

bs”d

**Why is this holiday different from all other holidays?
Or: the dilemma of creating Pesach art before Pesach.**

Right after Purim most Orthodox Jews get nervous: it’s exactly one month till Pesach and that means cleaning, organizing, sorting out stuff, remembering where the boxes with Pesachdike pots and plates are—the benefit of finding things you lost back doesn’t outweigh the trouble and aggravation, though—and in my case also moving lots of things around in a small, overcrowded New York apartment. Fortunately I never allow anybody to eat in my studio but only drink coffee, which saves me a complicated studio clean up. According to the Mishnah you don’t have to search places where you never bring in chametz. Some medieval miniatures



1, 2



display cats under the seder table. The rabbis figured that mice might drag chametz, like crumbs or pieces of bread, back into places you already searched. If you have a cat it's likely the mice stay away. I am lucky I share my house with a few felines.

But I also share a problem with many other Jewish artists. All those Pesach preparations leave precocious little time to read and study about the Exodus and the Haggadah, and even less time to decompress in my studio and make Pesach art during the month that puts me in the mood to do so. The Haggadah tells us to talk about the *yetziat mitzrayim* when our symbols are in front of us, on the seder table: pesach, matzah, maror. Indeed, but who has time to paint before the seder? When I wrote stories for chabad.org they often asked me to submit Pesach art shortly before Pesach, so I usually offered something from the year before, or older.

Over the years, after Pesach and sometimes already during chol hamoed, I made some Pesach art,—an artist has to paint—a few drawings here, a few drawings there, like the Three Symbols, [1](#) or a pastel drawing of the Yetziat Mitzrayim, [2](#) with the anachronistic details I have discussed in earlier columns, or aspects of the seder, like the Hillel sandwich of matzah and maror which is eaten right before the meal starts. [3](#)

But it was my dream to one day make a complete Haggadah. When my children were young—and I had even less time to paint—I started with parts of it, like a series of Chad Kadya, the song of the little goat, and Echad Mee Yodea, the repetitive song of the thirteen important Jewish concepts. These songs are meant to keep the children awake at the seder: *Who knows what is one? I know what is one! One is G-d who is Heaven and on earth, two are the tablets of the Covenant, three are the Patriarchs*, etc. I will post these series on the American Guild of Judaic Art website on Facebook.

An other year I made the “Fifteen Steps” indicating the order of the seder: kiddush, wash hands, karpas, break the matzah, etc., till nirtzah, the conclusion.

In 5762 / 2002 I decided to simply start at the beginning. A Haggadah is a big project and you need—besides brushes and paper—*sitzflaysh*, Yiddish for the perseverance and determination to sit down and continue the work for long stretches. There are already many beautiful Haggadot in the world, so what can an

artist add? Well, every Haggadah is unique and the illustrations contain the soul of the artist.

In order to keep the printing costs low I decided to make the Haggadah in black and white, India ink on paper. Because the story is timeless no historical accuracy is needed, as has been discussed in earlier columns, and I chose my great love, Chassidic stories. I have lived for a while in a Chassidic neighborhood, not for the stories but because there was an affordable loft available at the time before Williamsburg (Brooklyn) became hip and unaffordable, and that inspired me a lot. I had already several (chassidic) versions of the Fifteen Steps in both color and black and white, so I opened my own Haggadah, the printed one I use at the seder, and started at the beginning with the search for and burning of chametz and eruv tavshilin (preparing food when Yom Tov falls on Shabbat), p.3. I told myself that,



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p.3



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P.7 P.39



with the exception of unforeseen circumstances, every week I had to finish an x amount of pages and work in the right order, which means not picking out nice illustrations while postponing the "less interesting" parts of the text, because the whole Haggadah is interesting from the beginning to the end. I wrote the text and made the illustrations simultaneously, page by page, incorporating text and letters in my graphical display. For instance, on p.17 the Jews crossing the sea are the letters of *weyotzianu*, and *He brought us out*, and some text is like a slanting wall of receding waters. *Pour Your wrath*, p.40, has a similar visual effect. Some of my pages hardly have any text, like p.7, breaking the middle matzah for the afikoman. Others don't have much illustration, like p.39, the grace after the meal.

