



VIVIENNE ROUMANI-DENN

In July of 2009 I came across a website dedicated to the documentary entitled “The Last Jews of Libya” by the *Sephardic* scholar and filmmaker Vivienne Roumani-Denn. In this movie, Vivienne traces her family’s history in Benghazi through Ottoman rule, Italian rule and World War II, until their final exodus from Libya as a result of the rise of Arab nationalism. Her story seemed so interesting I instantly emailed her and introduced myself, asking whether it would be possible for me to interview her about her Libyan Passover traditions. In October of that same year I finally did get to speak with Vivienne on the phone,

and this is what she shared with me that day:

« I was born in 1950 and raised in Benghazi, Libya. In 1960 and 1961 two of my brothers moved directly to the United States to study, and in 1962 my parents, my third brother, and I joined them, settling in Boston. Our family tree in Libya can be traced back to the 1780s; we’re not really sure where they came from before that time. There are lots of reasonable stories that make sense, like the Balkans. Dov Noy (a noted professor of Jewish Folklore) said that the family name ‘Roumani’ meant ‘from Rome,’ and it is possible that they went from Rome to Spain and ultimately to the Ottoman Empire. Many of our family went to Rome after leaving Libya, which is where many Libyan Jews ended up after 1967. Even though we were born in Libya and lived there, we had Tunisian (not Libyan) passports. One of the explanations is that if one of your ancestors at a certain point came from Tunisia, then they issued you a Tunisian passport. I do know that my mother’s family came from Algeria at some point. That’s how things were done then—how it worked. (But that’s a whole other long story.)

Preparing for the Passover holiday was very, very involved. Starting almost from the second that Purim ended, my mother would go into every drawer, every closet, and every jacket or pants pocket of my brothers and my father looking for crumbs to get rid of. The apartment was also painted in preparation for the *Pesah* holiday — the entire apartment. So you really did a thorough spring cleaning. For the *Bedikat Hametz*, there was literally no chance that there was any *hametz* left — my parents took it very seriously. I remember my father used to take a knife, because it had a sharp edge, and wrap it with a cloth to go into every nook and cranny to remove any possible bread crumb. He would run the knife around the corners, and you know how there’s a crack between where your stove meets your countertop? He would take the skinniest knife and would clean that space out. And you started minimizing the *hametz* you bought into the house — you planned ahead. We didn’t really do the ‘selling’ business (of the *hametz*) — we just didn’t have any left. It was kind of easy because we didn’t normally eat too many processed foods anyway, but with flour, you just made sure that you didn’t have any by the time it got close to the holiday.

The week before *Pesah* we actually got a lamb. If you had a large family, and you had the means, you had one lamb for your whole family. If you had a smallish family then you would divide it among many families. We usually got a lamb and my father divided it among his sisters and brothers, and it would get slaughtered before the *hag*, before *Pesah*. For the second night it was traditional to eat grilled lamb (but I use grilled lamb chops, not lamb shanks). What I remember as a kid is they were just lovely pieces of lamb that were quickly grilled and a little charred on the outside. It was almost like a delicious steak. And the sauce that you would put on it was just lemon juice, straight from fresh lemons — none of this kind that you squirt from a bottle (until this day I can’t stand lemons that are not fresh). Then you would mix the lemon juice with a little black pepper, and pour a little bit of this seasoning on the lamb just before eating. It was absolutely delicious.

From *Pesah* to *Pesah* we never ate *matzah*, because you couldn’t just buy it in a box all year round. You had to make it, so you made it on the morning of the first *Seder*, after burning the *hametz*. Several families would have a *tanoor* or day oven on the roof, and actually made the *matzah*. I remember the women, even the men, mixing the flour and the water and timing it, then putting it against the wall of the *tanoor* and cooking it that way — you know, baking it exactly the right time. It was a lot of fun actually. It was community time, mostly family — cousins and other cousins. And there were two types of *matzah*: one was more like a thick cracker - *matzah* that you baked almost like a cookie in the oven at home. These were more for breakfast or like a snack during *Pesah*. Then there was the *matzah* that was more reminiscent of a thin *pita* or maybe the Indian bread. And that’s the one that you made in the *tanoor*. These we ate during the *Seder* and were *pita-size*, or maybe a little bigger, depending on the person who made them.

