

# THE SEDER GUEST

*by Stewert Weiss*

Time, it's been said, is often like a sharp gust of wind that can move you and turn you with its invisible force, and then disappear as quickly as it came. But time, it seems to me, is also like a river, flowing from one end of eternity to the other, winding through ages and places in unstoppable regularity. And while one current passes by and is soon beyond our grasp, the river of time stays right where it is, and you can step right up to its banks any time you feel like it, just by closing your eyes and dipping in. Right about now, every spring before Passover, I smile with sweet mystery at my Seder with Reb Pinchas.

I was a junior in college back in 1975, part of that mixed-up generation that had soured on the idealism of the sixties but hadn't yet caught the Yuppie Fever of the eighties. I was going to school in northern Pennsylvania, changing majors as fast as best friends, undergoing that rite of passage known as "finding yourself."

When spring vacation approached, I thought about going home, like I usually did, but eventually decided against it. My folks were going to Palm Springs, I had plenty of work to catch up on, and I kind of liked the way Pennsylvania changed its seasons right before your eyes. So I opted to spend the break at school, and I looked for some part-time work to pass the time. I noticed an interesting ad on the campus bulletin exchange, "Jewish student wanted for spring work," and I gave them a call.

It turned out I was applying for work at a matzah factory. Now, about all I knew concerning matzah was that you eat it on Passover, that it tastes only slightly better than the box it comes in, and that cream cheese and jelly is the best way to disguise it. But they told me I didn't have to know a whole lot in order to get the job, and I soon found out why.

They put me to work cleaning the dough out of the huge vats where it was kneaded and prepared for baking, making sure that every last particle of flour was removed before the vats were scoured. This plant was like one giant bakery, where time was of the essence.

There were three main areas of the factory. First, there was a mixing room, where the matzah ingredients were blended together by large kneading machines, quickly turning the flour and water into a doughy consistency that would produce the flat, unleavened bread.

Then there was the cutting room, where the dough was taken automatically to be cut and shaped into squares, flattened and then perforated with dozens of tiny holes that would spread the heat evenly and quickly during baking.

Finally, conveyer belts brought the sections of dough through large ovens, where intense heat baked them as they passed through, emerging as the finished product: matzah, the bread of affliction, "poor bread," the key reminiscence of the Exodus from Egypt. They were grouped eight together, sealed in cellophane, and boxed and labeled as soon as they cooled.

I marveled at the efficiency of it all. I had always pictured matzah-making as a painstakingly slow and involved process, performed by hand by elderly scholars in long, black coats. This factory was completely automated, a mass of whirring machines that combined age-old ritual law with the modern need to supply thousands of homes with fresh matzah for Passover. While much matzah was still made by hand, I was told, the majority of Jews in America ate machine-baked matzah, which was both cheaper and more plentiful than the personally-baked product.

The foreman, one Paul Thom (I never did figure out if he was Jewish or not, but he sure knew his matzah) explained to me that the most crucial aspect of the production was time. He cautioned that the whole baking process could not exceed eighteen minutes, because after that time the dough starts to leaven and is impermissible for Passover. The entire line had to be completed before the eighteen minutes, and, like clockwork, the machines automatically shut down before the deadline. A series of staccato bells would sound, the kneaders would stop kneading, the mixers would stop mixing, the rollers would stop rolling, the ovens would shut down and cool off. The workers had a ten-minute break, while I and a few other hardy workers got down to business.

We climbed into the vats, and scraped every last piece of dough out. We cleaned the hooks, and the trays, and even the conveyer belts. We had only seven minutes to do it, because there was a two-minute steam cleaning that preceded each new cycle. Between our scouring and the steam, not even an infinitesimal particle of dough remained that might have become chametz, that forbidden leaven that was our principal enemy...

