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In Praise of the Hagadah

A Davar Torah by Dr Menashe Tahan

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The Passover in History

The Passover Seder is one of the oldest and the most fascinating national-religious ceremonies ever known. There is none like it in other lands or among other nations. It was first celebrated by Moses in the Sinai desert in the second year after The Exodus (Num 9(5)) approximately 3165 years ago and it has been celebrated ever since. The destruction of the second temple could not quash the love for Passover; neither could 2000 years of exile. We still eagerly look forward to celebrating Passover every year of our lives.

At the seder night, we prepare our homes like temples and we eagerly wait to recite the Hagadah. Some interesting questions we can ask are: was the Passover always celebrated in the same way, following the same ritual? Was there always a Hagadah to follow? Who wrote the Hagadah? The short answers to these questions are: the Passover ritual has changed through history; we did not always have the Hagadah.

The answer to the question 'Who wrote the Hagadah?' is that initially, when the temple stood in Jerusalem, the celebrations centred around the temple sacrifice. A family or a group of no fewer than ten men would sacrifice a lamb. The head of the family or group would slaughter the lamb while the Levites continuously sang the Hallel

(Psalms 113-118). The Pascal lamb was immediately roasted and consumed with unleavened cakes and bitter herbs while the story of Exodus was recited. After the destruction of the second temple in 70 C.E. the ceremony was performed at home by every family. The altar was replaced by the dining table and the Pascal lamb by the Passover meal. A kind of traditional ritual continued to take place in every home. That early ritual was, fortunately, discussed and recorded in the Mishnah, which was compiled and completed around 200 C.E. At that time, it was not ordered as in the Hagadah but was flexible and continued to be so until the middle of the 9th century when the Jews of Spain, almost decimated by the Visigoth kings, wanted to know how to pray. They asked for the help of the Babylonian Gaonim, who served as the spiritual leaders of the Jewish people for hundreds of years. The Gaon of Sura, Rav Amram Ben Sheshnah (858-871 C.E.) answered their request by editing all the Jewish prayers and ceremonies in one Siddur called the "Siddur Rav Amram." That Siddur became one of the greatest influences on Jewish religious practice and ceremony for the next thousand years. Amongst other prayers, Rav Amram edited the Hagadah and formalised it in a certain order. This way, he established the "Seder", which means the "order", as we know it today. Yet the Hagadah remained a part of the Siddur until the thirteenth century when it was produced, decorated and adorned as a separate book. It has hardly been changed since.

The Principles of the Hagadah

1. Children at the centre - When editing the Hagadah, Rav Amram drew directly from the Mishnah and thus based the ritual on a single Biblical injunction which says: "And you shall **tell your son** in that day, saying, it is because of that that the Lord did for me, when I came forth out of Egypt" (Exod 13(8)). In doing so, Rav Amram centred the whole Passover ceremony around the children. He put them first and also increased their role in the ceremony,

thus benefiting Judaism for generations to come. At the same time, he provided a name for the Prayer book: "Hagadah" meaning "telling" i.e. telling our children the story of the Exodus.

2. Shame then praise - The second principle adopted by Rav Amram was that the recital of the history should be told in such a way that it begins with our shame and ends with the praise of God. This was achieved in two ways: a) from the shame of our slavery in Egypt to the praise of the Lord our God who redeemed us with a mighty hand and b) from the shame of our ancestors who worshipped idols to the praise of the Lord our God who brought us out to his service.

3. History with religion - The Hagadah does not tell our children a mere history but a history entwined with ethics, with a profound lesson enshrined in it. The two ways of telling the history mentioned above each teach our children a lesson. The first teaches our children that the Lord our God is a redeemer, a liberator and a source of hope for the oppressed. The second teaches our children that the most precious thing that happened to our nation was that we came to know God and worship Him. The history of the Exodus was thus used to teach us belief and religion. This principle of never forgetting the lessons of history but endeavouring to extract morals, ethics and religion from them is applied in almost every section of the Hagadah





starting with the story of Abraham. In this case, the Hagadah puts the emphasis on the story of "The Pact Between the Portions" that Abraham had with God. In this pact, God told Abraham the whole story of the Exodus before it actually happened. This story was chosen brilliantly to teach our children one of the main principles of our faith; the principle that **God has an absolute hegemony over history**: that God plans everything in advance for a purpose. He Himself planned the bondage and the Exodus in order to let the people of Israel lead the greatest spiritual revolution in history.

