

Topics for a Seder Conversation by Rabbi Jonathan Porath

**LIFESHAPING EXPERIENCES AND LESSONS ON THE ESSENTIAL PEOPLE IN OUR OWN LIVES
TODAY**

[Dedicated to Victor B. Geller z'l, of blessed memory by his son-in-law Jonathan]

This past month my wife's father, my father-in-law of 42 years, passed away at age 91. He had lived a very full and Jewish life, and left this world a better place. He was honored during his lifetime [including an Honorary Doctorate from his alma mater, Yeshiva University], and impacted the Jewish lives of literally thousands of students and colleagues. He never expected to have such an influence and, in fact, came from very modest circumstances.

When he was but 7, his own father passed away [at the age of only 34]. Little Victor had to "become a man" at a much younger age than most. As a second grader, he vividly recalled his mother sending him, accompanied by his 4-year-old brother, to their small neighborhood shul in the Bronx, to say Kaddish over their father. The two little boys were adopted by the older men as they recited the words "Yiskadal Veyiskadash" every morning and evening.

That undoubtedly left him with a profound understanding that he would have to become an adult **at a far younger age** than most of us sitting around the Seder table this evening would ever be accustomed to.

In speaking with him over the years, it became clear that one particular experience from his youth shaped his life beyond all others—and it happened to him as a teenager.

As he entered high school, America entered World War II. He felt in his deepest heart—this was a Jewish war; this was **his** war.

Only, at age 17 he was too young for the draft, and was technically exempt from military service with a 4-D [divinity student] exemption from the army [he had just enrolled in Yeshiva University as a freshman].

But no matter; at age 17 he asked his mother for permission to volunteer, gave up his "safe spot" in the yeshiva and joined the US Army. He arrived in France towards the end of 1944, already having made his mark on the other Jewish boys around. Coming from a strong Jewish background, in addition to his military role as a combat interrogator [he spoke English, Hebrew, Yiddish, German, French and Hungarian!], he also served as a Chaplain's Assistant in his spare time, helping to organize religious services, being in contact with the non-Jewish chaplain in his unit [they did not have enough Jewish boys for their own rabbi]—even writing letters of consolation to the families of Jewish soldiers who were killed in action.

The winter of 1944 was particularly brutal and almost led to military catastrophe. In a last-ditch effort to win the war, the Germans attacked in the Ardennes region of Belgium at the end of December in the famous Battle of the Bulge. After desperate fighting, the Allies got the upper

hand, and began to move towards the German heartland. Vic, now battle tested at age 19, was attached to General George Patton's Third Army spearheading the attack.

After some very tough fighting and taking many casualties, as the spring of 1945 began, they breached the enemy lines and started to move into Germany.

Pesach was very much on Victor's mind. Around the entire Jewish world, the Seder was scheduled for Wednesday evening, March 28. A week before, the non-Jewish army chaplain came to Vic with good news: "I just received a big package for you. Two hundred pounds of matzah arrived from England for the holiday! We'll see what we can do to arrange a Seder service for Wednesday night."

During the week before Pesach they were constantly on the move. On the morning of the 28th they had reached the western German town of Riementhal, only to be told that the Division had to keep on the move behind the withdrawing Germans. The next day, they were still on the roads. The chaplain reported that a break was scheduled for the following day, Friday, and he had received approval for the Jewish soldiers to conduct a Seder that Friday morning.

"Was it too late to hold the Seder?" he asked. Vic assured him that, under the wartime conditions, it was fine.

And so they gathered that Pesach of 1945, outdoors in a German field. There were no tables or chairs; some 50 GI's sat in a double circle around my then 19-year-old future father-in-law. There was no Seder plate nor any of the familiar symbols we have on our table this evening. The menu was a generous one-course-meal of the two hundred pounds of British matzah.

Wisely, Vic had brought a Haggada with him from the States—the only one they had. As he began to read in Hebrew, translate, and sing many of the familiar tunes, the other boys sat around him, undoubtedly recalling their own previous Seders with their families at home, not knowing what would be their fate in the fighting to come.

As the makeshift Seder continued, there was a bit of a commotion as a bottle of local wine somehow appeared; although lacking rabbinic certification, it certainly added to the holiday feeling!

Looking back years later, my father-in-law remarked that the original Seder was observed on the eve of the Exodus of the Jews from Egypt and just before their great victory over Pharaoh and his armies. "In 1945, our Seder took place in a later-day 'Egypt'. We were a group of young Jewish men who came from another "Promised Land"—America. We were pursuing the armies of the latest, most malevolent 'Pharaoh'."

He concluded, rather sadly: "As Americans--we won, but as Jews we could celebrate no victory, even though the evil Pharaoh perished in his Berlin bunker. In that German field, our modern-day Passover had come too late."

Those war-time experiences never left him. When he passed away just a few weeks ago, 72 years after that most memorable wartime Seder, the only picture of himself he had hanging on the wall of his room was of a young smiling 17-year soldier, with his entire life ahead of him.

May his memory be for a blessing.

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER FOR THIS EVENING: LIKE THE YOUNG SOLDIER IN THE TRUE STORY ABOVE, WHAT ESSENTIAL AND UNFORGETTABLE EXPERIENCES HAVE YOU HAD IN YOUR OWN LIVES, OR WHAT PEOPLE HAVE YOU MET OR BEEN EXPOSED TO, WHICH HAVE SHAPED AND MOULDED YOUR OWN PERSONAL/PROFESSIONAL/SPIRITUAL LIFE?

SHARE YOUR THOUGHTS WITH THOSE AROUND YOUR SEDER OR HOLIDAY TABLE!

Rabbi Jonathan Porath has lived in Jerusalem for the past 33 years, and is a member of the Jewish Speaker's Bureau. He specializes in facilitating meaningful Jewish conversations and teaching Torah with passion around the Jewish world. He has visited the Soviet Union and the Former Soviet Union 175 times. It would be his pleasure to bring his experience to your congregation or organization.