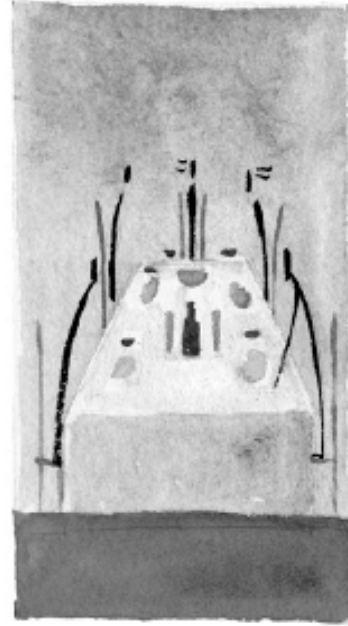


Creating Lively Passover Seders



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The Mishnah's Seder: The Vital Balance between Ritual and Spontaneity

The Mishnah was compiled in about 200 CE by Judah the Prince. It contains one of the oldest descriptions of how Passover was celebrated following the destruction of the Second Temple in 70 CE. Here are a few excerpts from Chapter Ten of Mishnah Pesachim, The Night of Passover.

Mishnah 10:1 ... Even a poor person in Israel should not eat until [he] reclines. [Those who serve] should not give him fewer than four cups of wine even if [the funds] come from the charity plate.

Mishnah 10:3 [They] served— [he] dips the lettuce [*chazeret*, the vegetable used for the bitter herbs] before he reaches the bread condiment. [They] served him unleavened bread and lettuce and *charoset*, even though the *charoset* is not a [Biblical] commandment. And in the Temple [they] serve him the carcass of the Passover offering.

Mishnah 10:4 [They] poured for him the second cup— **and here the child asks, and if the child lacks understanding, his father instructs him**. How is this night different from all [other] nights? For on all the [other] nights we dip once, this night twice. For on all the [other] nights we eat leavened and unleavened bread, this night we eat only unleavened. For on all the [other] nights we eat meat roasted, steamed, or cooked [in a liquid, boiled], this night only roasted. **According to the child's understanding, his father instructs him**. [He] starts with disgrace and ends with glory; and [he] **expounds** from, "My father was a wandering Aramean" [Deuteronomy 26:5], until he finishes the entire portion.

Mishnah 10:5 Rabban Gamaliel said, "Whoever did not say these three things on Passover did not fulfill his obligation: Pesach [the Passover offering], matzah [unleavened bread], and merorim [bitter herbs]. Pesach—because the Omnipresent skipped over the house of our ancestors in Egypt. Merorim—because the Egyptians embittered the lives of our ancestors in Egypt. Matzah—because they were redeemed. Therefore we are obligated to give thanks, to praise, to glorify, to crown, to exalt, to elevate the One who did for us all these miracles and took us from slavery to freedom, and let us say before him Hallelujah [Psalm 113].

Taking “Elaboration” Seriously

All who elaborate on telling the story of the Exodus from Egypt are to be praised.
—The Passover Haggadah (shortly after the “answer to the Four Questions)

Mishnah Sanhedrin 5:2: “All [judges] who engage in a more elaborate cross-examination [of a witness in a capital case] are to be praised. It is told of Ben Zakkai that he cross- examined [a witness] about stalks of figs.”

Jerusalem Talmud Moed Katan 18b: “All who make elaborate mourning rituals [e.g. fully rending all the outer garments one wears, completely refraining from work during shiva] for their father or mother are to be praised.”

- What light do these texts from the Mishnah and the Jerusalem Talmud shed on the importance and meaning of the Haggadah's encouragement to elaborate on telling of the Exodus?

The Last Night in Egypt: Knocking in the Night

The midrash describes what happened on the night of the last plague, the slaying of the Egyptian first born. Egyptian mothers have taken their first born children to the homes of Israelites and beg the Israelites to take their children in so they will escape death. Divide your Seder guests into three groups. Ask one group to play the Egyptian mothers, pleading for the lives of their children. The other two groups are Israelites. One group argues for taking in the Egyptian children. The other group opposes this. In the end, what have your guests decided to do?

When you've finished, read the following tenth century midrash (Exodus Rabbah 18:2):

When Moses said: "I will smite all the firstborn" (Ex. 12:12), some of the Egyptians were afraid and some not; those who were afraid brought their firstborn to an Israelite and said: "Do please allow him to pass with you this night." When midnight struck, God smote all the firstborn; as for those who took asylum in the houses of the Israelites, God passed between the Israelites and the Egyptians, depriving the latter of life while leaving the Israelites alive.

Moses and the Haggadah: The Human Role in Redemption

In the Book of Exodus Moses' name appears 278 times. It is often said that Moses appears nowhere in the traditional Haggadah. In fact, Moses is mentioned twice, once by name and once implicitly.

- Why do you think Moses was given a relatively small role in the Haggadah?
- If you were writing a Haggadah today, how prominent a role would you give Moses?

Below are the Haggadah's two references to Moses. According to the Mishnah, the staff that God gave Moses to bring to Pharaoh was among the ten things created just before the beginning of the very first Shabbat and it seems to have had miraculous properties.

1. "The Lord took us out from Egypt by a mighty hand, by an outstretched arm and awesome power, and by signs and portents" (Deut. 26:8)... 'And by signs:' This is the staff, as it is said, '**...And take with you this staff in your hand, with which you shall perform the signs**'" (Ex. 4:17). (These are God's last words to Moses at the burning bush. "You" refers to Moses. The verse appears in the Haggadah before the enumeration of the plagues.)

