

THE SERIES ON
JEWISH PRACTICES

Freeing The Seder From the Maxwell House Haggadah

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EBOOK



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This is an adaptation, with permission from the author, of the article "Toward Freeing the Seder" published in April 2008 by The Reb Zalman Legacy Project.

www.AskRebZalman.com

Version 1
March 2009

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Introduction

“Like the Siddur, the Haggadah is a kind of a cookbook filled with recipes. You can’t eat a cookbook, even ones with the tastiest recipes. You must do the cooking to turn recipes into dishes.”

I am here to free you from the Maxwell House *Haggadah*, to free you in your Pesach celebration!

One thing that’s wrong with widely-used *Haggadot* is archaic English like “vouchsafe,” or “bestow.” This kind of language makes it hard for us to understand even the of-this-plane plagues of the Egyptians, e.g. what is “murrain?” And the instructions are wooden.

Why? Because at the time when these *Haggadot* were edited, people wanted specific directions, a definite, “Amy Vanderbilt” description of precisely how one was to do it. They weren’t interested in being free to play, to elaborate.

But you are not just free to use better *Haggadot*, (the ones with good translations and more openness), you are also free to use the material as a jumping-off point for playing, for elaboration.

Like the *Siddur*, the *Haggadah* is a kind of a cookbook filled with recipes. You can’t eat a cookbook, even ones with the tastiest, the most nourishing recipes. You must do the cooking to turn recipes into dishes.

And it’s similar with the *Haggadah*: You make the words three-dimensional, four-dimensional. Every *Seder* you have is a different way to bring the words off the page with different “spices,” different life-conditions. Here are some notes toward freeing your Seders:



1

Stop and think for a moment of ways to wash hands around the table at the beginning of the *Seder* and when you have an idea you like, write it down.

Rechatz:**Hand Washing**

Please stop reading and take a moment to do this exercise.

“Instead of making a perfunctory gesture, it becomes an act of demonstrating love and caring.”

Okay. Did you write something? Here’s my scenario: Each person washes the hands of the next.

Instead of making a perfunctory gesture, it becomes an act of demonstrating love and caring. This was my idea, but the words you have written down, your ways that come out of your own feelings are also fine.



2**Die Vier Kashes:****The Four Questions**

“And what about life? Why is life different from what I expected?”

Here’s another exercise. Use your pencil and paper to jot down your four questions. What are they?

Or your four questions about Judaism.

In other words:

If I want to get some answers to my questions this night, what are my real questions, the ones I want answered?

Mah nishtanah halyla hazeh? Why is the night different?

And what about life? Why is life different from what I expected?

Jot down four “Differents,” four “It isn’t as I had thought it would be”-s.

A possible starting point:

“Four Questions for America today:”

Should hand-guns be permitted?

Is electricity produced by nuclear technology kosher for usage?

etc.,

.



3**Avadim Hayinu:****We Were Slaves**

It seems to me that one can't just do a *Seder*, talk about slavery and Pharaoh without addressing our recent past of Auschwitz. On this night, we need to talk about how bad slavery really is.

When is work slavery and how is slavery different from other kinds of hard work, like, e.g., righteous work?

“In what ways did I, myself, contribute to my having been enslaved? It takes two to tango.”

Some hard labor we do makes us feel we are not free-loaders on the universe.

So what is slavery? What kinds of work break the body and what kinds of work give us zest? When do you feel, “This is not the work I want to do. This is not the work I am meant to work. These conditions aren't working. They are not my working conditions, my conditions for work.”

There's a question we hate to ask ourselves, and yet, must on this night:

“In what ways did I, myself, contribute to my having been enslaved?”

It takes two to tango. Pharaoh's not the only side to this relationship; an oppressor can't be an oppressor without having someone to be on the other side, to be oppressed..



4

The world tries to keep it as a choice between options:

Oppress or be oppressed.

But leaving *Mitzrayim* / Egypt is leaving the “Either/or.” In *Mitzrayim* / Egypt are the letters of the word *Meytzar* / the narrow place and *-im* / more than one, or duality. (For example, *-im* as in, *eynaim*, two eyes; *oznaim*, two ears.)

