



Little Pesach on the Prairie

Richard Goldstein

In New Mexico, the coming of spring throws everyone into confusion—people, owls, mice, we all stare at the sky in wonder. Comes rain, comes snow, comes thunder. Then sunshine, and the holy omniscient mud.

“Ah, spring in New Mexico,” rhapsodizes Levi Ben Zalma. “If the Children of Israel had been slaves here, instead of Egypt, Moses could never have persuaded them to leave.”

It is the capricious spring of 1864 and Zalma sits on the seat-box of his buckboard wagon, his face turned into a sweet south breeze. He’s heading home to Santa Fe from Taos after delivering a load of goods to the pueblo. He has left his family getting ready for Pesach, rounding up all the *hamatz*, grating horseradish, baking matzos. It’s a ten-day round trip he’s undertaken, plus one night with friends at the pueblo. Plenty of time, he figured, and back on *erev Pesach* just in time for the seder. The weather in the spring is tricky, and it’s a risk, but he figures he knows the ropes and an obligation is an obligation.

Indeed, the trip so far has been uneventful, the weather on the trip north clear and sunny, and his horse, a six-year-old bay mare, has acted more like a stallion colt, even with the loaded wagon. Perhaps Zalma has been acting a little like a colt himself. Now, heading south again, what can possibly go wrong?

Then, with less than one day left to Santa Fe, the friendly little south breeze suddenly shifts around to the north and soon whips itself up into an angry grown-up of a wind, a howl, a tatter of black clouds. In an hour

the wind is like ice, spitting snow at the back of Zalma's head. He hunches down, and pulls his wool coat closer, and flicks the reins. The stallion colt has now turned into an elderly mule.

By dusk the snow is pelting down in a curtain, the flakes like huge pale moths flying around Zalma from all directions. He knows the road is there, because he came up it just five days before, but he can't see it. I'd better find some shelter, he thinks, or I'll freeze to death for sure. He has lost track of exactly where he is. But some hills are dimly visible off to his right, to the west, and he heads for them, hoping to find a sheltered canyon, or some such.

He leaves the road, or what he thought was the road, and bumps and slips up into the darker dark of the hills. The wagon slews heavily in the snow and ice, and threatens to tip. The horse, shivering badly, stops, puts her head down, gets the bit into her teeth, and refuses to go further.

Zalma slides stiffly off his seat-box, and skids around to her head. He takes her nose between his hands and breathes into her nostrils. Then he seizes the harness and starts to pull her forward. As he does so he sees a black smudge against the gray hillside just ahead. He thinks this might be a cave. He pulls the horse a few more yards, all he is going to manage.

And it is indeed a cave, a good sized one, disappearing into the limestone, a dark promise. Zalma situates the wagon in front of the cave mouth, blocking some of the wind. He unhitches the horse and leads her in.

The cave goes straight in about ten or fifteen feet, then makes a gentle turn to the right and ends in a bay about twenty feet across. It's dry inside and quite a lot warmer. Just enough light is left for Ben Zalma to see there's a pile of dusty dry firewood stacked against the far wall, and dry grass and fern scattered about a black fire-ring. The cave has been used before.

In no time Zalma has the horse tethered to a limestone spur and munching some fodder from the wagon, and has the beginnings of a fire sputtering in the ring. A good Jew, Zalma is never without his *kippah*, nor his *tallit*, nor dry matches either, and tinder, and a few supplies. Finally he is sitting before a warm blaze, wrapped up snugly in his canvas load-cover, a little cask of applejack beside him. The smoke winds around in the dark above his head, like a living thing, and finds its way out some secret exit. The air is quite fresh. All things considered, he considers, not too bad.

But outside a major blizzard is just getting started and it's now erev Pesach. He's going to miss seder, he realizes, and he's never missed it before, not back in the Old Country, not penniless on the long odyssey to the New World, not well-to-do in Santa Fe, not ever.

