

Next Year in Jerusalem

A Symbolic Study of a Jewish Ritual

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Meijers, Daniel 1997: Next Year in Jerusalem. A Symbolic Study of a Jewish Ritual. – *Ethnologia Europaea* 27: 59–66.

During the festival of *Pesach* Jews all over the world celebrate the Exodus of the Jewish people out of Egyptian bondage with a nighttime ritual. As a result of the isolated position in which Jews have found themselves in the diaspora historically, this ritual, in which fundamental values such as exile, redemption and Jewish homeland are symbolically expressed, remained almost unchanged over the years. In fact, recently, its significance has increased as a result of the political circumstances in the Middle East. To understand Jewish feelings about this subject, it is important to realize that the same fundamental values are at stake here.

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Introduction¹

The festival of *Pesach* or Passover, as it is called in the English-speaking world, is widely recognized as holding a primary place in the Jewish religious calendar. Jew and non-Jew alike are aware of the key function the festival, especially the evening meal called the *Seder*, possesses in Jewish ritual observance². The fact that the importance of *Pesach* is taken for granted even by many secular, non-observant Jews is all the more reason to attempt to investigate the nature of the festival.³

Held in Israel on the first night only and elsewhere on both the first and second nights of *Pesach*, the *Seder* concludes with a short prayer full of hope “Next Year in Jerusalem” which can be seen as the ultimate message of *Pesach*. Now, as a result of the events in the Middle East this festival has been re-imbued with political and religious symbols.

Although the *Seder* ritual has not remained precisely the same throughout its long history, the basic ritual, handed down from generation to generation, is, in essence unchanged. A further aspect to examine, then, is the reason for the continued existence of the *Seder* in Judaism.

In this paper, I will analyze the various stages and aspects of the *Seder*. In particular I will explore the changing emphasis over the last half century that some parts of the ritual have received among European Jews. Further, I will illustrate that this ritual contains a multitude of symbolic meanings which have always been essential to Judaism in the past and have not lost their relevance today. At the same time, I will show which social conditions have contributed to the long survival of the *Seder* observance.

The Seder Observance

The general meaning of the Hebrew word *Seder* is ‘order’. In this case, *Seder* means the particular, step-by-step order which this ritual meal follows. Taking place, as it does, at the beginning of the *Pesach* festival, the *Seder* meal is held at home in the company of family and friends. Among European Jews the *Seder* always took an important place in the religious calendar. Even during the Second World War, Jews tried to observe the *Seder* ritual.

In 1943, in the Dutch concentration camp Westerbork a few families gathered around the table to hold a *Seder*. The man who led the *Seder*

