



## Passover: The Festival of Active Learning

The Rambam relates that "it is a positive command of the Torah to recount on the eve of the fifteenth of Nisan the miracles and wonders that were wrought for our ancestors in Egypt" (Mishne Torah, Zemanim, Chametz uMatza 7:1).

While this mitzva is concisely mentioned in the Torah on four occasions (Exodus 12:26 – 27, 13:5, 13:14 – 15, Deuteronomy 6:20 – 25), it was only later during the Mishnaic, Talmudic and medieval periods that the exact procedures of the Seder night including the story of the Exodus were crystallized into a liturgical text: the Haggadah.

It is instructive to note that the grammatical root of the noun Haggadah (literally "the telling") and the infinitive להגיד (literally "to tell") is actually נ.ג.ד. This root is more commonly employed in its prepositional form signifying "opposite" and sometimes "in opposition" and is always used in a relational sense. For instance, when we sit at a table opposite a friend, we are positioned נגדו (masculine singular) or נגדה (feminine singular).

**We may therefore more accurately translate the term *Haggadah* not as "the telling" but rather as "the discussion that occurs between people who are in lively conversation with each other."** While a **סיפור** is a story that is told to a listener who listens, a **הגדה** is a conversation that takes place between two or more active partners.

The particular pedagogic strategy that the Haggadah employs to foster this conversation involves asking probing but open-ended questions that are suitable for all ages ("Why is this night different?", "What is this?", "What did Lavan seek to do to our ancestor Ya'acov?", "Why do we eat the maror?"), offering general responses, which are intended as starting points for further conversation, and encouraging us to experience the evening through multiple modalities.

To refer to the evening's telling as the הגדה rather than, for instance, the סיפור, is to suggest that our retelling of the Exodus story is not intended to be a detached, historical account communicated frontally to an audience of passive listeners but rather a dynamic, vigorous exchange of ideas that engages all of the participants in active dialogue.

### From the Haggadah

ואפילו כלנו חכמים, כלנו נבונים, כלנו זקנים, כלנו יודעים את התורה, מצווה עלינו לספר ביציאת מצרים. וכל המרבה לספר ביציאת מצרים הרי זה משובח.

Even if all of us are knowledgeable, all of us are wise, all of us are educated, all of us are well versed in the Torah, we are obligated to tell the story of the Exodus from Egypt. Whosoever expounds upon the story of the Exodus from Egypt at length is deemed praiseworthy.

# The Educators' Seder

Continued

Rabbi Michael Hattin

## From the Text

### 1 Talmud Bavli Pesachim 115b

Why is the matza referred to as "לחם עוני" (Deuteronomy 16:3, literally "bread of affliction")? Answered Shemuel (by employing a play on words): because it is a kind of bread that encourages conversation (לחם שעונין עליו דברים הרבה – literally "bread concerning which we recite many things").

### 2 Rambam, Mishne Torah, Zemanim, Chametz uMatza 7:3

It is a mitzva to tell the children (the story of the Exodus) even if they do not ask...The parent must teach the child in accordance with his capacity. How so? If the child were young or unschooled, he should say to him: "my child, all of us were slaves in Egypt just like this maid or servant and on this night God redeemed us from bondage and we went free." If the child were older and intelligent, he informs him what happened to us in Egypt and the miracles performed by Moshe our master. Everything is in accordance with the capacity of the child.

## Discuss

On the eve of liberation from Egypt, you have an opportunity to take a (Halakhically-permitted) "selfie".

- Who is in the picture with you?
- Who or what is in the background?
- What are your thoughts and dreams as you snap the photo?
- What indelible memories did you freeze in the single frame?

## Table Topics

- How does the particular mitzva of retelling the story of the Exodus on Seder night differ from the twice-daily mitzva of remembering the Exodus that is enshrined in the third paragraph of the Shema?
- Why are even accomplished scholars obligated to tell the story of the exodus if they already know it perfectly?
- The "four sons/children" of the Haggadah highlight the importance of differentiated learning. But why does our response to the wicked son seem to reject rather than embrace?
- Is there an underlying literary structure to the Haggadah and/or a detectable progression?

### 3 Rabbi Aharon HaLevi, Sefer HaChinuch, Mitzva #21

The matter of the mitzvah is to recall the miracles that were wrought for our ancestors at the time of the Exodus from Egypt and how God executed vengeance on our behalf. Even one who is alone for the Seder must audibly tell the story of the Exodus to himself so that his heart will be inspired by the matter, because inspiration is a function of verbalization.