Another example is the story of the Ten Plagues. Most of the plagues were natural disasters and are detailed in the Hagadah to emphasise another major principle of our religion: that **God has an undivided sovereignty over nature** and can control nature in any way for His own purposes. In this case the purpose was to redeem the people of Israel from the bondage of Egypt. Once more the history of the Exodus was used to manifest our faith and to serve as a source of ethical teaching.

4. History of Ethics - Moses, the hero of the Exodus, was hardly mentioned in the Hagadah, preventing a personality cult forming around him. On the other hand, Rav Amram ensured that the ethics, the comments and the customs of our sages, passed on from the time of the Maccabees or before, until his own time, would be featured in the book. Accordingly, the Hagadah mentions an array of Jewish scholars like Hillel the elderly (early first century), his grandson Rabban Gamliel (late first century), the five rabbis of Bene-Brak (the second century), Rabbi Judah (Bar-Ammi) of the fourth century and Rabbi Natronai, the Gaon of Sura (who wrote the passage "Ve-hi She-amda") and who officiated in Sura just before Rav Amram himself. He also ensured that,



apart from the bible, the relevant passages and commentaries from the Midrash, Mishnah, Gemara and Talmud would fill the Hagadah, enlightening us with over 1000 years of history of Jewish ethics, wisdom and scholarship.

5. History and Mystery - Not everything was fully explained in the Hagadah. For example we do not know why Rabbi Eliezer, Rabbi Jehoshua, Rabbi Elazar the son of Azaria, Rabbi Akiba and Rabbi Tarfon, the most eminent Rabbis of the second century, spent all of the Passover night together discussing the Exodus without their disciples participating; a fact which contradicts the spirit of Passover and their own teachings. The reason remained a mystery. Similarly, there is a passage about Laban the Syrian who was considered to be worse than Pharaoh, "for Pharaoh issued his edict only against the males but Laban sought to uproot all." Is it possible that our grandfather, the father of Rachel and Leah, wanted to kill his daughters and grandchildren? Why does the Hagadah give him such a "bad press"? This, too, remained a mystery. And why of all nights is it on Passover night, when we are supposed to recount Pharaoh's atrocities, that we should mention that our Syrian relative was, in fact, worse? Are we not exonerating Pharaoh? There must be a reason for that but again it remained a mystery.

There are more puzzling questions that the Hagadah left unanswered. Perhaps this was done deliberately to compel us to research and learn more about our heritage, history and ethics. We need

to find the answers for ourselves and for the sake of our children. They may want to know or they may ask questions. The Hagadah, therefore, was not edited to interest the children alone, but also the adults. It seems intended to engage adults, intellectually at first, so that they may tell their children about the Exodus in a most profound way.

Conclusion

The Hagadah shows us history within our religion and ethics within our history. It turns our history into a testimony of faith. It sums the Jewish cultural heritage of many ages and turns them into a source of joy and spiritual fortitude. It is a matter of fact that before the Exodus, many different nations inhabited the Holy Land, including the Kena'ani, the Hitti, the Hivvi, the Perizzi, the Girgashi, the Emori and the Yevuse (Joshua 3.10). It is also a matter of fact that none of these people succeeded in establishing a distinct and lasting culture. But there came a nation of slaves who had learned the lessons of their history and managed to establish not just a culture, but an entire civilisation. And what a civilisation that was! A religious, moral, universal and eternal civilisation, one to suit all nations, everywhere, at all times. Luckily for us there is a little book called the Hagadah that we pick up every year which brings directly to our homes, to our families and to our children, the essence of that wonderful civilisation, and we love it.

Pictures opposite are Slaves and The Wicked Son from 14th C. medieval Spanish Hagadah. The picture above is by M. Kunstadt, from the Schlesinger Hagadah, Vienna 1928. The artist depicted faces of distinguished scholars from 19th C including Rabbi Akivah Eger (1761-1837), first on the left, an ancestor of Kurt Eger who kindly provided the picture.