Suddenly, through the whining of the wind, comes the sound of steps crunching in the snow, and an elderly Indian man enters the cave. He is wrapped in a very fine woolen blanket with a pattern of blue stripes. In the wavering firelight something about him looks vaguely familiar to Zalma.

The Indian does not seem to be surprised to see Zalma, but simply comes in, sits down across the fire from Zalma, and sets about the serious business of warming himself.

Zalma knows only a few words of Tewa, but Spanish is his first language, better than his English. He doubts the Indian speaks Yiddish or Hebrew.

"Buenas tardes," says Zalma. "Hace mucho frio, que no?"

It turns out the Indian also speaks Spanish quite well. "Yes, it is cold," he agrees, in Spanish. "But that is spring for you."

"Well," continues Zalma, "you're certainly welcome to stay and share my fire."

"Thank you very much," replies the Indian politely. "And you are certainly welcome to have your fire here in our cave."

"Thank you very much," says Zalma, abashed. He pats the cask of applejack. "I have some supplies," he says. "You're welcome to share those also."

The Indian nods, and the two of them sit in a silence filled with the hot popping of the fire and the cold whistling of the storm and the blowing and champing of Zalma's horse. After a time the Indian looks up at Zalma. "Forgive me," he says, "but you seem quite unsettled. I cannot believe the weather alone has caused this. Is there anything I can do?"

Zalma reaches out and stirs the fire with a stick. Sparks dash up into the dark and bang themselves into the rock ceiling like mad flies. "You are perceptive and correct," he says. "I am missing a very important holiday of my people. A fiesta and a ritual feast. I've never missed it before in all my life."

The Indian stares into the fire, as if reading it. "Why not celebrate this feast here, now?" he asks after a few moments. "I will help. There are only two of us, but with the proper attitude, we can surely manage."

"I don't believe it's possible," begins Zalma, surprised at the offer. But then he bethinks himself of the many Indian feasts and dances he has attended. He sits up and looks back at the Indian. "Very well," he says. "We can try." He stands up and looks about the cave. "There are several symbolic items that we will need."

The Indian stands also. "Tell me. We will find them. Perhaps you can explain to me what this feast celebrates."

Zalma turns to him. "Thank you," he says. He puts his hand out. "My name is Levi Ben Zalma."

The Indian takes Zalma's hand in a limp Indian handshake. "Mine is Alohanianaalnish, which means something like I Follow the Spirit in Spanish. Perhaps you had best call me Follows. Now, what is this feast?"

"It celebrates something that happened a very long time ago," explains Zalma. "My people, the Hebrews, were held as slaves by another people, known as the Egyptians. This holiday, called Pesach, celebrates their escape to freedom."

"Certainly a worthy purpose," says Follows. "What will we need?"

Zalma looks around again. "First we need a dish to put the other things on. A seder plate."

Follows bends down by the wood pile and picks up a large flat piece of bark. "How's this?" he asks. He puts it down by the fire.

"Excellent," says Zalma. He goes out to the wagon and returns in a moment with a small bag of corn meal and a jug of water. "Now, the most important thing is a kind of flat bread, which we call matzoh. It must not be leavened. Here are makings for it, but how to bake it?"

"That you can leave to me," says Follows, and he rummages around in the rock rubble at the back of the cave. He comes up with a flat rock, which he places in coals at the edge of the fire. He takes the bag of corn meal and the water from Zalma. He opens the bag, pours a small amount of water into the meal. He rolls little meal balls between his hands, pats them out into flat cakes, places them on the flat rock. Soon the smell of baking tortillas fills the cave. Follows looks up. "Matzoh," he says. "What next?"

"We need a bitter herb," says Zalma, amazed.

Follows reaches into a little leather bag hanging from a cord

around his neck. He places a small handful of dried silvery gray leaves on the bark seder plate. "It's osha," he says. "As bitter as anyone could want."