I worked hard for those two weeks of vacation, as Passover approached. I had never been very

religious, but it felt good being part of something Jewish, knowing that in hundreds of homes in the days ahead, other Jews would be depending on my work to eat these unusual flat breads. I thought about writing up the whole thing for my student paper, a kind of culture-clash piece about how religion keeps up with modern times.

As the day of Passover drew close, the activity at the factory intensified. We were told that, for the first time, there was a chance that the Soviet Union might allow matzah to be brought into the country. Ten thousand pounds of matzah were being prepared nationally, and we were given an allotment of a thousand pounds to contribute. We worked almost around the clock, and when we tired, one of the Rabbis would smile and say, "You'll rest when the ship sails!"

Even the eve of Passover was no exception. We were asked to work as long as possible, with various people leaving throughout the day, depending upon where they lived and their travel time home. I told the foreman that because I lived close by, and had no family to prepare for, I could stay until closing, just a couple hours before the sun set. I volunteered to actually shut down the plant, and lock everything up for the holiday.

As the day progressed, the skies became progressively darker, and a Pennsylvania storm began to move in. This prompted many of the workers to leave even earlier, not wishing to be caught in the rain. When the Rabbis announced that this would be the last run, I was one of only a handful of employees left. I said goodbye and good holiday to my co-workers, and set about to clean the last few vats. "Don't forget to close the lights," said Mr. Thom. "The doors will automatically lock behind you."

There was a strange silence when everyone had left. The huge machines had come to a rest, their reward of sorts for the holidays, after all their hard work in preparation. The lightning outside seemed to silhouette the vastness of the place, created by men but powered by a desire to fulfill an ancient, Divine decree. The sound of the rain on the skylights told me that darkness would be upon me faster than I had anticipated.

I quickly closed all the lights, made sure that every machine had been shut down, and grabbed my coat. But as I made my way for the door, there was a tremendous clap of thunder, and a stunning bolt of lightning lit up the room. Suddenly I heard a crash, almost like a tree falling over my head, and the whole factory seemed to shake for just a second.

Determined now to get back to the relative safety of my dorm room, I rushed to the door and

pushed on the exit bar. Nothing happened. The lock remained frozen in place. I pushed again, and still no response. And then it dawned on me; all the doors were electrically locked, automatically operated! I flipped the light switch by the door; the darkness remained. The storm had knocked out all the power in the plant, including the power to open the doors.

I spent a few frantic, futile minutes trying other doors, looking for low, open windows, searching for an escape. There was none. Even the phones had been rendered useless. As I pondered my situation, trapped alone in the factory with several hundred remaining boxes of matzahs, I could only think of that novel I was assigned to read, 'No Way Out.'

About two hours into my ordeal, I heard a strange tapping noise coming from somewhere in the plant. At first I was just slightly terrified, imagining that certain reptilian creatures were now asserting their hours of supremacy, and challenging my intrusion on their time. But as the tap, tap, tapping continued, and as my frustration grew, I decided to look for the source of the noise. A hero, I knew, was someone too tired or cold to care much about the risks.

It was now pitch dark in the plant, except for the flashes of lightning which illuminated the place at regular intervals. With each brilliant burst of light, I proceeded to make my way slowly toward the source of the noise. As I got closer, I perceived that it was coming from somewhere above me, perhaps from the storage rooms near the roof. I had only been back there once, and then by elevator, but I remembered seeing a staircase at the very rear of the plant. I gingerly felt my way there, totally unprepared for what I would find.

As I climbed the stairs, holding on to the rail for dear life, I no longer heard the tapping sound. Now, however, I heard a low, humming noise, almost an imperceptible singsong. When I reached the top of the landing, afraid to go on but even more scared to back down those stairs (I counted 112), I saw a dim light coming from beneath one of the rooms at the end of the hall. I gathered up my courage and pushed open the door.

I almost fainted with surprise, and no little relief, to be greeted by an elderly man with a broad smile on his face. "Come in," he bellowed, with the faintest tinge of an elusive accent. "What a marvelous wonder to find you here!"

