

from the Pharaoh of that era, Haman. The combination of the two salvation stories is true to our experience, I believe, in a way that either one alone is not. The Lord continues to work in mysterious ways.

I read the Haggadah as saying, with help from the Megillah: Do the work you need to do. Thank God for giving you the bodily and spiritual resources you need to do that work. Thank God by joining in the effort to free other human beings—who, like you, bear God's image—from slavery.

And do not despair if the redemption you have worked for, and the help you have counted on, does not arrive.

This year, we are here. Next year, we will be in a holier place called Jerusalem.

May your seder be lively, and your holiday sweet.

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דבר אחר | A Different Perspective



Two New Tunes for the Seder

Cantor Nancy Abramson, Director, H.L. Miller Cantorial School and College of Jewish Music, JTS

I have fond memories of my grandfather at the head of the table, chanting the Haggadah straight through in Hebrew. My grandmother, mother, and aunts would be busy in the kitchen while all of us kids were fidgeting, waiting for our cue to sing *Mah Nishtanah*, the Four Questions. The night of the first seder was always magical for me, and still is, as I try to infuse the tradition with contemporary ideas and some new melodies.

The Torah teaches that the first seder took place on the eve of the exodus from Egypt. The Haggadah as we know it was compiled during the Mishnaic and Talmudic eras. In modern times, it is now customary to add contemporary readings to enhance the themes of the Haggadah. I would like to continue this process by adding new musical material. Please enjoy recently composed settings of *Dayenu* and *Vehi She'amdah* by visiting www.jtsa.edu/two-new-tunes.

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Shabbat Hagadol Pesah 5777

שבת הגדול
פסח תשע"ז



Retelling the Story

Professor Arnold M. Eisen, Chancellor, JTS

Here's a fifth question to ask at the seder this year, in addition to the usual four—a question likely to provoke discussion about the meaning of Passover that is especially timely in April 2017.

Why on all other nights (and days too) do we recall the Exodus from Egypt, but on this night, which is dedicated to the telling of that story, the Haggadah says little about what actually happened at the Exodus, and how it happened?

Think about it: you open the text at the start of the seder, expecting to find page after page that fulfills the biblical commandment to tell the story of the Exodus from Egypt; you read near the very start of the Haggadah that whoever enlarges upon that story in the course of the evening is to be praised—and then you find a presentation of the Israelites' move from slavery to freedom that is disjointed, short on detail, and occasionally hard to follow. Moses, who we might have thought would play a major role in the tale, is not mentioned even once. Pharaoh's name comes up only four times, by my count, three of these in quotations from the biblical account. The third major character in the drama—God—is absolutely everywhere in the Haggadah. That seems to be the point the authors and editors of the text over the centuries had in mind.

I propose we look at the story they gave us, consider the lessons they wanted us to learn, and then ask ourselves two more questions:

- How do we think the story should be told?
- What *lessons* does it bear for you and me, right here, right now?

The traditional text of the Haggadah wants us to know two things above all about the Exodus, presented as the two answers to the *Mah Nishtanah*.

One: We were slaves in Egypt—and God delivered us (with wonders and plagues).

Two: We were mired in idol-worship before Sinai—and God delivered us from that too.

The lesson: We should regard ourselves as if we personally went forth from Egypt, and praise God for delivering our ancestors and us. God keeps promises—then, now, and in the future.

That’s what the matzah and bitter herbs are meant to remind us of. That’s why we recite the ten plagues one by one, learn through midrash that there were actually 60 plagues, or 240, and sing *Dayenu*. And that’s why the rabbis built the entire Haggadah around the verses (Deut. 26:5-8) that ancient Israelites were meant to say when they brought first fruits to the Temple in the Land of Israel—an act that would witness to the fact that God had fulfilled God’s promises, and they had fulfilled theirs.

In the Mishnah’s original outline of the seder, the key to the entire story is the double move, political and spiritual, from “degradation” to “praise.” The traditional Haggadah enlarges on that bare outline, but not by much. It does not try to give us detail, let alone history. If the Rabbis had opted for history, our fidelity to the holiday would have been held hostage to the latest archeological discoveries about what “really” happened. If they had given us detail instead of scaffolding, they might have turned the seder into the rote recitation of a script instead of lively discussion of what the Exodus means to us.

And if the Haggadah had not included notes about how our ancestors observed the holiday—first in the Temple, then (after the Temple was destroyed) in Benai Berak—and made sure we follow in their footsteps by eating the same foods, placing the same symbols on the table, and saying the same key words—we would not have understood our responsibility to keep this tradition alive, and apply its lessons, in our generation.

As a bridge to asking how we would tell the story, and what lessons we would draw from it, consider the three-fold takeaway proposed by philosopher Michael Walzer in his wonderful book *Exodus and Revolution*:

[W]herever you live, it is probably Egypt;

[...] there is a better place, a world more attractive, a promised land;

[...] “the way to the land is through the wilderness.” There is no way to get from here to there except by joining together and marching.

Walzer phrases those lessons in a way that maximizes their universality. His book argues that the Passover story has had greater influence than any other on liberation struggles throughout history and throughout the world.

I would tell the Passover story in 2017, and formulate its lessons, this way:

One: We were strangers in the Land of Egypt—a powerless minority of immigrants, persecuted to the point of enslavement—and we were freed with God’s help. That put us in a position to help the strangers in our midst, and assist *their* move toward redemption.

Two: We were once devoted to false gods of our own devising—and we were delivered from that error with God’s help as well—brought to recognize that we are created in God’s image, and endowed with the ability and obligation to protect fellow-creatures and the Earth.

In short: This year, we are slaves. Next year, we will be free, and if not next year, then the one after that.

There are many ways to be enslaved, in body and in spirit. One sign that we are free, the very best proof available, is that we help others to break free from whatever is enslaving them. But the point of the Haggadah is not just to make us reflect on what it is to be enslaved or free, but to get us to focus on what the word we means. “This year we are slaves” means one thing if “we” includes only those gathered around the table, or the larger group of family and friends who could not be with us for the seder, or the local Jewish community, or even the Jewish people as a whole. Suppose our “we” also includes the neighbors we don’t really know, the people down the street or a few miles away, fellow-residents of the continent we inhabit, or fellow inhabitants (and stewards) of the planet. Once you and I have “them” in our sights and hear their call for help, it’s hard not to conclude that we, too, *are* slaves this year, and must work harder, together, to be free.

You and I are indispensable to this effort. And so, in ways much harder to understand, is God. Our effort is absolutely necessary but, sadly, it will not be sufficient. The Passover story goes out of its way to stress that God took Israel out of Egypt “with a strong hand and an outstretched arm”—demonstrably, directly, without intermediate agents or messengers. (Hence, perhaps, the absence of Moses from the telling.) But only a month before Passover, Jews celebrate Purim, and the character notably absent from the text read that day is God, Who appears nowhere in the Book of Esther and (unless God was active behind the scenes) plays no role in Israel’s salvation