

Pesach 8th day – 11 April 2015

The story is told in a small Russian town. The community council decided to pay a poor Jew one measly ruble a week to sit at the gates and be the first to greet the Mashiach when he comes. His brother comes to see him and is puzzled.

“Why did you take such a low paying job?” he asks.

The poor man responds: “The pay is low but it sure is steady!”

Our Sages say that there is an intrinsic difference between the first and last days of Pesach. The first days we emphasise the past. We relate to our children about the Exodus from Egypt and what happened to our ancestors all those years ago. We ingest the Matzah; we experience the freedom. We taste the bitter herbs; we feel the pain and embitterment of exile. We transmit the messages and values of the past to our future generations.

Equate that to the last two days and you will notice the paradigm shift. In the liturgical prayers of the Evening service we talk about the future Pesach of redemption. In the morning of the eighth day, the Haftarah from Isaiah speaks about “a staff will grow from the stump of Jesse, a shoot will grow forth from his roots.” The ravages of thousands of years of exile have decimated the dynasty of David. However, from his descendants (his roots) a king will be born, who will once again reflect the spirit and wisdom of Jewish holiness.

In other words the last two days, even though they are part of the same Pesach festival, the accent has changed to contemplate the future.

In the West we live relatively prosperous and comfortable lives. We are free to live and practice our religious beliefs in relative tranquillity, and anti-Semitism is still present, but not as bad as it used to be. On a physical and material level most of us are satisfied with our lot.

And yet we may be only scratching the surface. Just think about the recent events in Paris, in Copenhagen, to know that the world is very far from perfect. The world is far away from the messianic ideal of when the “lion will lie down with the lamb” when different people will be able to live together in peace and tranquillity. Too much violence and hatred exists, we are far-off from a state of perfection.

On the eighth day we recite Yizkor when we remember our loved ones who have passed on. But, if the last days are all about the future why are we mentioning the past again?

The answer is that we mention the goodness of the former generations and how they lived good upstanding lives devoted to our values and traditions. We are dwarfs on the shoulders of the giants of previous generations. It is their actions that stand us in good stead and we emulate their ways to ensure a positive future.

Chag Sameach