Zalma rubs his hands together in delight. "How about a lamb bone? That stands for the lamb's blood the Hebrews marked their doors with, so the Angel of Death would know which houses to skip."

"I certainly am looking forward to hearing this story," says Follows. "I have no lamb bone, but perhaps this will do." He reaches into his bag again, and removes a small bone. He puts the bone between his lips and blows a high sweet fluting note. "It is an eagle bone whistle," he says. He puts the whistle next to the osha on the bark.

"Next," says Zalma, "are green herbs, for spring. But I know where to get that." He goes back to the cave mouth and kicks up the snow. Sure enough, there is a little early clover struggling there. He picks a handful and brings it to the plate.

"The last item," concludes Zalma, "is *charoset*, which is a concoction of apples and nuts and wine, intended to represent the mud mortar used by the Hebrew slaves in Egypt."

"I believe for that we will need to use real mud," says Follows, and he takes the water jug and makes a little mud on the cave floor. "*Charoset*," he says, and dabs some onto the plate.

"We also need wine," says Zalma. "The ritual calls for the drinking of four cups, but I think we have that covered." And he holds up the cask of applejack.

So Zalma and I Follow the Spirit begin their seder there in the cave, while the wind wails like a lost dog outside. Zalma explains to Follows about the Four Questions, and Follows asks them, even though he isn't the youngest person present. They eat the burned brown corn matzoh. They pass the cask of applejack back and forth.

Then Zalma begins to tell the story of the Exodus, the maggid, the heart of the seder. He explains how the Egyptians enslaved the Hebrews living among them.

"Yes," said Follows. "All peoples are oppressed."

Zalma speaks of the trials of the early life of Moses, and how, when God finally spoke to him, Moses was reluctant to take on the mission.

"True," says Follows. "A great leader must come from the heart of his people."

Zalma describes the hardening of the heart of Pharaoh, and how he refused to let the Hebrews go.

Follows shakes his head. "Yes," he says, "I have never understood why that happens."

Then Zalma recites the Ten Plagues that were visited upon Egypt, flies and frogs and blood and so on, and he and Follows flick a drop of applejack off their fingers with each plague.

When the list is complete, Follows says, "The world is a difficult place."

"Now I wish I had been a better scholar," says Zalma. "I don't know all the prayers and songs by heart. But I do know most of one," he suddenly remembers. He recites part of The Song of Songs in Hebrew, then translates some of it into Spanish for Follows.

"Yes," says Follows, smiling broadly. "I understand that one."

"Now," says Zalma, "it's time for a part of the ceremony I have always found especially moving. This is where we set aside a cup of wine for the great prophet Elijah, Eliyahu, who lived long ago. When I was a boy, I always got to get up and open the door for Eliyahu."

Zalma sets the applejack cask between himself and Follows. Then he rises, and goes to the cave mouth. There he begins to pantomime opening a door.

As he does so, Follows speaks in a strange voice. "That is not necessary," he says.

Zalma turns. Follows has changed. His blanket is now a long prayer shawl of whitest wool, a tallit, with blue borders and long *tzitzit* in the corners. He has a long gray beard. He is holding a silver wine cup, filled with brown applejack. The cup gleams like ice in the firelight.

"I am here already," says Follows. And he drains the cup.

Then Follows gets up, and walks to where Zalma is standing with his hand on an imaginary door knob, his mouth hanging open like another cave.

Follows puts his arm over Zalma's shoulders. "How could I possibly stand by," he says, "and let *un loco*, a crazy Jew like you, miss seder? Shalom!"

And with that he swirls out of the cave and disappears into the still, cold night. The wind has stopped, and the snow gleams in moonlight like silver.

Zalma returns to the fire, wraps up in the canvas load-cover, and sits munching corn matzoh. He drinks applejack from the wooden cask. I, Levi Ben Zalma, he thinks, I have just instructed the Prophet Eliyahu in proper Jewish practice. ¡Eso es! He shakes his head, drinks more applejack, eats more matzoh, laughs aloud.



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