דבר אחר | A Different Perspective

"*Echad Mi Yodea*" ("Who Knows One?")

Dr. Sarah Diamant, Administrative Librarian for Special Collections, JTS

11 + 12 + 13 = 36

In blessing
are you blessed,
and in multiplying
are you multiplied,
eleven stars
become twelve tribes,
your dream of progeny
radiating
at the turning point,
where the thirteen ways
of God
are One.

And you,
upholder of the world,
are hidden
in the sum
of their completion,
concealed
in your answer
to the first question.

"*Echad Mi Yodea*" is a traditional cumulative-number song found in the Haggadah. Each verse circles back to the Oneness of God.

The poem above is a play on verses 11, 12, and 13 of the song:

> Eleven are the stars of Joseph's dream.
> Twelve are the tribes of Israel.
> Thirteen are the attributes of God.

I wrote this poem for my teacher and friend Avraham Holtz, Simon H. Fabian Professor Emeritus of Hebrew Literature at JTS. More especially, it was written in honor of the birth of his 12th grandchild around Passover time. He mentioned this event to me by quoting "*Echad Mi Yodea"*: just as 11 increases to 12, so had his clan increased from 11 to 12 grandchildren.

I realized that in bringing the poem to closure with 13 and adding the three numbers together, I arrived at 36, a number which also has symbolic significance in Jewish tradition: according to mystical lore, the *Lamed Vav Tzadikim* are 36 hidden righteous people who are upholders of the world. This brought the poem full circle for me, as I regard Avraham Holtz to be among this company.

TORAH FROM JTS

JTS Community Learning

Passover 5775 **פסח תשע"ה**

The Telling

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This Friday evening we will gather with family and friends. We will sit down to beautifully set tables, and each of us will open one of the most popular and well-known of Hebrew books—the Haggadah. The name of the book comes from the Hebrew verb *lehagid* ("to tell"), and if we were to translate "*haggadah*" into English, it would be "the telling." Not surprisingly, the core of the Haggadah is the section called *maggid*, a word that also derives from the Hebrew root meaning "to tell." Clearly these two forms of the verb *lehagid* communicate the centrality of the activity of "telling" on this night. But here things become less clear.

We might ask, about using the traditional text of the Haggadah on seder night:

- What is it that we are telling?
- What is it that we will try to tell our family and friends who will gather around our tables?
- What is it we will seek to express?

Now, don't answer immediately. The go-to response is often "We come together to retell the Exodus from Egypt. We were once slaves, and God broke us free from the bondage of slavery and took our ancestors out of the land of Egypt."

True. But if the Exodus from Egypt really is the focus of "the telling," then it is strange that large sections from the book of Exodus are not used in the Haggadah. If we want to retell the Exodus, what better source could we find than passages from the book of Exodus?! But the ancient Rabbis of the Mishnah who fashioned the seder ritual did not choose a biblical text from the book of Exodus; instead, as their centerpiece for the evening they selected a passage from the book of Deuteronomy!

The Rabbis of antiquity chose Deuteronomy 26:5–8 as the textual cornerstone for the Haggadah: "My father was a wandering Aramean. . ." I suggest that the ultimate meaning of the seder night and "the telling" are unlocked only when we understand this choice. The very message of the seder depends on the moment when we read this.

Ironically it was at this moment in the seders of my youth that everyone's eyes began to glaze over. By that point, the high notes of the seder have passed. Gone are the Four Questions and the Four Children. What remains is the seemingly impenetrable rabbinic riffing on a biblical passage that itself feels inaccessible. I can still see my grandfather pointing to his watch, gently indicating to me that the time to wrap up this part of the seder was upon us. His look said, "Speed things up. Let's get to Grandma's gefilte fish." For my family, and I imagine for many others, it is with the rabbinic unpacking of "My father was a wandering Aramean . . ." that the entire seder loses steam and people begin to frantically skip pages.

But it is here—at this very point—when Maimonides encourages us to add our own words and thoughts (Mishnah Torah, Laws of Leaven and Matzah 7:1). Ironically, it is with the passage "My father was a wandering Aramean . . ." that we are asked to add our own voices to the reading of this biblical text. Why here? And again, why was this passage chosen as the foundation for the Haggadah?

Deuteronomy describes the beginning of a new phase of Israel's spiritual life. At long last the Israelites will be able to lay down foundations and build cities. They will be able to till the soil and take responsibility for their own sustenance. God instructs that every year, from the first generation to have entered the Land with Joshua and to all subsequent generations, each farmer must take from the season's first produce and bring it to the Temple in Jerusalem as an offering of gratitude. Part of the drama of this moment has the farmer give the basket of his bounty to the priest, who sets it down in front of the altar.

Then the farmer recites a set text (Deut. 26:5–10) that begins with the declaration "My father was a wandering Aramean." It is this passage that the Rabbis chose as the cornerstone of our seder. I quote it in full here, without rabbinic interruptions. Pay attention to the use of pronouns in this passage:

> My father was a wandering Aramean. *He* went down to Egypt with meager numbers and sojourned there; but there *he* became a great and very populous nation. The Egyptians dealt harshly with *us* and oppressed *us*; they imposed heavy labor upon *us*. *We* cried to the Lord, the God of our fathers, and the Lord heard *our* plea and saw our plight, our misery, and our oppression. The Lord freed us from Egypt by a mighty hand, by an outstretched arm and awesome power, and by signs and portents. He brought us to this place and gave us this Land, a land flowing with milk and honey. Wherefore *I* now bring the first fruits of the soil which You, O Lord, have given *me*.

The farmer bringing his first fruits conjures up his people's distant past. The Hebrew meaning of the first line is uncertain, but it may very well refer to Jacob and his wanderings. *He* became powerful. But the Egyptians acted harshly against *us*. Here the farmer merges his identity with that of his ancestors. They are one. *We* cried; it was *our* misery, not only theirs; God freed *us* and brought *us* to the Land of Israel. However, the key to unlocking the meaning of "the telling" is the last sentence of the declaration: "Wherefore *I* now bring the first fruits of the soil which You, O Lord, have given *me*."

This passage that the farmer declares is not a history lesson. It's not really about Egypt or the Israelites. It's a text that is about the possibility of recognizing the experience of God's presence in one's life. It is a text that models a certain paradigm of seeing the world, a world view that sees and feels the divine presence. By reciting this text, the farmer adopts this paradigm. He recounts the ways his ancestors recognized and appreciated God's presence in their lives. Now the farmer is invited to declare how he recognizes God's bounty in a deeply personal way. With his bounty placed before him, he is asked to speak about the blessings God has given him.

Indeed, this is what we are asked "to tell" on the night of the seder. We invoke a specific story of our ancestors who experienced God's intimacy and blessings. But this narrative is an invitation to speak about how God and God's blessings are present in our lives. Exodus is a paradigm. The real task of "the telling" is to speak in an "I" voice. That's why Maimonides says this is the moment for personal elaboration. In front of our children and friends, we are asked to identify and express gratitude for God's bounty in our lives. So put the Haggadahs aside for a moment during the seder, come out from behind the wall of all the words in them, and speak in an "I" voice. "Wherefore *I* now bring the first fruits of the soil which You, O Lord, have given *me*."

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