

Center's Passover seder gives cause for celebration

By SHEILA CHASE
Advance Staff Writer

Jews all over the world last night began the eight-day celebration of freedom called Passover.

Families from all economic levels, in all kinds of political situations gathered around seder tables and retold the 5,000-year-old story of the liberation of the nation Israel from enslavement by the Egyptians.

Some tables were set in lace and silver, others in paper and plastic.

Many people who heard the story last night crave freedom from modern oppression — political, social, spiritual or emotional.

Others, such as Linda, a lifetime resident of the Staten Island Developmental Center (SIDC), had a new-found freedom to celebrate.

She was one of 100 clients of SIDC who attended a seder last night in the center's auditorium. Rabbi Philip Goldberg, center chaplain for 30 years, presided at the ceremony and helped serve food and distribute gifts to guests.

Clients returned from group homes and foster families to join residents of the center in the Passover celebration. Also at the meal were some client family members and many workers the center and group homes.

A woman in her 30s, Linda has attended seders at SIDC every year of her life in a wheelchair. This year she walked.

She reached the goal of getting on her feet with only the aid of a walker just two weeks ago, after years of intense therapy.

She smiled shyly and looked away from visitors as Rabbi Goldberg spoke about her

accomplishment. "She has never walked before," he said. "Aren't you proud?" he asked her. After much coaxing, he finally got a "Yes."

As chaplain, Rabbi Goldberg has presided at the seder for Jewish clients at SIDC for 30 years. Many of the male clients wore yarmulkes and a few recited some of the familiar Hebrew phrases with the rabbi as he spoke. Joining in the meal were many non-Jews — center administrators and workers, and clients' foster families. Non-Jewish foster mothers said they made a point of bringing their Jewish children every year to help them preserve their heritage.

Rabbi Goldberg stopped the Passover storytelling to introduce SIDC dietician Samire Soliman, an Egyptian woman who for six years has prepared the seder. Although the Egyptian nation is clearly the villain in the Passover story, the rabbi made a special point of telling his audience that "today, we are friends with the Egyptians."

The seder was held in the large auditorium where religious services of all faiths are held. And although the customary lengthy service was modified somewhat, all the elements were there — the bitter herb, the onion and salt water, the hard egg, the apple and nut mixture

and the wine — Concord grape juice with a drop of Manischewitz in it.

The rabbi explained each in simple terms and then called upon specially appointed "family members" carry out their parts in the ceremony.

Philip Greene, as the "youngest son," read the answers to the age-old question: "Why is this night different from all other nights?"

Francine Adler as the "mother" lit the three candles set at the head table.

Greene, a former resident who credits Rabbi Goldberg with placing him in a good home in Queens, has been reading the same part in the Passover for 30 years, he said. "I've been studying for three weeks," he said.

He knew his part. As Rabbi Goldberg picked up each symbol from the Passover plate, Greene called out its meaning.

The rabbi stressed that Passover is a time that is not always happy. "We may have good days today," he told the mentally retarded men and women sitting at long tables. "But we have had some days that were not so good."

But he also reminded them of the celebration of freedom and of spring and wished them "all the health in the world."

Passover, he said "is a children's holiday and we are all children. If not our parents children, then God's children."