

What's in your Haggadah

Anshe Emeth Memorial Temple

April 4th 2014 / 4th of Nissan 5774

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About two weeks ago I wandered into a book store and was utterly shocked and amazed at how many different kinds of haggadot they were selling. There must have been 20 different kinds of children's haggadot, a dozen liberal haggadot, and several traditional haggadot. But who needs to go to bookstore to get a haggadah, you can just go to the supermarket. There you'll find both the *Maxwell House Haggadah* and the *Maxwell House Haggadah The Deluxe Edition*. Now, I spent a couple of minutes comparing the two of them and for the life of me I just couldn't figure out what was different between the regular and the deluxe edition. I thought maybe the deluxe edition would have more plagues or perhaps instead of the four questions, there might be 6 or 7. Perhaps the deluxe edition just comes with a bag of coffee.

If you type "Haggadah" into the Barnes and Noble search engine, you'll get roughly 430 results to weed through. Do we really need 430 different kinds of haggadah? Are they really that different? They all tell the same story: Jews go to Egypt; Jews become slaves; "Let my people go"; the 10 plagues; and then the Sea of Reeds splits. Throw in 4 children and 4 questions and you have yourself a Haggadah. So, why are there so many haggadot out there?

Now an economist might say that there are so many in the market because we are willing to buy them. Yes, there is a demand and if there wasn't a market for them, there probably wouldn't be so many. However, there is some inherent feature of the Passover narrative that allows for there to be so many variants of the same haggadah and that is its theme.

I actually thought about leading my seder without a haggadah. This wasn't to see whether or not I could recall it by heart, which I assure you I can't, but to focus our seder on the universal message of the holiday. Yes, there are specific aspects that tradition says should be mentioned, but it all revolves around getting us to the one theme that's the answer to the following questions. Why do we eat matzah, and bitter herbs? Why do we dip spring greens into salt water and recline at the table? In other words, why are we having a seder? Why are we even

celebrating Passover at all? The answer to all of these questions is the same. “Because we were slaves in the land of Egypt, and now we are free.”

The Passover narrative recalls our people’s history from entrance into Egypt until God took us out hundreds years later. But our story goes beyond the mere recollection of these details. The Passover story is a timeless message about what it means to be enslaved and then freed. This is a message that speaks to us in every generation and in every age.

Our haggadah tells us that we should recall the exodus from Egypt as if we personally participated in walking through the parted seas. But as American Jews living in contemporary times most of us have never felt the bonds of actual, physical slavery whether in Egypt or elsewhere. Yet we strongly identify with the Passover message. We can tell the story of the exodus as if we were there because we are constantly struggling for freedom from that which enslaves us today.

Here at the synagogue next Wednesday night there will be a woman’s seder. Women’s seders have been around since the late 1960’s early 1970’s. They serve as one way to explore women’s connection to Jewish tradition. For example, it creates an opportunity to recognize the lives of our matriarchs, who sacrificed just as much as our patriarchs, if not more. Women’s seders and a slew of other liberal seders use the Passover narrative as a metaphor for the constant struggle for equal rights. The Ma’yan Women’s Haggadah opens with asking, “Why is this night different from all other nights?” And answers with, “On this night, we gather together ... in a way our foremothers could have never imagined. On this night we join as a community to rid ourselves of a different kind of *chameitz*. What do we cleanse ourselves of tonight? ...The silencing of women’s stories...and the lingering belief that this tradition doesn’t belong to women.” These haggadot note that women’s rights have come a long way since the 1960’s, but there is still a long road to be traveled until everyone in this country is considered an equal.

Last week Rabbi Miller and I were at the Central Conference of American Rabbis convention in Chicago. There, one of the major Jewish book publishers had out a slew of books and one of the books that caught my eye was plainly labeled *A Passover Haggadah*. The only distinguishing feature of this haggadah was the subtitle “as commented on by Elie Wiesel.” It’s a post-Holocaust haggadah, in which our traditional text is brought into modernity with additions

interspersed about life in the ghettos and the concentration camps, Kristallnacht and Babi Yar. When we tell of the four children we introduce a fifth child. This child represents the children lost in the Holocaust, the ones who did not survive to be able to ask any questions. For this child we ask the question, “why,” which we can’t answer. This haggadah and others like it encourage activism in the world today to try and stop the genocidal acts occurring in places like Darfur.

In the newest edition of the Family Haggadah there is an inclusion of a piece written by Rabbi Arthur Waskow that supplements the Ten Plagues. This supplemental reading looks beyond race and gender but at what happens to humanity and the world when people are enslaved by their own greed. Rabbi Waskow writes, “When a society acts idolatrous, when corporations act like Pharaoh by ignoring the common good in order to maximize their own power, nature itself rebels: The rivers turn to blood, frog and vermin infest the earth, animals get sick, thick clouds blot out the sun and moon, ultimately human beings die. Indeed, the whole plague cycle in Exodus could be understood as a growing series of eco-disasters.”

Unfortunately, as many ways as there are to talk about freedom, there are just as many to talk about enslavement, persecution, and greed. Despite the fact that that we live in a society that was founded on the ideals of liberty and justice; crimes based on greed and hate still plague us today, look no further than the front page of any newspaper. We wait and struggle for our exodus from these enslavements. Why are there so many different interpretations of the haggadah? Because there so many different types of enslavement that still exist in the world.

All of these haggadot, both new and old, hold in common one shared theme: that we were slaves in the land of Egypt and then released. However, we balance this with the acknowledgement that we are struggling with new forms of enslavement every day. I want to encourage you all to think past the standard haggadah that you have been using for the last decade or two and explore the many options that are out there and even consider what you can do at your seder to really explore and wrestle with these two questions. What enslaves you today, and how would you translate that into your own interpretation of the haggadah? May this Pesach be a season where in the words of prophets, justice well up like water, righteousness like an unending stream and may all the oppressed everywhere go free.

Amen