To make a Chassidic Haggadah is one thing, but what about the phrase, *Because of this did HaShem, do [wonders] for me and I was leaving Egypt?* There has to be a connection between the past and the present. I added images of both Pharaoh, Cossacks, Haman, p.14, Nazis, p.10, and other oppressors over the ages embittering



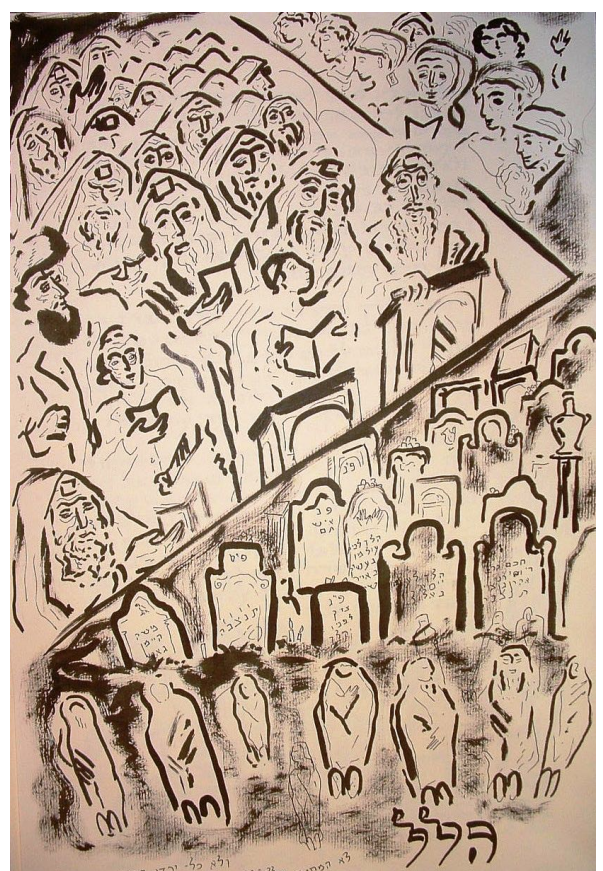
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the lives of Jews during their long Galut, Exile, but illustrated the Ten Plagues with a simple timeless image of the Angel of Death hovering over the dead firstborns, p. 20, and the page with *bekhol dor wador* (in every generation, p.25) with a Chassidic father and son in a nineteenth-century Eastern European town, just like the Chassidic-style exodus from Egypt on p.27, and Hallel with the phrase *The dead do not praise G-d*, on p.41

My Haggadah contains modern elements as well, like the state of Israel, p.50, next to pure Chassidic elements, like the page with the conclusion of the official part of the seder meal, nirtzah, p.54, to which I added an image of a story about the Koznitzer Maggid:



P.50



P.54

A SOLDIER'S SONG

*At the time of the Koznitzer Maggid, countless young Jewish boys suffered the misfortunes of being forcibly drafted into the army of the Czar for several years, up to twenty. Many of these children died, others were converted, and of course none of them ever received a proper Jewish education. One such "soldier" happened to be in Koznitz with his regiment at Pesach time, and he asked the Maggid for permission to attend his seder. This request was happily granted to him. At the conclusion of the seder the Chassidim chanted the traditional song *peduyim letziyon berinno* (redeemed to Zion with joy). When the soldier heard *peduyim* (Hebrew: redeemed) he added in Russian *podyom*, (Let's go!) The Maggid beamed and started clapping and dancing. "Yes, *podyom!* We are ready to go!" But where was the soldier? He had disappeared.*

There is much more to say about making a Haggadah, but for now I leave it at this and encourage my fellow Jewish artists, if you want to make a Haggadah, just say *podyom*, and start with it.

Moadim lesimchah, have a good Pesach,

Shoshannah Brombacher,
Vice President of the AGJA