So *Mitzrayim* also means double narrows or Either/Or narrows.

Min ha Meytzar karati yah / Out of this Either/Or, did I call out to God.

“Mitzrayim also means double narrows or Either/Or narrows.”

Then we can understand leaving Egypt as learning a third option. Not just oppressor or victim, but myself, (which is neither oppressor nor victim, not either/or).

How can I be this self?

That is a question for me at the Seder.



5

Freedom and *Mishpocha*

But you are not just alone by yourself on this night. With whom are you at the *Seder*? With your *mishpocha* / family.

It's translated as family, but the word is somehow denser than the English, "family," almost like oatmeal that's been standing around for a day. You can't swim around so easily.

*“Making changes
in yourself ...
while being
together with those
people with whom
it is hard to make
the changes ...
these are your
challenges.”*

In your *mishpocha*, it's hard to make changes.

Making changes in yourself, reestablishing your covenant for a new year, eliminating from your life the sources of your enslavement, all of this while being together with those people with whom it is hard to make the changes that come up, these are your challenges.



6

Two Seders

There are two *Seders*, so for one of them, you could do it the way the family did it, the way *bubbe* and *zeyde* did it, with the old tricks you want the kids to learn, the same, old melodies. That was the form you received, and that is the form you have to transmit.

But it is also very important to make a *Seder* that is new happen:

One that is your own, one that is a leaving of your own *Mitzrayim*.

“Avoid letting it run down; create a buoyancy throughout.”

How much to sing; how much to talk at any one point in the *Seder*?

My suggestion:

Keep a sense of leanness throughout.

Think of it like this: If you over-ate on *karpas*, you would have no room for the goodies coming later. So build up to an experience and when you are in it just enough to see it working, use it to give you a springboard to the next one.

Stop and avoid letting it run down; create a buoyancy throughout.



7**Esser Makot:****10 Plagues**

“It takes a certain kind of belief to recognize that the signs of the times are a true feed-back from the Universe.”

What plagues do we escape by ignoring, by turning off? Are there any plagues we are experiencing here in America, (plagues, not just incidents or accidents)?

I am sure that in Egypt, too, there must have been people who were denying these ten were plagues, trying valiantly to maintain, e.g., “What should we do to restore the economy after this terrible mess of frogs,” people who did not see it as a plague, a smiting by the Ruler of all Space-Time.

It takes a certain kind of belief to recognize that the signs of the times are a true feed-back from the Universe.

Here’s an analogy:

I have a headache. Why did I get one? Because my body wanted to send me a message.

Then I turned off the message. I took the extra-strength pain reliever; I, in effect, cut off the communication. “Head: I don’t want you to tell me that you hurt.” What follows is I forget about the root cause because I have numbed the pain.

Although it is pain and it’s unpleasant, it’s better to listen.

Must it get to a point where the body has to scream through something more serious before the message gets through?



So what plagues are out there that we have turned off?

“What plagues are out there that we have turned off?”

As we discuss these plagues, we can pour out some more wine from our cups, drops for each of our own plagues.

May the drops be few, and may there be some wine left in our cups when we are done with this work.

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8

The Fast in the Feast

“So in the same vein regarding, the feast, we should take just a minute to absorb what it would mean to only have a piece of parsley or a potato for dinner.”

Let us turn to the foods upon the table. We have *karpas*, a green vegetable, e.g., parsley, that we dip in salt water, (in my family, a little vinegar too), for the tears and the sweat.

The kids are hungry, so they ask, “Is that all we have for supper,” and you answer, “Try to imagine what it would be like if this were all we did have for supper.”

My point is that you must have some element of the fast in the feast. The dark side can’t be ignored. We can’t afford to do this. The fast beneath the feast must run throughout the Seder.

We pour off the wine when we come to the plagues in order to say:

“Yes, yes, I’m happy over what God did for me.”

“But, I do not want to drink in my cup of joy the sufferings of the Egyptians.”

So in the same vein regarding, the feast, we should take just a minute to absorb what it would mean to only have a piece of parsley or a potato for dinner. Maybe that will stimulate a discussion of Anne Frank or her family, or our own fears, e.g., a lost job, or old people who are denied food stamps, etc.



