

Fewer Jews than originally planned will be celebrating the festival of freedom in Thailand next month, since the luxury resort owners have told the organisers of a Pesach retreat that they regard a large Jewish group as a security risk.

Given that this fear is a response to the terrorist attacks last February that were aimed at Israelis in Bangkok, it is a bizarre case of “punishing the victim”. Rather than re-doubling efforts to ensure the safety of Jews and Israelis, this part of the Thai tourist industry chooses to turn away customers, and give the clear message that Jews are seen as trouble.

However, this particular cloud has a silver lining. The proposed Thailand trip was a fulfilment of the fast growing custom of “Pesach retreats” according to which many families regard the traditional Pesach at home as a relic of the past. The attraction of such a retreat is obvious. Apart from the luxury surroundings to relax the body, gourmet food to tempt the palate and a scholar-in-residence to enhance the Seder, such a retreat obviates the need to clean the house or kasher the kitchen. The freedom from slavery can be celebrated with even more enthusiasm when it is actually accompanied by freedom from domestic chores. It will entice even if the retreat is closer to home and lacks an exotic overseas location.

Yet there is a price to be paid (and not just the many thousands of dollars demanded for a week’s hotel accommodation). Pesach itself can be observed and celebrated anywhere in the world, but the traditional family experience cannot. The treasured rituals - from unpacking the pots and pans to setting the seder table; the unique family idiosyncrasies and folklore that accompany each stage of preparation, cannot be recreated anywhere outside of the home. A Thailand Pesach, or a Ballarat Pesach might be pleasant and indeed meaningful, but it can never be the same as a family Pesach.

Some would describe this as progress. Just as we now rely on supermarkets to provide the food that once we would have grown ourselves, so it must be modern to collectivise cleaning and cooking, dispensing with the family experience in favour of comfort and convenience. Are not stay-at-home Pesach traditionalists merely Luddites who are stuck in the past, like the old-fashioned folk who insist on reading books made of paper?

But this is not progress. The family element of Pesach is not something to be evolved to destruction by the passage of time; it is the foundation of the festival itself. Without that experience, Pesach is not improved, it is cut adrift and emptied of its essence.

As the Chief Rabbi has pointed out, our tradition states that the moment of liberation and simultaneous creation of the Jewish people in Egypt was not marked with rallies in the streets, but by families in their homes sitting around their tables. And every year when we re-enact and re-create that event, as we do at the Seder, we sit together as families.

That the anniversary of the dawn of peoplehood should be a shared family experience is no coincidence. It is precisely the transcending of generations – when parent teaches child, when grandparent shares their story with grandchild – that creates a people. Without that transcendence we are atomised individuals; with it, we are links in the chain of generations that defines who we are.

And therefore the Seder is introduced with the questions of a child, and continues with the answers, at length, from the parents and grandparents – reciting not just the formulaic response prescribed in the Hagada, but enhanced with discussion, further questions and answer, stories and even jokes. As Jewish heritage is transmitted from old to young, our identity is not only celebrated, it is forged anew.

But children learn from much more than the set piece rituals and text of the seder; every aspect of Pesach is an opportunity for a learning experience and an inter-generational bonding. The sweeping and searching, boiling and burning, schlepping and swapping of dishes can all be family activities which are remembered, smiled at and hence repeated for years to come.

Our children today need as many Jewish memories as they can get. Memories that associate fun, family and Jewishness generate a desire for more such experiences, and hence are a greater guarantor of Jewish continuity than any formal lesson or educational programme.

Pesach at home is hard work. A week in a warm tourist hotspot, leaving the labour to others seems attractive. But transforming Pesach into just another vacation deprives our children of so many treasured family moments with a unique Pesach association. In their place will come the message that we avoided the effort required to create Pesach for ourselves. Is that the lesson – of convenience rather than dedication – that we want them to take away from this archetypal Jewish festival?