

Accidental Balabusta



Balabusta preps for Pesach

Between the planning, cleaning and cooking, there's a lot to do.

SHELLEY CIVKIN

As the Torah commands us, we tell the story of Passover and the Israelites' exodus from slavery in Egypt to our children and ourselves every year, by reading from the Haggadah. Coming from a secular home, I don't recall our family owning a single Haggadah. Instead, my father had a little black notebook in which he wrote down the story of Passover and the Jews' exodus from Egypt. It took about five minutes for Dad to read it, and then we had our seder. It wasn't particularly traditional, but it was meaningful nonetheless.

On the all-encompassing journey called Yiddishkeit, preparing for Passover scores about an 18/10 on the commitment scale. Between the feathers and flashlights, flourless sponge cakes and briskets, a balabusta has her work cut out for her. And then some.

As an accidental balabusta and relative neophyte to traditional Passover preparations, I want to get with the program as much as possible. I scared myself the other day though, by reading articles about what goes into getting ready for this significant holiday. One such article – called “Cook your Pesach while you sleep” – was particularly troubling. It seems to me that a Pesadik balabusta requires at least 36 hours in every day to prepare her food for the seder, a month ahead of time. She might also require a housekeeper to do all the laundry and clean the house while she's tethered to the kitchen, cutting, peeling, blanching, baking and roasting the eight-course meals she'll serve to her 42 guests over the two nights of Passover. Oh, and did I mention the other two minor meals she needs to organize daily for her family during the eight days of the holiday? Holy flourless kugel, Batman!

And then there's the issue of finding and removing all the chametz from your home. Let me confess something right from the get-go: I am not an observant Jew in the strict sense of the word. I do observe certain things, like going to synagogue every Shabbat, lighting Shabbat candles, doing the odd mitzvah, and studying a little Torah. That's about the extent of it. I refrain from eating

chametz during Pesach, but I have never actually removed all the chametz from my home before the holiday. And I don't keep kosher. However, I do eat matzah religiously during Pesach. And I kind of have a crush on shmurah matzah.

As for that age-old shmurah versus Manischewitz matzah debate ... I wholeheartedly throw my vote

generous though. A couple of years ago, I decided to forgo the store-bought *chraim* (horseradish) and make my own. I found a recipe, then went out and bought the fresh horseradish root. It looked innocent enough. From a distance. Nobody told me that taking a close-up whiff of newly pulverized horseradish root is akin to inhaling mustard gas. I

thought I'd burned my lungs. Sure, it produced that unrivaled heat I always admire in a memorable horseradish. However, it almost knocked me out. This Pesach, I plan to simplify the process by buying horseradish. And saving my lungs for more important things ... like breathing.

On the topic of food ... my husband Harvey makes the ultimate Passover crowd-pleaser: a visually stunning, delicious pyramid-shaped charoset. He got the recipe decades ago from the *L.A. Times*. It never fails to impress guests. Here's the recipe.



Harvey's charoset pyramid.

behind shmurah. Yes, it's expensive, but it's so worth it. Having visited Kfar Chabad on our trip to Israel last year, we went to their shmurah matzah factory and witnessed how the matzah is made by hand. Seeing the meticulous precision with which everything is measured, timed and baked, it was a fascinating and educational experience. And did I mention its unique flavour and round shape? Sure, parts of it can be burnt, but that just enhances the taste. Once you go shmurah, you'll never go back.

I'm the kind of accidental balabusta that, instead of making matzah ball soup, brisket, tzimmes and macaroons for Pesach, I'm inclined to make hotel reservations in Whistler and call it a day. There's no need for me to be Jewish Wonder Woman. Gal Godot has that covered. I know, not every woman who prepares for Pesach considers herself Wonder Woman. But, given the magnitude of preparation that must get done in advance – and done to rigorous standards – I'm pretty sure that devotedly observant women qualify for that title. As for me, I'll do the best I can to honour the traditions, prepare a welcoming and tasty seder for my family, then enjoy a plotzfest.

Preparing for Pesach can be dan-

HARVEY'S CHAROSET PYRAMID

- 1 unpeeled pear, cored and chopped roughly
- 1 unpeeled apple, cored and chopped roughly
- 1 cup chopped walnuts
- 1 cup chopped almonds
- 1 cup chopped hazelnuts
- 1 cup chopped pistachios
- 1 cup chopped pitted dates
- 1 cup chopped raisins
- 2 tsp ground cinnamon
- 2 tsp grated fresh ginger
- 1 tbsp apple cider vinegar
- sweet wine, preferably Manischewitz (about 1/4 cup)
- extra dates to decorate the plate

1. Put all the nuts in food processor and chop, but not too finely. Place in a bowl.

2. Put dates and raisins in food processor and chop, but not too finely. Place in separate bowl.

3. Core and roughly chop apple and pear by hand, then put in the food processor, along with the nuts, and the raisin and date mixture. Add cinnamon, ginger, apple cider vinegar and wine. Chop till it's all mixed together. Be careful

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didn't heed" (e.g. 7:10-13) and it also says about the Israelites, "and they did not heed." (6:9)

Even though it seems that Pharaoh and the Israelites are exhibiting the same behaviour – they both are stubborn in refusing to accept the reality that God is going to redeem the Israelites

through Moses's leadership – the contexts for their behaviour are quite different, almost opposite.