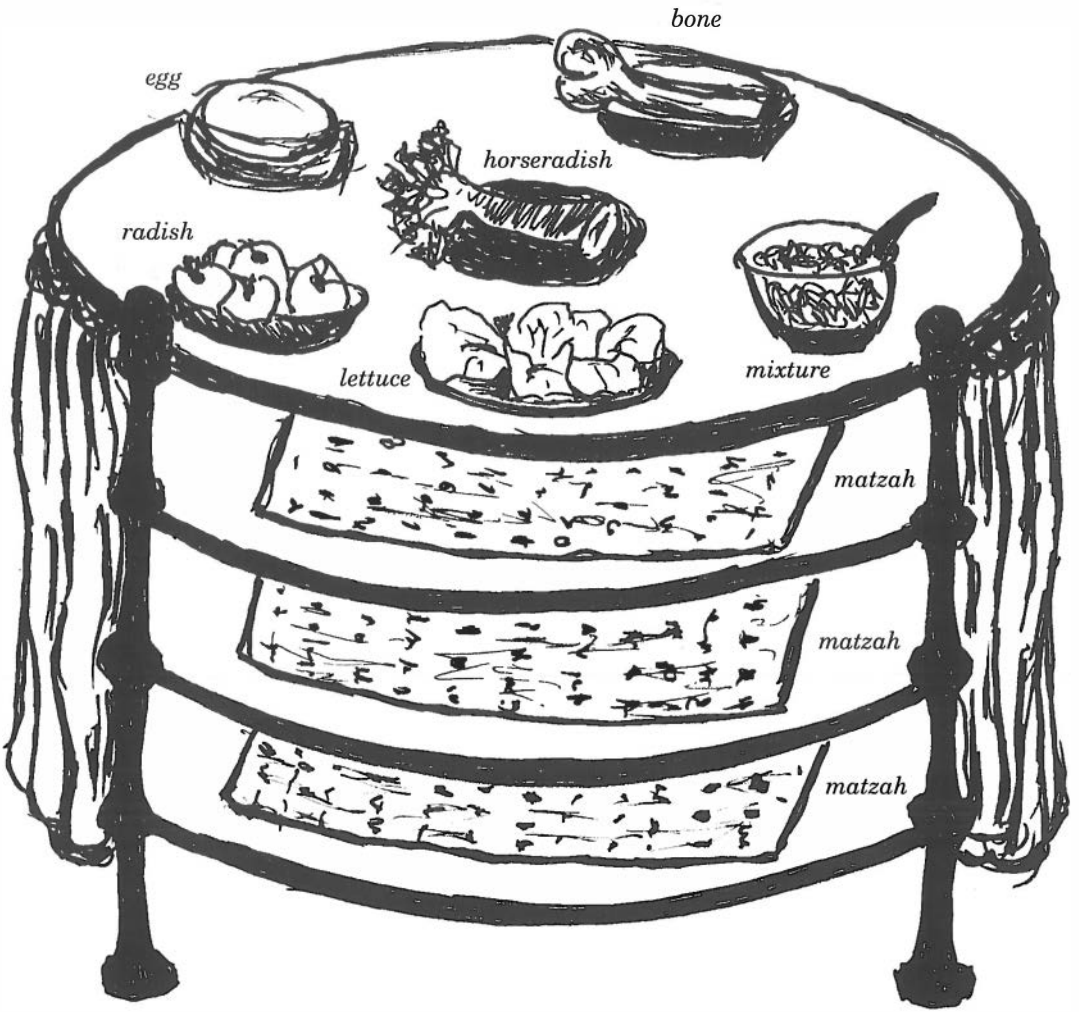
was trying to come to terms with the loss of a child. Another child had undergone an operation in extremely primitive circumstances. The leader of the *Seder* began to read from the traditional text. A woman who sat alone on a three-tiered bunk-bed asked if she could take part. The leader answered her from the text: "All who are hungry may come and eat, and all who are in need may come and celebrate the festival of *Pesach* together with us" (my translation from Haggadah shel *Pesach*).¹

The *Seder* with its message of hope and comfort was even observed in the most difficult circumstances as a ritual emphasizing *communitas* in the sense Turner gave to this concept, i.e. a moment of anti-structure, in which feel-

ings of human equality resist the pressure of the established hierarchical order (cf. Turner 1969:96 ff.).

The actual observance of the *Seder* is as follows: On the first night of *Pesach* the *Haggadah* is read. The text relates the miraculous Exodus of the Jewish people from slavery in Egypt. Depending on the level of religious knowledge of the participants, various explanations of the Haggadah are offered since "the more one relates (about the Exodus – D.M.) the more one is to be praised" (Haggadah shel *Pesach*). Certain ritually prescribed foods and dishes are then eaten and four cups of wine are drunk in the course of the meal.

The *Seder* begins with a verbal consecration



of the festival, after which the first cup of wine is drunk. The four cups of wine are linked to the four expressions of redemption employed in the Pentateuch in connection with the liberation of the Jewish people from Egypt. Then the youngest of those present asks four questions. The rest of the *Haggadah* can be considered a response to these four questions.

On the *Seder* table is a special plate with three *matzot* (unleavened bread), on the top left-hand side is an egg, on the top right a bone, in the centre the bitter herbs – usually a piece of horseradish. Below on the left is a piece of vegetable: an onion, a potato or radish, and below on the right is a dish consisting of a mixture of apple, almonds, wine and, depending on local custom, various other ingredients. Finally, below in the middle there is a quantity of bitter vegetables, mostly a bitter-tasting lettuce. The *matzah* symbolizes the speed with which the Jewish people had to leave Egypt once the time of their deliverance had arrived. There was not even time for the bread to rise: the clear implication here, is that the future Messianic redemption will also occur in the twinkling of an eye. The unleavened bread also symbolizes a more personal aspect of redemption. Ordinary leavened bread is “risen” – this refers to the “fermenting” process within the person. The ideal person does not possess the egotism and arrogance of the leavened person. He reduces himself to the level of the flat unleavened bread. *Matzah* is also, therefore, the bread of affliction, the bread of poverty, of insignificance. The three *matzot* together symbolize the unity of the Jewish people, consisting as it does of three ritual categories, priests, Levites and ordinary Jews. The egg is a reminder of the offerings brought in the Temple in connection with the festival. It is also a reminder of death, since eggs are eaten as part of the mourning ritual following the loss of a close relative. The bone is a reminder of the Paschal lamb offering. The Paschal lamb is also a symbol of survival, since in the last moments before the Exodus, the Jews had to smear the blood of a lamb on their doorposts in order that their houses should be recognized as Jewish homes. In this way, they would be “passed-over” during the tenth plague, the death of the firstborn. The various

