

A Variety of Pesach Greetings— “Kosher,” “Happy,” and “Sweet”

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On the Monday morning of Erev Pesach, I was listening to the Tony Kornheiser¹ radio program on 980 AM and was struck by his wishing his Jewish listeners “a Ziezen Pesach” (a sweet Passover.) My curiosity about this particular phraseology that I had never noticed before was strengthened when my mother-in-law, who was spending the first days of the Yom Tov with us in Silver Spring, similarly wished some of her relatives over the phone “a Ziezen Pesach.”

I suspected that the reason why this obviously Yiddish blessing was alien to me was because I did not grow up in a Yiddish-speaking home; nevertheless I was struck by the apparent incongruity between “a Ziezen Pesach” and the Hebrew phrase to which I was accustomed to hearing as well as imparting over the years, “Chag Kasher VeSameach” (a Kosher and joyous Festival.) The two elements, “Kosher” and “joyous”, particularly with respect to Passover, can be easily accounted for in terms of overall Jewish tradition. Passover is the most challenging of Jewish holidays with respect to the food that one is allowed to consume, hence the blessing that throughout the upcoming holiday, the laws of Kashrut will hopefully be fulfilled.² The Talmud in Pesachim 6a insists that the laws of Pesach must be reviewed at least two weeks, if not a full month, prior to the beginning of the holiday in order to assure that everyone has ample time to familiarize him/herself with the relevant rules to which he will be expected to adhere for eight days. The practice of the community Rabbi presenting a public scholarly discourse on the Shabbat HaGadol, the Sabbath preceding Pesach, a presentation which traditionally includes not only homiletic material, but also practical aspects of the laws that are relevant to the Passover holiday,³ stems from the same rationale, i.e., the complexities of Passover laws, particularly those pertaining to food. As far as “Sameach,” the second element in the greeting, is concerned, this would appear to be directly related to the Biblical Commandment in Devarim 16:14, “VeSamachta BeChagecha” (and you will rejoice on your festivals.)⁴ The Yiddish equivalent to “Sameach” would be

¹ Tony Kornheiser is a former sports columnist for The Washington Post, a co-host of ESPN’s “Pardon the Interruption”, and host of a daily radio program between 10:00 and 12:00 AM daily.

² One of the stories that we recount in our own family is how one year on Pesach, when we were about to have Gefilte fish which is often eaten with horseradish, Joanie warned everyone that since fresh batches are manufactured before Pesach, we should be prepared for the “Chrain” to be particularly sharp. However, upon tasting the horseradish, we all agreed that it was quite tame. This led to looking at the bottle from which it had been taken and seeing that inadvertently, horseradish that was not Kosher for Passover had been purchased. While the silverware could be Kashered, a set of small ceramic plates ended up being replaced as a result of this error. “Chag Kasher” consequently is a wish that such errors do not occur.

³ See e.g., Aruch HaShulchan, Orech Chayim 430:5.

⁴ Although the immediate context in Devarim is the festival of Sukkot rather than Pesach (v. 13-15,) and commentators note that while “Simcha” is also mentioned with regard to Shavuot (v. 10-12,) no such reference

“Freilichin,” and some congregants told me that they remember their parents and grandparents wishing others a “Ziezen und Freilichin Pesach.” Nevertheless, the specific mention of “sweetness” remained curious to me.⁵

In 2008, “Philologus,”⁶ the pseudonym of a columnist in The Forward newspaper, who each week explicates a turn of phrase that has relevance to Jewish culture and tradition, wrote a piece on this very topic, i.e., the origin of the blessing “A Ziezen Pesach,” entitled appropriately enough, “A Sweet Passover for All.”⁷ The author advances three hypotheses for the basis of associating sweetness with Passover:

- 1) The phrase was introduced in advertisements by manufacturers of Passover food and drink, such as Manischewitz and/or Schapiro’s, with the campaign proving so effective, that the expression crept into everyday speech referring to Passover as a whole rather than just the food available for purchase. (I suppose that this interpretation should be considered Marxian in the sense that it utilizes an economic frame of reference.)
- 2) Ruth Wisse, professor of Jewish and Yiddish literature at Harvard, suggests that the greeting is a result of a blending together of wishes associated with other holidays. On Rosh HaShana, one wishes for a “sweet year”⁸ and on Purim, the typical greeting is to wish another “a Freilichin Purim.” (A linguistic perspective.)
- 3) While the first two explanations were offered by others (a correspondent to the column, Benzion Ginn, and Professor Wisse,) Philologus claims the third explanation, a clearly sociological point of view, as his own, and, in my opinion, it is quite poignant and symbolic of the contemporary Jewish condition. The author suggests that once the level of Halachic observance diminished among many Yiddish-speaking Jews, they felt hypocritical wishing one another, “Have a Kosher Passover.” Consequently a substitute had to be found which would not reflect an expectation and even aspiration that the complex laws be carried out. According to this view,

appears in the parallel verses discussing Pesach (v. 1-8,) nevertheless Talmudic sources such as Pesachim 109a clearly state that the Mitzva of “Simcha” applies to all three of the Pilgrim Festivals.

⁵ During the course of the Seder in particular, most of what is consumed could hardly be considered sweet: Matza, Karpas (dipping a vegetable in either salt water or vinegar) and the bitter herb. While the Charoset is generally sweet, the Maror is supposed to be only dipped into it and then the Charoset shaken off. As for the wine, while one could drink sweet wine if s/he wished, the Halachic preference appears to be the color of the wine, red, rather than how sweet or dry it is.

⁶ See <http://www.forward.com/articles/104242/> for a description of a man named Philologus during the Roman period. As to the author of the Forward column, I have been unable to ascertain his identity.