9

Rabbi Gamaliel says you've got to talk about three things on

Pesach: the lamb, the *Matzah*, and the bitter herb.

Sheloshah

Devorim / The

Three Things

Why?

*“The lamb, the
Matzah, and the
bitter herb.”*



10

The pass-over lamb: the one sacrificed so God would pass over, skip over our houses.

Pesach / Passover

Lamb

The hardest question we have is:

“The Paschal lamb was about really believing that in addition to the big things, God also cares about this house.”

Why us?

Why me?

Most of us who have gotten to the point where we believe in God, believe in a cosmic being, a huge God who cares about the ecology in general, but not, “my little toe.” The Paschal lamb was about really believing that in addition to the big things, God also cares about this house.

This lamb is the first one of three and we will not have done our Pesach homework unless we talked about all three. Next, *Matzah*.



11

Baking Your Own Matzah

Matzah. No salt, no yeast, no sugar; water and plain grain meal.

What's so nice? Nothing.

Except, the more you chew the sweeter it gets.

First bite: nothing. Hemstitched cardboard. But if you stay with it, chew and chew...

We bake it ourselves. When people were most worried about the purity of *kashrut*, they would say,

“Don't bake your own, for it mightn't, then, be quite, absolutely *kosher*.”

***“So I urge you:
Bake your own,
and use it for the
celebration itself.
It works.”***

But, at least once a year, shouldn't we recall how food gets from the plant to our belly? Otherwise, we begin to just think food comes from the supermarket.

So we get the grain, look it over ourselves to make sure none has sprouted, hand grind it, *kasher* our ovens, smell the marvelous smell, bump into each other while some of us are rolling the dough and some are making the holes and one puts on a record, “Hallelujah, hallelujah,” (the right sound with which to do it): All of this.

So I urge you: Bake your own, and use it for the celebration itself. It works.



12

Matzah: The First Taste

For the first bite, keep in mind what the *Zohar* says: “The first night [the *matzah*] is the bread of faith.” And the Talmud says, a baby doesn’t know to say, “*abba*” / “daddy” until it has tasted the first taste of grain. So it is with the soul: It doesn’t know how to say “God” until it has tasted the first taste of *matzah*.

So when you eat that first bite of *matzah*, focus on it silently. It will feed your faith.

“So when you eat that first bite of matzah, focus on it silently. It will feed your faith.”



13Three *matzahs*.**Three *Matzahs*:**

Why?

Three Sets of Jews

At one time, there were three sets of Jews: *Kohanim*, the priests; *Leviim*, the religious bureaucrats; *Yisrael*, the ordinary congregants.

And which were on top? The priests made the rules, so they were on top, and the *Yisrael*, on the bottom.

“Which of these sets of Jews are we? Should one set be on top?”

And what about in our day? Think for yourselves: “Which of these sets of Jews are we?” And should one set be on top?

Don't only do this exercise out of a sense of sentimentality, of nostalgia; perhaps they should be on top, and perhaps not. Be open to possibilities. It is a good question; make it one of the Four.



14

Breaking the Middle *Matzah*

“Just because someone once in the thirteenth century gave a reason, why should that remain the only reason forever?”

The question goes deeper still:

The middle *matzah* we break, and the large piece we hide away. Why?

I won't say, because it is important that at each *Seder* there be a totally new reason for these things we do. Just because someone once in the thirteenth century gave a reason, why should that remain the only reason forever?

There were very good reasons for that person's understanding of the universe; but the *Seder* is bigger than that moment; it is that continuity, that covenant, that household of Israel that keeps going on in freedom.

So your own reasons are vital.

So Think:

What is your sense of “middle *matzah*?” What does it mean, why is it broken, and why is it left for last?



15

Three Matzahs: Chochmah, Binah, Da'at

*“Conceptualization
takes place in
Chochmah,
analysis in Binah,
reality testing in
Da'at.”*

Here's a way of looking at these questions using Kabbalistic ideas:

The three *matzahs* are the three *S'phiroth* just below *Keter*, “Crown,” the highest one.