kinds of bitter herbs – horseradish, lettuce and so on, are a symbol of the bitter times of slavery. The Hebrew word for bitter vegetables is *maror*. The mixture of apple and wine comes as a contrast to the bitter herbs. It is also reminiscent of the cement which the Jews used in Egypt to make bricks.

There is yet another aspect of the contrast between life and death which exists in the *Seder*. The bitter herbs refer to the bitter persecution in Egypt when Pharaoh, the king of Egypt, decreed that all male babies were to be drowned in the Nile. On the other hand, the apples in the sweet cement-like mixture are a symbol of life: the women gave birth to their children under the apple trees, so that the Egyptians would not realize that a Jewish child had been born.⁵

Finally, the reason why the vegetable on the *Seder* plate is dipped in salt water at the commencement of the *Seder* is in order to awaken the curiosity of any children who may be present.

Of course, many other comments could be made on the *Seder*. It is, however, not my intention to give a detailed analysis and explanation of every aspect of the *Seder*. This is not only because Gruber Fredman (1983) has already done a deep study of the *Seder* but also because I wish to delineate in its “totality” the specific message which is today being propagated by this ritual. It may even be possible that aspects of the *Seder* which previously received little emphasis, are now coming more sharply into focus.

For this reason, it is important to establish that the *Seder* is connected with ‘liberation’ or ‘redemption’. This is already apparent at the beginning. The *Seder* begins with the drinking of the first of the four cups of wine. Wine is a symbol of freedom. This can be seen from the fact that a fifth cup is also filled, by some at the beginning of the *Seder* and by others at a later stage of the ritual. There is a difference of opinion among the sages of the *Talmud* as to whether there are four, or five, expressions of ‘redemption’ in the Torah and consequently as to whether four or five cups of wine must be drunk at the *Seder*. As a result of this difference of opinion, a fifth cup of wine is filled, but not drunk, in expectation of the appearance of the

prophet Elijah. Before the coming of the Messiah, Elijah will solve all disagreements and differences of opinion. Moreover, he is the prophet who will announce the anticipated Messianic redemption of the future. Then after the first cup of wine is drunk, the ritual recital of the story of the Exodus begins with the asking of the Four Questions "Why is this night different from all other nights?". The answer begins: "We were slaves in Egypt" and the liturgical recital of the *Haggadah* concludes with the words "Next year in Jerusalem".

I hope to show that in the course of the *Seder* a number of values and ideas emerge which are fundamental to Judaism both on an individual level and a collective level. As Gruber-Fredman notes:

"The story of the Exodus contains within it a rationale for the existence of the Jews as an eternally distinct people, and also provides a metaphor for the Jews' existence as a socially marginal community. (...) Exodus deals with matters of separation and distinction, but Exodus is also a story of passages, of transitional states between fixed points, between absolute slavery in Egypt and absolute freedom in the Promised Land. (...) Exodus is the story that once and for all times has given Jews their self-definition as a people (...)" (1983:24).

It may be clear that, particularly in extreme circumstances, the *Seder* functioned as a ritual passage from slavery to freedom. Not only during the Second World War but also in Eastern Europe under communist rule *Pesach* was celebrated as 'our holiday of liberty' (Gilbert 1985:196). It is necessary to analyze this ritual in more detail to understand its meaning as a ritual of identification of the individual with a collective identity.

The Pesach Haggadah

An extremely interesting aspect of the *Haggadah* is that it is composed on a question and answer basis. This interrogatory character always exists. If, for example, no child is present to ask the four questions, they are recited by one of the adults. If a person conducts the *Seder*

alone, then he recites the four questions on his own. Of all the explanations for the various customs of the *Seder* offered by the sages the most prevalent is that any children present should be stimulated to ask questions.

