of wine – for the four stages of redemption



## Pesach – The Seder Plate

On the Seder plate:

- A fifth glass for the prophet Elijah – for the final redemption that is still to come.



## Pesach

At the seder we recline as kings and as free people.

During the Holocaust, in a time of slavery – how do you celebrate the holiday of redemption?



## Pesach in the Holocaust

Desperate attempts were made to observe this holiday, but it was also impossible to refrain from eating *Hametz* – there were no conditions to bake matza.

When receiving a few hundred calories per day, not eating *Hametz* meant a certain death.



## Pesach in the Holocaust

However, there was a need and desire to observe at least something of the holiday.

The Jews were living in conditions of slavery and relating to the festival of redemption.



## From the Diary of Egon Redlich

Following are excerpts from the diary of Egon Redlich, which he wrote while he was in the Theresienstadt ghetto-camp. Egon was murdered in the Auschwitz death camp, together with his wife and son.



## From the Diary of Egon Redlich

*“April 17, 1943. Shabbat.*

*“Passover – the festival of freedom, of light. Around the city are walls and barbed wire; In the evening, lights are forbidden, and during the day, you cannot go out.”*



## From the Diary of Egon Redlich

*“ April 20, 1943*

*‘In all your habitations you shall eat matza.’  
But here in the ghetto, they celebrated the  
Seder and ate bread rolls, a strange thing to  
do. A strange act. A strange ghetto – strange  
Jews, a strange world. A celebration of  
Passover, and for the Seder they eat  
[leavened] bread.’”*



## The Diary of Egon Redlich

- What is Theresienstadt?



## The Diary of Egon Redlich

*“A strange act. A strange ghetto – strange Jews, a strange world. A celebration of Passover and for the Seder they eat [leavened] bread.”*

- Can you substitute another word for “strange”?



## Bergen-Belsen

- A camp in Germany.
- Jews were compelled to eat against their will.



## The Prayer for Eating Leaven

### *Bergen-Belsen, Passover, 1944*

*“.. Before eating hametz, the following should be said with heartfelt intent: Heavenly Father, here, openly and knowingly before you, is our desire to do your will and to celebrate Passover by eating matza and by observing the prohibition of eating leaven, but it pains our hearts that slavery prevents us and we are in mortal danger.*”



## The Prayer for Eating Leaven

*“..We are prepared and ready to observe your commandments and live by them and, if not, die by them and be warned by the warning, ‘beware and guard you soul carefully.’*

*For this reason, we pray that You will keep us in life, and preserve us and redeem us quickly so that we can observe Your laws and do Your will and worship You with a full heart – Amen.”*



## Question

- Is it at all necessary to observe, or try to observe, Pesach, when conditions don't allow to do so properly?



## The Warsaw Ghetto

*“With the background of the burning ghetto.. My father’s behavior seemed out of place. I remember this was the eighth day of Passover. It’s true that father could not buy matza for the holidays, but he was able to buy horseradish. He made a meal with the horseradish for the first day of Passover, in memory of the Jewish sojourn in Egypt.”*



## The Warsaw Ghetto

*“..For the eight days of the holiday, father ate only potatoes. His was not a fast, however, pleading with G-d for mercy for the unfortunate, doomed, innocent people. Father behaved with habit. He wanted – with whatever means were possible – to observe Jewish tradition.”*



## The Warsaw Ghetto

*“..There was really nothing bad about it, but it unnerved me terribly.”*

- From: Calel Perechodnik, *Am I a Murderer?*, Westview Press, 1996.



## The Warsaw Ghetto - Question

- Calel is unnerved by his father's behavior. Why?



## Quotes

- *“A strange act. A strange ghetto – strange Jews, a strange world. A celebration of Passover and for the Seder they eat [leavened] bread.”*
- *“...Before eating leaven, the following should be said with heartfelt intent.”*
- *“...He made a meal with the horseradish for the first day of Passover in memory of the Jewish sojourn in Egypt...”*



## Question

Why did the Jews decide to try and observe Passover as much as they could?



