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, it meant making and telling the story of Passover and the Jews’ exodus from Egypt. It took about five minutes for Dad to read it, and then we told the 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, 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 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.

So, in the spirit of Pesach, I’m inclined to 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 intolerable horseradish. How-ever, 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.

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HARVEY’S CHAROSET PYRAMID

1. Put all the nuts in food processor and chop roughly
2. Put dates and raisins in food processor and chop, but not too finely.
3. Core and roughly chop apple
4. Chop unpeeled pear and hazelnuts
5. Chop chopped pistachios
6. Chop chopped pitted dates
7. Chop chopped raisins
8. Chop ground cinnamon
9. Chop grated fresh ginger
10. Chop apple cider vinegar

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

Happy Passover!

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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.” (6:6)

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 on faith and resolution 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 Abraham…” 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 Moshe again: “Go and tell Pharaoh, king of Egypt, to let the Israelites depart from his land.” (11)

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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 pyramidal shape with a spatula. Then use a small, sharp knife to lightly make “brick” shapes in the pyramidal shape. Refrigerate. Put whole dates around the outside before serving.

For another Passover culinary experiment, check out Jamie Geller’s recipe for potato kugel cups at joyofkosher.com/recipes/potato-kugel-cups. You can You Tube 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 knock your Pesach socks off. 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 brazen enough, to imagine what a life beyond slavery would look like, to see it and even live it.

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chariots of fire, and I will take you from Egypt. I will free you in this fun house world we’re living in. So Sandra takes control, bringing… and I am God. I will free you and deliver you… and I will redeem you… and I will take you and I will bring you into the land....’” (6:2-8)

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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 brazen enough, to imagine what a life beyond slavery would look like, to see it and even live it.

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