The *Seder*, then, can be construed as a ritual involving question and answer. Symbolically, to ask a question is to emphasize that something is unknown. By giving answers to the question, the unknown becomes known. Obviously, the questioner must be one who does not yet know the answer. Such a one is the youngest member of the group, preferably a child. A child is still unacquainted with life and the purpose of life. The answer is given by the leader of the ritual, the one who does know. In other words, asking questions indicates concealment and giving answers revelation. Thus, the significance of the *Seder* might be that, through the posing of questions, what was concealed becomes revealed.

The existence of such an important and recurring traditional ritual as the *Seder* should also lead us to investigate whether any other cultural categories receive special emphasis. This is certainly the case with day and night, as can be seen immediately at the beginning of the *Seder*. The four questions begin with relatively general questions "Why is this night different from all other nights?" Moreover, the *Seder* takes place at nightfall which is also the beginning of the Jewish day. The reason is "It was evening, it was morning, the first day" (Genesis 1:5). Based on this text, the evening is considered to be the start of a new day.

In the concealment of darkness the revealed light of the dawn lies hidden. This theme is made explicit in the *Haggadah* with the story which is related about the sages who met together to celebrate the *Seder*. They were so involved in telling the story of the Exodus from Egypt, that they did not notice that dawn had already broken. Their students came to inform that it was time to recite the morning prayer.

One of the leading Jewish scholars, the late Rabbi M.M. Schneerson, the so-called Rabbi of Lubavitch, gives the following explanation of this incident: the sages referred to in the *Haggadah* were numbered amongst the great teachers of Judaism. Their students stood on a lower

spiritual level. The “light” radiated by the teachers had the effect of illuminating the souls of the students to such an extent that they thought that the dawn i.e. the Messianic redemption, had broken. The teachers, who possessed souls which were “higher” than their students, needed more illumination to attain redemption than their students, whose “lower” souls were able to find fulfilment at an earlier level through the corrective actions of their teachers (Schneerson 1962:539–540). The theme of concealment and revelation is evident in both aspects of the story that of the pupils and their teachers and that of the night becoming day.

The symbolic importance of night is also evident in the *Talmud*. This comprehensive work, treats all religious duties and practices as well as a number of cosmological ideas. The *Talmud* begins with the question of when the evening prayer should be recited. The answer is “From the time that the priests may begin to eat their ‘heave-offering’” (Talmud Brachot 2A). The time indicated here is the time when stars appear in the sky. It is only at a later stage that the question of when the morning prayer may be recited is discussed. The sages of the *Talmud* continue by discussing why the evening prayer is mentioned before the morning prayer. The answer given is that in the Biblical account of the Creation, the evening of each day is mentioned before the morning.

The fact that Judaism’s most outstanding religious work which was composed in the first centuries of the Diaspora commences with the theme of night followed by day, signifies that its main focus is on exile and redemption. The presentation of this theme in a question and answer framework is an indication that the Messianic redemption from exile – the morning – is viewed as a revelation which emerges from the darkness of the night. Nightfall is not defined here as when the stars first appear in the sky – the usually Talmudic definition of night – but as equivalent to the time when priests, having been ritually purified following a period of ritual impurity, may once again eat of the offering of grain which they receive as their due (literally heave-offering). This heave-offering implies the elevation and sanctification of the material world. If man performs his task in the

world in the same manner as that of the priest, the material world will be elevated to its, rightful place and the ultimate redemption will be achieved.

The story about the sages is the only real narration in the *Haggadah*. It is evident that this story is told in order to illustrate how the *Seder* observance should be conducted. Further, the *Haggadah* continues with a long drawn-out answer to the four questions in which the events of the Exodus are discussed and the Divine Being is extolled.

Something which resembles a narration and which is in any case, almost a separate entity is the observation that there are four sons, a wise son, a wicked son, a stupid or simple son and a son who does not even know how to ask questions. With the exception of the latter, each son asks about Passover. The *Haggadah* then gives a suitable answer for each son. Only the wicked son, who asks about the purpose of the whole ritual in a manner which indicates that he wishes to exclude himself from it, receives the answer that had he been in Egypt he would not have been liberated. On the other hand, the son who, as yet, is unable to ask any questions has to be told about the Exodus in such a way that he also becomes involved.