My mother wouldn’t let me cook very much. She just thought, ‘You know, you’re going to cook plenty in your life in your own home. You don’t need to start now.’ She was pretty progressive, and she did all the cooking. Even though she had help with laundry and house cleaning, she took a lot of pride in saying, ‘I cook my own food — nobody’s touching my food.’ For *Pesah* we did eat *kitniyot*, so there was nothing wrong with beans and chickpeas. I don’t remember rice, to tell you the truth, although we must have had it. The general rule was that if it was fresh, not processed, you could eat it. Even canned tomato paste that my mother often used from Italy, she wouldn’t use during *Pesah*. She would instead make a sauce from fresh tomatoes. And I kind of looked forward to all of this extra fuss with the cooking, because suddenly the smells and tastes were

even more fresh than usual, and I just remember a lot of tasty food. For dessert we didn't have all the chocolates and the candies, so you really lost weight during this period. You felt healthy. We weren't worried about our weight back then because we ate such a good, healthy diet, and we walked a lot.

Men often went to the market themselves and did all the shopping in these North African countries, so they were responsible for obtaining and arranging the symbolic foods for the *Seder*. It was a *mitzvah* for the men to prepare the *Seder* plate, my father used to tell us. You weren't supposed to have a conversation when you were arranging the *Seder* plate, so he would just call out the item and my mother would hand it to him as he placed it into a large, flat basket — like a rattan tray with handles. It was not a fancy plate, it had to be a basket — after all, you were coming out of the desert! And when it was complete he would set it on the table.

You can imagine the afternoon of Pesah before it started — it was incredibly special and exciting. The house was spotless. Everything was newly painted. The smell of all the cooking and all the fresh, fresh vegetables and herbs... ahhh! It was just magnificent— there was a feeling of elation with all this cleanliness. We always had the *Seder* at our house. This going away was totally foreign. When the men came back home from synagogue that night, they would change into casual clothing, like new *kaftans* — nice looking ones. They were like lounge wear, because you were supposed to be free like a king, and therefore not choke your neck with a tie, or suit, or anything like that. We would sit on a low table, and the pillows were on the floor so you could recline to your heart's content. I loved that because as a kid you can imagine that all of a sudden we were sitting at one of these low, low tables, and it was just fun! And we did all the singing and the praying together. The *Seder* and the story had a personal touch. It was just quite nice.

During the *Seder* we all took turns reading passages from the *haggadah*. I have to tell you that it was read sometimes in several languages, definitely in Hebrew, first and foremost, as well as in Arabic (maybe *Judeo-Arabic*) because everybody around the table should understand it. We did not do *Ladino*, but we did Italian at times.

When we sang *HaLahmah Anya* ("The Bread of Affliction"), my mother would pick up the basket and pass it over everyone sitting at the table, gently touching each of our heads with it. The significance of that, I think, was to reinforce that each one of us was taking part in the *Seder* and in the story.

The children reenacted the story of *Pesah*. The youngest child would carry the *afikomen* on his back, and everyone else would ask either together, or separately, "Where are you going? Where are you coming from?" The father probably started, but it takes a community to raise a child you know, so one or many would ask where are you coming from? Where are you going? What are you carrying? Why? Just as you would if someone had suddenly gotten up and left not formal, memorized lines. Remember, at the *Seder* everyone had to feel like he or she went through the Exodus — the road to freedom. It was slightly different than the way we do it in the U.S. The children would hide the *afikomen*, and the father would find it. And they didn't do gifts. The fun of the game was enough.