By the light of two long candles burning on the table, I beheld an incredible scene. Here was a man, dressed in a flowing white robe, sitting cross-legged upon a pillow. In front of him was a low, oriental-style table, set as if for a banquet. A medley of delicious smells rushed at me, reminding me

of how hungry I was, and my appetite moved right in, pushing the fear away completely.

"Who are you?" I asked sheepishly, glad to have a human, any human to talk to.

"My name is Pinchas, young man," he said, "but my friends -- and I think you'll be one -- call me Reb Pinchas. I was just about to begin my Passover Seder, and I would be honored if you would join me. Like a lot of things," and now he winked with a grin, "it goes better with two."

"But who are you? What are you doing here? I've never seen you. Do you work here? Does the foreman know...?"

"Relax, son. Mr. Thom knows all about me. You see, I used to be the foreman here, a long time ago, before they decided to make the matzahs by machine. Then, it was all hand-crafted, a real art, and I was the supervisor. But when they automated the place, I became kind of obsolete, and had to retire. But they gave me this place to live, as a kind of good deed to an old man who had served the company well. Now, since I'm the one with seniority here, I want you to be my guest. Tell me about yourself."

I told him my name, and how I had come to be stuck in the factory -- he smiled at the wonders of automation -- and how I had followed the tapping noise.

"Oh, that was just me, chopping walnuts for the charoses, the mortar-like food that we eat at the Seder. I've got to do all my preparation myself, you know, from the soup to the grinding of the horseradish root to the mixing of the salt water. But I'll tell you what. Let's try some of your machine matzah tonight, if you can find your way back to retrieve some."

Borrowing one of the candles, I retraced my steps and took a couple boxes of matzah. I was fairly overwhelmed by the whole scene, but, on the whole, it seemed better than spending what could be a couple of days alone in the dark. I knew that the foreman would return in two days, when the first days of the holiday were over, but that could be an eternity without food and companionship.

When I returned, I saw that the old man had set a place for me at his table. I sat down next to a large pillow, relaxed, and we began to talk.

"Have you been to many Seders?" asked Reb Pinchas.

"Oh, I've been to a lot, but mostly they were just eat-fests, huge banquets of great food with a few vague prayers and blessings thrown in for good measure."

The old man smiled. "This may be a new experience for you, then."

And we proceeded to talk about, well, to talk about life, for a very long time. Reb Pinchas asked me about freedom, and what it means to me. I told him it means independence, and making my own decisions. He agreed with that, but he pointed out that true freedom is based on law and routine, moving from anarchy to established patterns of behavior in a civilized setting.

"I'll bet America has more laws than any other country around," he said, "and yet look how free a place this is. Laws don't stifle freedom, they protect it."

"Judaism isn't so different, either. Why, some people look at the Torah and all its commandments and feel suppressed, when they should really feel liberated. After all, it was the Ten Commandments that freed the whole world from lawlessness and injustice. It brought seder, order, to civilization."

A lot of what he had to say made sense. We talked a lot about the matzah, and how the rabbis debated whether or not it stood for slavery (the bread of affliction) or was a symbol of freedom to lean back and eat in luxury. "Matzah is like life," Reb Pinchas said, "it all depends upon your perspective, as to whether it's a blessing or a burden. The minute you start taking it for granted, you may as well be under the taskmaster's whip again."

He asked me what my goals and future plans were, but, like most college students, I didn't have too clear an answer.

"You know, son," he said, between bites of the unleavened bread, "when we say 'Next year in Jerusalem' we aren't only speaking in the geographical sense. Every person has to have a dream, an ultimate Jerusalem where they hope to end up. You have to plot your life's journey as soon as you can, set a course and follow it. Like matzah, as you well know, if you wait too long it begins to leaven and is no longer suitable or fulfilling. The clocks are running, and none of us can afford to waste precious minutes."