## From the Underground Press in the Warsaw Ghetto

Unzer Haffnung, Warsaw, April 1, 1942  
(Passover eve)

*“We are still having the festival of freedom at a time of inhuman slavery. And even though freedom is being trampled underfoot every day by the boots of the most terrible monster in all generations, it continues to flourish in our souls, and we believe and hope.*”



## From the Underground Press in the Warsaw Ghetto

*“Passover, the most beautiful festival in our history, returns and revives the eternal idea of freedom in our memory. For [our] tortured [people] these days, it is a recollection of redemption. We understand today [more] than before the meaning of the words,*



## From the Underground Press in the Warsaw Ghetto

*“..’In every generation, every person must see himself as if he himself came out of Egypt.’*

*It is the command of history. No generation may forget the experiences that the people underwent in the foreign diasporas.*



## From the Underground Press in the Warsaw Ghetto

*“Since the liberation from slavery in Egypt, every Jewish generation has had its own Haggadah, which was written in torment and sorrow, in subjugation and slavery, but also in faith and in hope for a better tomorrow.”*



## *“And They were Still Holding Seders.. Passover 1943*

*“And the same night, at daybreak on Tuesday, the first night of the uprising, they were still holding the Seder in the ghetto.*

*Somewhere, in the depths of the bunkers, in silent apartments that were used only in the breaks.. That is the last time Jews sat at set tables.”*



*“And They were Still Holding Seders.. Passover 1943*

*“They read the Haggadah...*

*And the treacherous deeds of Pharaoh in the Egypt merged with what the wicked Hitler was doing to us.*

*The story of Rabbi Eliezer and Rabbi Joshua and Rabbi Eliezer Ben Azaria and Rabbi Akiva...”*



## *“And They were Still Holding Seders.. Passover 1943*

*“Like the sages in Bnei Brak, the Warsaw Jews would recall the miracles of the Exodus from Egypt and speak about the uprising. They praised the deeds of the young fighters from Mila Street and Zamenhoff..*

*The wicked one ends up being destroyed, like pharaoh and his forces..*



## *“And They were Still Holding Seders.. Passover 1943*

*“Their yearning for redemption was immeasurably great. An old tune, ancient words. They knew that they were doomed to destruction on the threshold of redemption.*

*They sang and wept. In their imagination, old and young joined the war of liberation of the ancients.*



## Passover in Mauthausen

*“This was the first Passover I had spent in a concentration camp. The previous Passover, we were still in the Theresienstadt ghetto, where we could still hold the Seder within the family circle. However, we celebrated that Seder in a unique way, too, because in those days the suffering in the ghetto was severe, and once darkness fell...*



## Passover in Mauthausen

*“... we were forbidden to illuminate anything, even light a match. Under those circumstances, we were forced to hold the Seder during the day. But I was still with my parents, and on our table there were a few sheets of matza, as well as tea mixed with jam, as a substitute for wine.”*



## Passover in Mauthausen

*“The Mauthausen Seder was completely different. After the evening roll call, and before we went into the hut to sleep, we were allowed some time to wander around the open space in front of the huts. I asked one of the chaps to walk with me a bit, and while we were walking back and forth, we recited extracts from the Haggadah by heart, as much as we could remember.”*



## Passover in Mauthausen

*“A unique Seder night, without matza or wine, without a festive meal, during during which all the members of the family reclined around one table, but rather a Seder of walking. Our bodies were humiliated and enslaved, but they could not enslave our spirits again.. Because in spite of everything, we felt that we were free.”*



## The Last Seder in the Warsaw Ghetto

*There was one Moishale, the last Moishale  
in the Warsaw Ghetto*

*Asking his father, “Ma Nishtana”*

*“Ma nishtana halaila haze mikol haleilot?”*

*Why is this night so long and more terrible  
than any night before?*



## The Last Seder in the Warsaw Ghetto

*“While Moishale asked all his questions  
Heaven and earth stood still*

*The angels were afraid to make noise*

*And his father, his father wants the answer*

*“Avadim Hayinu”*



## The Last Seder in the Warsaw Ghetto

*“Moishale says, “Tate Zise, I have one more question of my own,*

*and this is the question:*

*I want to know, Tate Zise, would I still be alive next year to ask you, ‘Ma Nishtana’?*

*Would there any Jewish children be left to ask the ‘Ma Nishtana’?*



## The Last Seder in the Warsaw Ghetto

*“Will there any Jewish father  
be left to answer, ‘Avadim Hayinu’?”*



## The Last Seder in the Warsaw Ghetto

*“And the father’s answer: ‘I don’t know...*

*I don’t know if I’ll be alive*

*I don’t know, I don’t know if you’ll be alive*

*But I know that there will always be one  
Mishale*

*Somewhere to ask the ‘Ma Nishtana’”*



## The Last Seder in the Warsaw Ghetto

*“I don't know if I'll be alive  
but I know one thing:*

”כי בשם קדשך נשבעת לו  
שלא יכבה נרו לעולם ועד”