Rabbi Schneerson explains the “four sons” as referring to four types of people. In these four categories are comprised the whole of the Jewish people, since the text of the *Haggadah* in naming the four types of sons, employs the conjunction ‘and’ – the wise son, and the wicked son, and etc. Evidently a different approach is necessary for each type in order to arrive at revelation from concealment. The wise son is only wise if he can transform the bad son into a good son, since ‘and’ creates a connection between the wise and the bad son. The simple son is given a patient answer to his question and the son who does not even know how to ask, and who is therefore unable to take the initiative in order to achieve revelation, has to be helped. In other words, here also the individual is seen as part of a whole. During the ritual one is moved to identify oneself with the collectivity.

The Hebrew expression for the Exodus from Egypt is *yetziat mitzrayim*. Hebrew is usually

written only with consonants, and no vowel signs. A word consisting of consonants only can thus be read with another vowel combination thereby changing its meaning. *Yetziat nitzrayim* can be pronounced and read as *yetziat maitzarim* – meaning to go out of, or transcend, one’s limitations. Both terms illustrate the twofold meaning of the *Seder* ritual. On the collective level, there is an exodus from exile in order to attain a Messianic redemption. On the level of the individual, there is an exodus from one’s limitations as a human being, the personal redemption indicated in the story of the sages. It is significant that the *Haggadah* states that a person’s religious obligations with respect to the *Seder* are not fulfilled until he feels himself that he is liberated from Egypt i.e. from his own shortcomings.

These themes are constantly brought to the fore in the *Seder*. Four cups of wine are drunk, which represent, not only the four expressions of redemption but also the four occasions that the Jewish people have been freed from exile: Egypt, Babylon, the Hellenistic occupation of the land of Israel, and the present exile which began with the Roman conquest of Judea. The four periods of exile are also related to the four questions or, on a deeper symbolic level, the four types of concealment. Exile and redemption can be contrasted and categorized as follows:

exile	redemption
night	day
darkness	light
concealment	revelation
death	life
bitter	sweet
diaspora	homeland

It is surely not accidental that the egg which is related to death is located at the left of the *Seder* plate and the bone related to life at the right. Despite the fact that the bitter herbs are placed in the center, it is tempting to place both categories right and left before exile and redemption. This would be to follow Needham (1973), who showed that in many cultures the opposition between right and left plays a central role in this sort of analysis. Furthermore, then, these

pairs of opposites can be included in a more general symbolic classification of Jewish culture (see Meijers 1987 and Douglas 1993:115).

The main themes of the *Seder* are the liberation from Egyptian slavery, the exodus which follows and the entry into and taking possession of the homeland: “Next year in Jerusalem”. These themes, have their origin in the cultural and historical experience of the Jewish people. In particular the themes “exile”, “redemption” and “homeland” have been constantly reiterated for thousands of years under all kinds of social conditions (cf. Gruber Fredman 1983:114; Meijers, 1984). Every year they are experienced anew on the *Seder* night.

The Social Coercion Resulting from a World Network

The huge emotional attachment to the *Seder* ritual which is to be found among the Jews to this day would appear to indicate that the themes emphasized in this ritual have a perennial relevance and topicality. What kind of social conditions cause this continual reliving of particular ideas and values?

This question becomes even more pointed if we remember that the geographic and socio-economic setting of the orthodox-Jewish “religious regimes”, to use Bax’s term (1987), was in a constant state of flux. What all these “regimes” had in common was their special status in society. Jews have almost always, and in almost every place, been placed in a marginal and isolated position. As migrants without landed property, but with business interests which extended beyond national borders, practicing their own separate religion and as economic competitors with other social strata they belonged neither to the one nor to the other social class. As a consequence of economic and political developments in Eastern and Central Europe the power struggle between the differing political and religious groups eventually led to the total exclusion of the Jews. The authorities in various places tolerated their presence only in so far as they could profit from the financial advantage of the Jews’ international business connections (Meijers 1989:17). The situation of the Jews of Western Europe differed from that

of their brethren in Eastern Europe, due to the fact that the majority of Western European Jews had fled eastwards in the Middle Ages. In spite of this, they were officially treated as a minority group at least until after the French Revolution but in practice for a much longer period.