Pharaoh is holding onto the Israelites and enslaving them. He is insisting on a continuation of the suffering and backbreaking labour, which he initiated. The Israelites, on the other hand, are described as

refusing to listen because they themselves are suffering, "their spirits crushed by cruel bondage." (6:9)

Pharaoh is mired in a lack of morality; Israel is mired in a lack of faith. What they have in common is that they refuse to accept what seem like the futile fantasies of Moses about the Israelites leaving Egypt

with him, and moving from bondage to freedom.

Israel needs to be convinced that this idea of the exodus, of actually leaving Egypt, is real, implementable and viable. They need to believe in it. While deep in the heart of slavery, it's hard for the Israelites to imagine a different reality. Their insistence on relying on the here and now as opposed to a promise for the future stems from despair. How much hope are they supposed to keep?

Pharaoh also refuses to accept the future as described by Moses and, in this way, his stubbornness, in all its strength, weight and difficulty, is close to the Israelites' despair. Pharaoh refuses to see what the Israelites cannot.

In contrast to both of these images of stubbornness, Pharaoh's refusal and the Israelites' despair, there is a third image. This third character needs to be even more stubborn, strong and resolute – this character is God. God's stubbornness is characterized by steadfastness, insistence and resoluteness in the face of those who don't believe in his presence and his promise. God needs to stand against those who refuse him, who repeatedly reject the vision of the future that He presents.

At the very beginning of the story, God makes a promise: "God spoke to Moses... 'I appeared to Avraham ... and I have remembered My covenant. Say, therefore, to the Israelite people: I am God. I will free you ... and deliver you ... I will redeem you ... and I will take you ... and I will bring you into the land...'" (6:2-8)

A few verses later, God speaks to Moses again: "Go and tell Pharaoh, king of Egypt, to let the Israelites depart from his land." (11)

God is always responded to with negativity and refusal. "The Israelites would not listen to me, how then should Pharaoh heed me?" (12) God continues with his own steady perseverance: "So God spoke to both Moses and Aaron in regard to the Israelites and Pharaoh, king of Egypt, instructing them to deliver the Israelites from the land of Egypt." (13)

God's stubbornness is instructive and holds a lesson for all of us who dream of a world that looks different than the one we now inhabit. Maybe anyone who dreams about a different reality, anyone who believes that it is truly possible that our existence can be transformed, needs a form of stubbornness. They need to be unrelenting and steadfast in holding onto their dreams, rejecting the people who resist change, on the one hand, and who are too beaten down to have faith, on the other.

God's character in the story emerges for the benefit of dreamers, to call us to be constant and steadfast in our faith that, indeed, tomorrow can be different. And, if we are not dreamers but rather are those who listen, God's voice is charging us to bear the difficulty, the heaviness, the strength of those who are dreamers. Because it is in the merit of those divine representatives, such as Moses and Aaron, that we became able, we became brazen enough, to imagine what a life beyond slavery would look like, to see it and even live it. ❧

Rabbi Avital Hochstein is president of *Hadar Israel* and a research fellow at the *Shalom Hartman Institute*. She received rabbinic ordination from the institute in 2016. Articles by Hochstein and other institute scholars can be found at shalomhartman.org.

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not to overdo it – you don't want it mushy.

4. Remove it all from the food processor and shape it into a pyramid with a spatula. Then use a small, sharp knife to lightly make "brick" shapes in the pyramid. Refrigerate. Put whole dates around the outside before serving.

For another Passover culinary experience, check out Jamie Geller's recipe for potato kugel cups at joyofkosher.com/recipes/potato-kugel-cups. You can YouTube it, too. If you're not afraid of hot oil in a 425°F oven, this recipe will knock your Pesach socks off. Personally, scorching hot oil makes me a bit skittish. But the result is potato heaven.

As Pesach approaches, it's a time to clean house, both literally and spiritually. It's a time to remember how blessed we are in our freedom

as Jews today. And it's a time to hold close our traditions, pass along the story of our exodus from Egypt to the younger generation, and be thankful for where we are now.

So, eat the matzah and bitter herbs and drink those four cups of wine. Then go out and buy lots of Metamucil. Because you're going to need it after eight days of matzah. But check with your rabbi first to make sure Metamucil is kosher for Pesach.

Wishing you all a meaningful and freilach Pesach. ❧

Shelley Civkin, aka the *Accidental Balabusta*, is a happily retired librarian and communications officer. For 17 years, she wrote a weekly book review column for the *Richmond Review*, and currently writes a bi-weekly column about retirement for the *Richmond News*.