⁷ <http://www.forward.com/articles/13161/>

⁸ A widespread custom on Rosh HaShana is to eat during the evening meals various foods that symbolize one’s hopes for the coming year. Among these foods is an apple dipped in honey, to which the following recitation is attached once one has finished eating it: “Yehi Ratzon Lefanecha HaShem Elokeinu VElokai Avoteinu SheTechadesh Aleinu Shana Tova U’Metuka” (Let it be the Will before You Lord our God and God of our fathers, that You Renew for us a good and sweet year.) Furthermore, there is a practice to avoid bitter or sour foods on Rosh HaShana, in effect the converse of the dipping of an apple into honey. See Aruch HaShulchan, Orech Chayim 583:3.

“A Ziezen Pesach” reflects the transformation of the Pesach festival from a religious observance to a secular, cultural one.⁹

While Philologus might be correct in his depressing assessment of this particular greeting as indicative of a downward trajectory of Jewish observance for most Jews, I was intent on taking the “high road”¹⁰ and reflecting on how “a Ziezen Pesach” could be a proper greeting even among those who take Jewish observance seriously and therefore also care about having a “Kosheren Pesach.”

One approach would entail understanding the quality of “sweetness” as essentially a cognitive metaphor, rather than a sensual response of the taste buds to outside stimuli. Jonathan Swift, in The Battle of the Books (1704),¹¹ attributes to bees the following sentiment:

Instead of dirt and poison, we have rather chosen to fill our hives with honey and wax; thus furnishing mankind with the two noblest of things, which are sweetness and light,

which is then transformed by Matthew Arnold, several hundreds of years later, into the following:

The pursuit of perfection, then, is the pursuit of sweetness and light...He who works for sweetness and light united, works to make reason and the Will of God prevail.¹²

While Swift is dealing with a literally “sweet” entity, i.e., honey, he compares it to an alternative, i.e., “dirt,” suggesting that the bee has improved upon a practice in which other, less ethereal creatures, engage. From such a comparison, it is a relatively short leap to the assumption that referring to something as “sweet” suggests wholeness, perfection, a harmonious unity. Swift’s and Arnold’s conception of sweetness certainly deserve to comprise a greeting and a wish for a wonderful religious celebration.¹³

⁹ A cynical turn can be given to this point of view in light of the verse in Mishlei 9:17 “Stolen waters are sweet; and secreted bread pleasant.” The verse is typically interpreted to suggest that there is a human satisfaction in breaking rules, rebelling and being a non-conformist. Consequently, there may be some, like the Bundists of old who would specifically schedule Kol Nidrei Balls, who would take satisfaction and consider it actually pleasurable to not adhere to the rules of Passover. However, it seems that after generations of assimilation, the problem is more of one of indifference and ignorance, than spiteful resistance, in effect the problem of the “Eino Yodeah LiSh’ol” (the son who does not know how to ask) rather than the “Rasha” (the evil son.)

¹⁰ My desire to justify the greeting of “a Ziezen Pesach” stems from the same sort of outlook that posits that there is no such thing as a “Minhag Shtut” (a foolish custom/practice.) If a broad swath of the Jewish people behave in a certain fashion, there should be some positive justification for what they are doing.

¹¹ Quoted in The Yale Book of Quotations, ed. Fred R. Shapiro, Yale. U. Press, New Haven, 2006, p. 740.

¹² Culture and Anarchy, Chapt. 1, 1869, quoted in Ibid., p. 28.

¹³ In Christine Ammer’s The Facts on File Dictionary of Cliches, (Checkmark Books, New York, 2001) p. 385, after citing Swift and Arnold, the author writes the following:

Today however, it is always used ironically, as in “At home she yells at the children, but when she brings them to Sunday School, she is all sweetness and light.”

On a metaphysical, psychological level, the great Chassidic thinker, R. Nachman of Breslav, offered an intriguing insight regarding the manner in which we experience the most basic of Passover foods, the Matza.¹⁴ R. Nachman discussed the nature of an entity called “Noam Elyon” (Celestial Sweetness) that flows from Heaven to those on earth. However, it takes a certain sense of simplicity and inner peace to experience this Divine gift from above. A litmus test regarding whether one has achieved the requisite personal qualities to have a sense of “Noam Elyon” is how s/he feels about the Matza that he eats at this time of year. Matza, too, is the most basic of foods, consisting of nothing more than flour and water baked quickly at high heat. When a person embodies the type of personal simplicity that parallels the very simple quality of Matza, the Matza will taste truly sweet and link him/her to the Source of “Noam Elyon.” Consequently wishing someone “a Ziezen Pesach” could reflect the hope and prayer that s/he will truly experience a sense of closeness with God and an aura of spiritual fulfillment.

But I think that there is an even more fundamental sense of “sweetness” that is associated more with Passover than any other Jewish holiday. Pesach in general, and the Seder nights in particular, are traditionally times when families gather together. People come from far and wide to spend quality time with one another, not only engaging in religious ritual, but recounting familial lore, forging relationships between young and old, creating new memories and experiences that can be shared in years to come. Watching one’s child or grandchild growing up, participating more and more as a family member, becoming part of the chain of tradition that contributed to our own identities and self-awareness, is nothing other than sublimely “sweet” and is to be especially cherished at this time of year.

I guess I would beg to differ.

¹⁴ R. Nachman, quoted by Shlomo Carlbach at his House of Love and Prayer in San Francisco, 5733 (1974,) contained in an article on Passover on the Chavura Shir Chadash website. See <http://www.havurahshirhadash.org/shlomoarticle5.html>