

**Shabbat Hagadol
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**Rabbi Lisa Edwards
Beth Chayim Chadashim, LA**

Who knows the Yiddish word "narishkeit"? What does it mean?
[answers...]

Yes, it means "foolishness, a triviality," according to Leo Rosten in his famous book, *The Joys of Yiddish*. Narishkeit was one of the few Yiddish words I heard as a kid. My parents both came from families that tried hard to leave Yiddish behind, lest their children not be American enough. And since my grandparents had arrived in the United States at the end of 19th century and had been losing Yiddish ever since, by the time I came along, Yiddish words were few and far between, to say the least. Narishkeit is one I remember though. Except that I heard it as "nourish – keit" and so I long thought it meant something that nourishes you, even sustains you.

I bring all this up because I received a letter from our dear friend Harriet Perl this week. As most of you know, Harriet is a long time BCC member, since our very early years, and she has never been afraid to express her opinion. She wrote me because she was upset that the G'vanim, our newsletter, had, in this month's issue, printed a list of "forbidden foods" for Passover without making any disclaimer that the list follows Orthodox tradition, and is for informational purposes only, that neither G'vanim or BCC necessarily endorses such "unreasonable" behavior. Harriet's right. I apologize to her and you. I should have been clear about why I included the list in G'vanim. I do so because each year there are BCC members who ask to be reminded of some of the "traditions" of Passover. These days it's so easy to get things from other sources — websites, etc.— that perhaps we shouldn't bother anymore.

But back to "narishkeit." Harriet used the word in her letter. She was responding to what she sees as the absurdity of the food rules of Passover — especially the rules for Ashkenazi Jews [Eastern European Jewish culture], which are much more complicated, with a much longer list of forbidden foods, than the Sephardim keep.

Harriet wasn't able to join us tonight, but I asked her permission to share part of her letter with you and see if you could help with her dilemmas. She agreed to let me. So let me read you part of her letter:

"Corn oil may leaven;" she writes, and "I am likely to create leavening if I put cumin in my chili; soy sauce was forbidden to the Israelites, apparently. Those are just a few of the listed prohibitions for Pesach. But not forbidden are light, fluffy sponge cakes, definitely leavened — with eggs, under careful conditions which presumably the hurried Israelites, traveling rough, were able to provide. And I can have my matzos chocolate covered, a luxury I seriously doubt the Israelites had in the days before Europeans

discovered this hemisphere's tropics." She continues: "What kind of narishkeit is all this?...I can understand and appreciate a seder in which modern Jews celebrate their freedom and remember that they were once slaves who escaped a tyrant in such a hurry that they hadn't time to raise their yeast-imbued bread. We eat that unleavened bread in commemoration, sensibly. . . . But using alfafa sprouts or mustard was not an issue for them; why should it become one for us? "Judaism's appeal for me has always included respect for its reasonableness in most things. As a religion, it must and does go beyond sheer rationality, of course: one doesn't hamstring [her word choice] spirituality to the rules of reason. . . . "But the "food facts" for Pesach are about as unreasonable as it is possible to be.... "What am I supposed to think of all this? How do I reconcile it with my love for a religion which honors the intellect?..." asks Harriet. She signed her letter "with love and exasperation."

RESPONSES

Who keeps some form of the "food rules" for Passover?

[several people raised their hands]

Why do you?

[lots of discussion. my brief summaries: way of marking a difference in time, in one's life; making one's food intake a deliberate, thought out action rather than just putting food in your mouth; because as a Jew I have a right to – it makes me notice my Jewishness, and appreciate it; because it was thought out by the Rabbis and just as when I read the report of a medical doctor I may not understand how they arrived at their conclusion, I try to find out as much as I can, seek advice from many sources, and eventually follow the advice of people who know more about the subject than I do; because when you go back to eating normally, you feel released – like you knew what it was to be a slave, eating what others told you to eat; because my mother and grandmother did it – doing it honors them/honors their memory; it feels good, feels like a spiritual act]

Who agrees with Harriet that the rules are "unreasonable," that this is all narishkeit? foolishness?

[a few raised their hands]

How many of you are like me – believing, as Harriet does, that the rules are narishkeit, but keeping at least some of them anyway?

[a few raised their hands]

For me I think it goes back to my childhood confusion over the term narishkeit. Somehow I came to believe that what may seem trivial or foolish to some, may end up being nourishing to others. My parents certainly didn't keep the "food rules" of Passover. Though we always went to a seder, I don't think I knew until I went away to college and Les Zandle taught me, that many Jews don't eat bread at all during the whole week of Passover. I don't think I had a clue about the cleaning or the forbidden foods or the mishigaas of keeping Passover. (mishigaas is a Yiddish word meaning, "craziness." Mishigaas, by the way, was a word my parents used much more often than narishkeit.)

If my grandparents had had their way, I fear I wouldn't know any Yiddish at all, nor care about it at all. Nor, probably, would I know that Jews over the centuries tried as best they could to create a week in the springtime when their whole family – in all kinds of different ways – could come to understand that Jews had once been slaves in Egypt and that now we were free...But not yet as free as we will someday be – someday when every person on earth is free, when every one of God's creations is free.

My growing thought about keeping Kosher for Pesach is that we should all be vegetarians, that at least on Passover we should make sure that none of God's creatures are enslaved or suffer for our sake. But if we did that, what would happen, for example, to Fran's family's tradition of making gefilte fish from scratch for Passover? This morning 2 year old Rae helped with her first batch of the stuff: "I'm squishin' it with my fingers," I heard her say, which was why her mom wouldn't let her pick up the phone just then to tell me all about it.

And if we all became vegetarians on Pesach, a bunch of people would miss out on Harriet Perl's Passover knaydlach (matzah balls), made with real schmaltz, she wanted us to know. I wouldn't deprive Rae or Harriet's friends of these traditions that, though they don't date back quite as far as the Exodus from Egypt, at least go back far enough to be a way to keep our Jewishness, our history, our Judaism right on the tips of fingers and the tips of our tongues – where we can not only squish them, but also taste them and smell them and "swallow" them, and literally make them a part of us, instead of apart from us.

Harriet speaks so many truths in her letter. And the remark that hit home most for me was, "As a religion, it [Judaism] must and does go beyond sheer rationality, of course: one doesn't hamstring spirituality to the rules of reason." For that's a key, I think, to Judaism, to being a Jew – that rationality and spirituality go hand in hand...And a key for liberal Jews, I think, is knowing that both of those – the rationality and the spirituality – mean different things and come in different ways to different Jews. One person's narishkeit is another person's nourishment. What one person can't stomach, literally provides sustenance for another. And all of it, all of it, the narishkeit and nourishment alike, has helped sustain Judaism and the Jewish people not only through the trying and frightening times, but through the times of sheer pleasure too – all the seder tables through the centuries where Jews and their friends have gathered to remember and to find joy.

Shabbat shalom. I wish you a nourishing Passover.