The position of the Jews in the Ottoman Empire was very similar. Although their situation was in general more favorable than in Christian Europe, the Islamic monarchs considered them to be third-class citizens. In no country were they equal to the other citizens. Everywhere, they acted as mediators between the different social classes, they became brokers, forming a buffer between two or more social strata and continuously holding what Weber called a "pariah-position" (Weber 1960:3). The lower classes always felt that they were being exploited by the Jews because of the professional services the latter performed for the higher classes. At the same time, as many professions were closed for them, their social situation forced them to perform these services in exchange for income and protection. Through being favored by one class, they attracted the hatred of the other class. In general, the situation of the Jews was the result of a complex interplay between different social forces in societies in which they were strangers. Because of their special status they were constantly oppressed and persecuted. It was therefore a psychological and a social necessity to form a closely-knit group that would be easily recognizable for refugees from other Jewish communities. In fact, this was one of the principal features of a Jewish community: its members were constantly aware that they might have to appeal to each other for assistance. In this way an extensive world-wide "support-network" developed.

The strength of this global network, dependent as Jews everywhere were on external, social factors, was often uncertain. At any event, in their own local communities Jews exerted great pressure on each other to conform to their own norms, and values. This internal pressure resulted in a personal inner constraint which, in a certain sense, was just as powerful as the external pressure from the host society. Assimilation into the host society in order to avoid the

internal pressure was difficult, not to say impossible. It meant severing all previous links and relationships. Moreover, there was so much antagonism to these constantly migrating people, that assimilation was never a real possibility. This was also the case in those countries which were relatively good for the Jews. All too often misfortune struck for no apparent reason. As a result Jews everywhere were apprehensive of any social unrest or tension. This was especially true whenever this tension had any connection whatsoever with Jews. This in turn led to an oversensitivity whereby anti-Semitism was perceived in situations where it did not even exist, a tendency to translate every kind of aggression with which Jews were confronted into anti-Semitic terms. In recent times, this process has been intensified by better means of communication. News of the occurrence of a calamity could be disseminated with greater rapidity. As a result of global networks and the interdependence of the Jewish communities, stresses and strains, sometimes only psychological, did not remain confined to a specific locality. Anxiety and fear could spread from one place to another. The only place of refuge, offering protection and repose, was with one's own kind.

Evidently, the ideas and rituals most cardinal to Judaism would be bound to allude to this problem and moreover would be transmitted almost unchanged from one generation to the next. This was even more true in a situation which could be really called "slavery". In those circumstances the only possibility of mentally surviving was identifying oneself strongly with a collective Jewish identity of a free nation with its own territory.

Conclusion

In contrast to what one might have expected, the notions and values which are apparent in the *Haggadah* are as eloquent today as in former times. The ordeals of the Second World War, the struggle for Israel's existence, and the difficult position of the Jews in many countries constantly confirm the relevance of these ideas. Although there are numerous places where Jews are able to live freely and undisturbed, a

glance in the newspaper will indicate that the problem of being Jewish is constantly re-appearing. It does not matter whether the news is about the influence of the Jewish lobby in the United States, the spread of anti-Semitism in Eastern Europe or the situation in Israel. These news reports sometimes produce reactions that are stronger than are necessary from a realistic standpoint. This is especially true regarding the situation in Israel, a country which more than any other is a symbol of the future Messianic redemption from exile as well as being a homeland for the Jewish people. The significance of the *Haggadah* in connection with the establishment of, and settlement in the Jewish homeland is even greater now that the future of the territories which have been in Israeli hands since the wars of 1967 and 1973 is under international pressure. In order to understand Jewish feelings concerning this area, it is important to realize that it is not a question of political imperialism, but of fundamental values which are at stake here. The heated emotions connected with this issue are a fundamental part of a Jewish cultural and historical identity which developed in the course of many hundreds of years. Because of the marginal position of the Jews everywhere in the world during the whole of this period, this identity is constantly being re-confirmed and strengthened. And this identity is re-affirmed annually in the *Haggadah*.

Notes

1. I am grateful to Mart Bax and Peter Kloos who commented on an earlier version of this paper.
2. It may be this shared notion of the importance of the festival, which for the Christian emphasizes Christ's last meal and for the Jew the Exodus from Egypt, both major religious facts, that lies behind why throughout history it was precisely during *Pesach* that Jews were so often accused of ritually

murdering Christian children and using their blood for baking the unleavened bread necessary for the *Seder*.

3. According to the orthodox journal *Hamachane Hachareadi* (d.d. 24.3 1983 p. 1) 80% of Israel's population observed most of the rather complex religious laws of *Pesach*.
4. This information is based on an interview with a survivor.
5. The various meanings of the ritual are found in the *Haggadah shel Pesach nusach Lubavitch* which is here mainly used for explanation.

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