

Pesach in a Bomb Shelter

By Phyllis Chesler

Most Israelis will probably be spending Pesach in a bomb shelter. At least I hope they will.

As a people, we have been here before many times—but when we did not have a sovereign state or heroic and magnificently trained soldiers to protect us from those who are, “in each generation,” determined to genocidally exterminate us.

We are living Jewish history again. Except for brief and merciful pauses, we always have. Many Jews forget this and think that they’ve escaped it. But it seems that we are again also reliving Jewish history in the sovereign Holy Land—the land which was both a miraculous homecoming and a hoped-for protection for Jews living in the Diaspora.

Let’s take a moment and breathe. And remember.

Jews have celebrated Pesach under very terrible conditions before. In Nazi ghettos and in Nazi death camps such as Auschwitz, Dachau, and Westerbork, Jews risked imminent death by smuggling flour into their barracks from which to make a little matza. Unbelievably, some managed to kasher a crematoria oven to do so. Already starving, some Jews refused to eat their meager portion of bread for a week in order to observe the prohibition against eating chametz. Some women smuggled boiled potatoes and raisins for all their seder ingredients. Many could recite the entire Haggadah from memory, and they conducted secret sedarim—again risking imminent death.



Baking matzah in the Warsaw Ghetto, Poland (Courtesy Yad Vashem Photo Archives 24D06)

A number of survivors remember such secret sederim as the most meaningful of their lives. Their own expression of faith strengthened and uplifted them.

In Samarkand, Chabad Jews under Stalin risked immediate death if their underground yeshivot, their hiding of Jews on the run, and their secret and perfectionistic matza-making and Pesach celebrations were ever discovered. Ancient and fragile Jews walked miles in the darkness to immerse themselves in the iciest of rivers as their only mikvah.

In the 15th and 16th centuries, those Spanish Jews who did not choose exile had to pretend to be Catholics, nevertheless held secret sederim—also at great risk of torture and death. They baked matzot secretly and, because they were constantly watched and reported upon by spies and neighbors, they usually celebrated on a night other than the first two nights.

The very origin of the Passover ritual as we know it was created under terrible conditions.

It began when the Babylonians destroyed the First Temple and exiled the Jews in 586 BCE. Passover in the Holy Land had always been a very public communal experience, with generously provided food to the masses during the Temple-based sacrifices. Without the Temple, Jews had to improvise, and the seder became home-based. Every family was a kohen, a priest, and every dining room table was an altar. Thus, in a house of bondage, Jews celebrated their freedom from bondage in Egypt. And my people composed the Babylonian Talmud while there. No small feat.

How can this be? How can one celebrate one's freedom while living in exile or in a Nazi death camp?

I once celebrated a Pesach seder in a women's prison, at Bedford Hills. It was one of the most moving seders of my life. The participants spoke of how much safer or "freer" they felt in prison than at home, where they were the victims of incestuous and violent families from whom they had run away; thereafter, they lived on the streets and were inevitably trafficked by pimps and drug dealers, and themselves turned to alcohol and drugs. In prison, they became "clean." One woman, a political prisoner (she looked as if she'd been mistreated), was happy to be out of solitary and to be, even briefly, in a group of women.

And yes, some of these women came from Jewish and from Orthodox Jewish homes.

I hope and I pray that Israelis remain in their mamads and bomb shelters all the time; that they again conduct communal sedarim while hiding from rockets and missiles; that they (or others) bring everything they need for a seder into the shelter, as well as food in general. I hope that the elderly and the disabled, who cannot run quickly enough to a shelter,

now plan to sleep there as well, as some Londoners did during the Blitz. Musical instruments and portable toilets would not be such a bad idea either.

May we again be redeemed from terrible times. May Khomeini's Evil Empire finally, finally fall. May the extraordinary IDF prevail. May God remain on our side. May we keep the faith. This time, may everyone be spared, not only the promised remnant.

Chag Pesach Sameach!

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