During the reciting of the Ten Plagues, we were raised with the concept that you didn't rejoice in the demise of your enemy, so overall the mood was very serious. My mother would bring a pitcher of water, and a separate pot for the discarded wine. My father would take the wine and put a drop into this clay pot, while my mother would follow right after with some water to dilute it (Only the leaders would do this — like my mother, my father.) Then my mother would dump the wine-water mixture in the toilet or down the sink (it was very important at that this pot was never to be used for anything food related — you usually threw it away or used it only to clean floors or something like that).

At the very end of the evening, they started doing, what was it: *Shir HaShirim* or *Azharot*? It was really beautiful... when the whole *Seder* was over, and the *afikomen* was eaten, and *Birkat HaMazon* was recited, and all the signing was done, the men hung around — my father, my brothers — and started reading something else. I don't know what it was, but there was still some singing going on just between the guys.

This is another significant thing that we did that was just beautiful. Towards the end of *Pesah*, in the afternoon, the children reenacted the entire *Seder*. And there were Jewish artisans who actually made miniature serving pieces and toy plates to go on this small *Seder* table — we even had the wine in little cups. The children, sitting at a short *Seder* table — much smaller than the real one — would reenact the whole *Seder*, from beginning to end. I have a picture where my brothers and I were sitting at this small table while my parents were watching us perform the entire *Seder* ourselves. And I don't know if I made up this reason, or if it was told to me, but I think it's because you know how the Bible says that you must pass it on to your children? What better way to pass it on to your children than to have them performing it themselves? I remember that so fondly, because first of all you're playing house, but in a very organized and purposeful way. And then you knew that the artisans had made these things especially for you, and there were your parents proudly watching you. You felt like a grown up because you were doing what grown ups did. As far as I know, everyone in the community did this.

On the last night of *Pesah*, my father used to come home right after synagogue with lettuce, and pat us all on the head with it. This was to wish for a prosperous year. He would say in Hebrew '*Tizku leshanim rabbot*' ('May you merit many years'), to which we responded '*Ne'imot u-tuvot*' ('Pleasant and good ones'), and in Arabic '*Akbal dayer, nak'lu leftayer fi Yerushalay'ym*' ('Happy holiday, may we eat the *matzah* in Jerusalem'), which is equivalent to 'Next year in Jerusalem' that everyone says today. I remember him also going out late that same night to try and find flour for my mother to bake the *Mimounah* loaves once the holiday had ended, because of course you couldn't use anything flour products that were made during *Pesah*. My mother would then stay up very late at night making the breads, waiting for the dough to rise and then bake, so it wasn't really until the next morning when they were ready. She would make one regular bread loaf, and one that was a

little sweeter. There was one that even had an egg placed on top with a criss-crossed piece of dough on top of the egg, so that when she took it out of the oven it looked like a little egg inside a nest. I remember the breads were round to indicate the cycle of life and the eggs too were symbolic of the cycle of continuity, fertility, and birth. The next day was when all the families went to the *bosco*, which means 'the woods' in Italian. I think it was when the men who would bring the breads and other foods and we would have a picnic, which was a lot of fun. We called this period *Mimounah*, because of Rabbi Maimon, the father of Maimonides.

"The *matzah* on the *Seder* plate had to be complete without any cracks. When my father cut the *matzah* by hand during the *Seder* prayer, he had to make sure to cut it precisely to form the shape of the Hebrew letters *dalet* and *vav* * He took great care to cut it just right*¹

According to Jewish numerology (*gematria*) each Hebrew letter has a numerical value, and because *dalet* is the fourth letter and *vav* the sixth letter in the alphabet, the total value would equal ten, which is also the number of the Ten *Sefirot* "attributes" of God to create (and sustain) the world. (See page xviii for arrangement of *Seder* plate according to the Ten *Sefirot* or "Tree of Life")