I enjoyed reading from the Haggadah that Reb Pinchas gave me. I could still sing the Four Questions -- that much I had retained -- and I ended up doing most of the narration. We stopped all along the way to ask questions of each other and discuss. I think that's how you really get to know someone, by asking them questions.

"You know, it's a mitzvah to ask questions at the Seder," Reb Pinchas said. "Most years, I have to ask myself the questions, and that sounds pretty senile. So I'm beholden to you for sharing this night with me and letting us really ask the questions."

I remember so vividly discussing the four sons. "Some people think this is about four separate people," said Reb Pinchas, "but I say it's about four sides of the same person. After all, at different times in our life, we're wise, or rebellious, uninformed, even apathetic. But as long as we know we have the capacity to be wise, that's half the battle in getting there."

There was a lot of that upbeat philosophy at the table. I remarked that the mix of symbols at the Seder, the bitterness of the horseradish and the sweetness of the wine, seemed to show that life contains all the elements of emotion, from deep depression and the feeling of being trapped to unbridled song and the sensory satisfaction of spring. It was just a question of making some kind of seder, order, of it all.

"There's that chacham in you!" smiled my friend. "You're talking like a scholar now!"

Even the matzah tasted good that night. Most of all, though, the taste that remains with me still is the wine. From a dusty, round bottle, we poured cup after cup of the delicious grape wine. I poured for him, and he for me, and I know I've never tasted anything so sweet and satisfying before. "Been brewing this since Egypt," Reb Pinchas said with a twinkle in his eyes, and it must have been the wine that made those songs sound so on key and pleasant, even from my lips.

After talking long into the night, and eating and drinking our fill, we awoke barely in time to begin preparing for the second Seder. "I insist you stay," my new friend urged. "We haven't quite finished explaining all the mysteries of the universe yet!"

And so for two nights and two days, in the upper room of a dark factory, we lit up our little world with a friendship and a sharing that taught me more than any professor has, or will. I not only learned about a heritage I hardly knew I had, but I learned that I fit in, that I wasn't an outsider, but a valuable, real player in this game of life, Jewish life. When I put on Reb Pinchas's white robe the second night -

- he said it was my turn to be the leader -- I really felt royal, as a leader should. I never knew -- until then -- that I had it in me.

"For about four thousand years you've had it in you," said Reb Pinchas. "It just took a little wine and song to get it out!"

The wine was something out of this world. I fell asleep clutching a bottle of it in my hand, and I must have slept the better part of a day, because I awakened to the sound of voices downstairs. Rushing to the lower level, I saw Mr. Thom, who realized only once he saw me that I had been locked inside for the last forty-eight hours.

"I've heard of devotion to work," said the foreman, "but this is beyond the call of duty. You must be famished, scared!"

"Not really," I explained. You see, I found the old man upstairs. We had two wonderful Seders together. He taught me a lot about Passover, and about myself. All in all, I'd say it changed my life!"

Mr. Thom had a confused look on his face, but smiled when he saw the bottle of wine in my hand. "You must have been drinking one l'chaim too many," he said. "I don't know what old man you're talking about."

He seemed to be totally unaware of Reb Pinchas, and his association with the company, so I insisted he come upstairs and meet him for himself. But when I threw open the door to our little banquet hall, the room was completely transformed. No table or pillows or Reb Pinchas remained. Only boxes of matzah supplies, and machine parts, piled in a corner of the room. I looked at the boxes, searching in vain for a trace of the Seder, and I looked at Mr. Thom, who, after all, I hoped would re-hire me next spring.

I just kind of shrugged my shoulders and said, "You're right; it must have been the wine." And then I remembered the wine, still in my hand, and I smiled a knowing smile that none in the world could have erased.

The years have passed since that fateful Passover. Now, I conduct my own Seder with my own children gathered around the table. They ask good questions, those little chachamim, the kind my wife and I are hard-pressed to answer. But every time we're just about stumped, I pour the tiniest bit



of Reb Pinchas's wine into our cups and, somehow, we seem to find all the right answers.

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