

Pesach and Leeds University

Much of Pesach during my second year at Leeds University in the 1990s was spent at...Leeds University, along with many other Jewish students. Not only did Pesach fall during term time, but my parents went away for the first time for Pesach, to relatives in Israel, taking my grandmother with for her first ever visit there. I had little choice but to remain in Leeds, at the house I shared at 21 Brudenell Grove, LS6. How different, I wondered, would this Pesach be to others I had experienced?

Two of the central themes of Pesach, especially the Seder night are: a. all who need to share the Seder are welcome to and; b. the more you discuss and learn about the Exodus, the better.

The application of these themes made Pesach that year very different to anything I had experienced before, even whilst studying in Israel.

The Leeds Jewish community on the other side of the city, building on connections made by Rabbi Mordechai Nissim (then University Jewish Chaplain in Leeds) displayed tremendous hospitality, not just hosting students for Seder but for other Yom Tov meals too. These hosts also provided accomodation for those students who needed it. They opened their homes and their sedarim to us, making us feel 'at home away from home' and encouraging us to participate as a member of the family.

After the first two days of Yom Tov, I returned to Brudenell Grove. How would the rest of Pesach be?

During Chol Hamoed (the middle days of the festival) around campus, Jewish students, sometimes meeting each other for the first time, came together due to Pesach, either through spotting "matza eaters", or by coming to J-Soc at the Hillel House, as it was at that time.

For the first time, my housemates and I had to 'make Pesach' and ensure that we ate more than just chocolate spread! So did many others on campus.

This became a great example of student empowerment. With the help of our chaplain, we organised Pesach shopping and provisions. Our house, which had a big kitchen area, became a place where many students hung out together that Pesach. It also was a place where, for those who wished, there was the opportunity to learn more about Pesach as well.

I had experienced many Sedarim and attended many shiurim (lessons) about Pesach. That year, for the first time, I was able to study this amazing festival with people from very different backgrounds, putting into practice the theme of learning about this seminal event in our history.

I had originally approached that Pesach with some trepidation, fearing it would be negatively different to previous years. Yet that Pesach turned out to be one of the most memorable that I have experienced, empowered and enthused by what, with God's help and the kindness of many others, became a Pesach I have never forgotten.

I wish you all a joyous Pesach.