2. "**Israel saw the great hand which the Lord laid upon the Egyptians, and the people revered the Lord and they believed in the Lord and in His servant Moses**" (Ex. 14:31). (The verse appears in the book of Exodus just after the Israelites cross the Red Sea and witness the drowning of Pharaoh's army. In the Haggadah it's found just after the spilling of wine from our cups in conjunction with reciting the names of the plagues. It occurs in Rabbi Yossi the Galilean's midrash on the number of plagues the Egyptians suffered at the Red Sea. The midrash comes from the 3rd century Mekhilta of Rabbi Ishmael.)

- What is the meaning of the fact that God tells Moses to bring the staff before Pharaoh?
- What similarity do you notice between Ex. 4:17 and Ex. 14:31?
- What do these verses say about the relationship between the divine and the human roles in redemption?

The Symbolism of Charoset: A Closer Look

Rabbi Akiva said: “The Israelites were delivered from Egypt as a reward for the righteous women who lived in that generation” (Babylonian Talmud, Sotah 11b).

“Under the apple tree I roused you; it was there your mother conceived you, there she bore you” (Song of Songs 8:5).

Charoset: “One must make it tart in commemoration of the apple tree; and one must make it thick in commemoration of the clay” (Babylonian Talmud, Pesachim 116a).

Welcoming Elijah to the Seder: The Haggadah as an Ever Evolving Text

Following the grace after meals, we drink the 3rd cup of wine, fill the fourth cup as well as the cup of Elijah, open the door and recite:

1. Pour out Your wrath upon the nations that do not know You, upon the governments which do not call upon Your name. For they have devoured Jacob and desolated his home. Pour out Your wrath on them; may Your blazing anger overtake them, destroy them from under the heavens of the Lord.

—Psalms 79:6-7, 69:25, and Lamentations 3:66

An Alternative: From *The Open Door: A Passover Haggadah*, Sue Levi Elwell, ed. (New York: Central Conference of American Rabbis, 2002).

2. Give up anger, abandon fury, put aside wrath; it can only harm. The call to violence shall no longer be heard in your land, nor the cry of desolation within your borders. If your enemy is hungry, give him bread to eat. If he is thirsty give him water to drink. For when compassion and truth meet, justice and peace kiss.

—Psalms 37:8, Isaiah 60:18, Proverbs 25:21, Psalms 85:11

- Which of these passages do you prefer as a reading for opening the door for Elijah? Why?
- Given our world today, are we better served by calling on God to support us as we strike down our enemies or as we give them bread to eat? Is there a time when both might be appropriate?

A Passover Puzzle: The Fruits of Israel versus Egypt

Since Passover is the festival par excellence of symbolic foods, here’s a perfect puzzle for the Seder.

The Bible associates certain fruits and vegetables with Egypt and others with Israel. During their wanderings in the desert “the Israelites wept and said... ‘We remember the fish that we used to eat free in Egypt, the cucumbers, the melons, the leeks, the onions, and the garlic’” (Numbers 11:4-5). When the spies returned from the Promised Land they brought grapes, pomegranates, and figs (Numbers 13:23).

How many reasons can you think of to explain why, cucumbers, melons, leeks, onions, and garlic are associated with Egypt while grapes, pomegranates, and figs are connected with Israel?

Hint: For one answer see Deuteronomy 11:10-14

A Tale of Two Images: The Great Seal of the United States of America



The story of the Exodus from Egypt has inspired hope among Jews for millennia. And for centuries, the saga has echoed thunderously through American history. When the Stamp Act was repealed in 1776, Pastor Charles Chauncey preached: “Nor were the Jews more pleased with the royal provision in their day, which, under God, delivered them from their bondage in Egypt, than were the colonists with the repeal of that act...” A century later freed slaves bound for Kansas from the South became known as “Exodusters.” When he accepted the Nobel Peace Prize in 1964, Martin Luther King Jr. proclaimed, “Oppressed people cannot remain oppressed forever. The yearning for freedom eventually manifests itself. The Bible tells the thrilling story of how Moses stood in Pharaoh’s court centuries ago and cried, ‘Let my people go.’”

But surely one of the most poignant connections between the Exodus story and American history lies in the tale of the two images above.

(Right) After declaring independence on July 4, 1776, the Continental Congress charged Thomas Jefferson, John Adams, and Benjamin Franklin with recommending a design for the new nation’s seal. For the reverse of the Great Seal they agreed on a scene from the Exodus—Moses’ arm outstretched over the Red Sea, the Israelites crossing through the parted waters protected by a divine pillar of fire, and Pharaoh’s drowning army. They also chose the motto which Jefferson believed was associated with one of the regicides during the English Civil Wars. Their recommendation was tabled.

(Left) As the Revolutionary War drew to a close, in 1782, a new committee endorsed a different image associated with Egypt, the pyramid. The image now appears on the one-dollar bill. According to the artist who designed the seal, the “pyramid signifies strength and duration.” Both Latin inscriptions paraphrase verses by the Roman poet Virgil: *Annuit Coeptis*, “He (God) has favored our undertakings;” *Novus Ordo Seclorum*, “A new order of the ages (is born).” The “all seeing eye” represents the eye of providence.

- What are the principal values that underlie these two images?
- Which do you prefer and why?
- What do you make of the fact that one image uses English, the other Latin?