Keter is the circular crown, as everyone at the table, the whole *chevra*, is a circle.

The three *matzahs* are *Chabad*,

1. *Chochmah* / intuitive wisdom
2. *Binah* / the ability to distinguish, differentiate, analyze, and
3. *Da'at* / experiential knowledge.

The top matzah is *Chochmah*, the middle one is *Binah*, (*Chochmah*, right brain, *Binah*, left brain), and the bottom Matzah is *Da'at*.

Conceptualization takes place in *Chochmah*, analysis in *Binah*, reality testing in *Da'at*.

Later, from the third, “experiential” matzah of *Da'at*, we take two pieces. On one we put some bitter herbs and some *charoset* and cover it all with the other piece and say, “In the Temple time this is the way Hillel, the gentle teacher, did it; he softened the bitter herb with the matzah of faith and the lamb of loving-kindness, *Chesed*.”



16***Maror***

“That’s how it helps the body to teach the real agony of bitterness of work that breaks the spirit and the body.”

Bitter herbs, maybe dandelion greens from your back yard; it is good to teach yourself that you can survive on weeds, even bitter ones.

Horseradish was a kind of “rocket fuel,” invented in Eastern Europe. I don’t know of anyone who ever actually died of it, but it feels as though one could. There is that moment in which it chokes one in the throat and one daren’t take a breath for fear of poisoning one’s lungs. Aaaaak! That’s how it helps the body to teach the real agony of bitterness of work that breaks the spirit and the body.”

Maror: Bitter Work

We, the Jews who had fled Austria or Germany, were mostly in France, interned in a refugee/concentration camp in the Vichy zone. Those in charge gave us picks and shovels and told us to go out to the fields to remove the rocks. We were eager, for our diets were very poor, mostly peas and rice with holes from worms, and we thought we would get to grow some carrots, onions. After all, what is a good Jew without an onion from time to time?

So we went to work chipper, eager, and we cleared away the rocks. It was something to do. Otherwise, we were just cooped up, families of seven in a stable for a horse.

We cleared the fields. Then the commander came by and said,



“I don’t like this pile of rocks. Bury it deep underneath.”

We were not so chipper now, but still we did it in good cheer. And then, he told us to cover the rocks with cement, then cover it all with earth again, and we did it still, happily.

Three days later he came again, saying, “Where are these beautiful rocks from the field? Dig up the rocks. Move them back into the field!” Otherwise we would be punished.

***“Can you imagine
how the work
tasted?”***

Can you imagine how the work tasted? I remember standing there, (we had already dug to where our rocks had fused into concrete; now he wanted us to break them up), and I raised my pick and hit down on the ground. I felt such frustration and anger. The last thing I remember seeing was a spark where my pick hit the rock, when I fell in a faint.

My father wasn’t permitted to bring me water and there I remained until the evening, when a dog licked my face and I came to. For years afterwards, I had migraine headaches that would begin when tension hit that point where the spark came out.

That is the kind of work, Those are the kinds of conditions under which many must still spend their lives. Over and over again, doing things one doesn’t feel like doing and under conditions one can’t possibly work, knowing one can’t survive otherwise, feeling one doesn’t want to survive,



“So the bitter herb is the work that breaks the body with frustration.”

“If we told the body about the spiritual experience, it would become ever more willing to participate in a spiritual path and wouldn’t rob us of the energy that follows.”

and yet knowing one wouldn’t survive unless one gave in.

So the bitter herb is the work that breaks the body with frustration. It stimulates the story. It tells our body this story.

Maror: Somatic Connections

Reb Nachman of Bratslav asks why most people don’t make their way spiritually. The answer is that when we have spiritual experiences, we don’t tell the body about it. If we told the body about the spiritual experience, it would become ever more willing to participate in a spiritual path and wouldn’t rob us of the energy that follows. And how do we tell our bodies? In “body language,” i.e. *maror* helps us to make these somatic connections.

Bitterness is a necessary ingredient for change. Bitter is not totally bad. Some good is sweet, some good is bitter. Bitter is not bad. Children learn from the beginning to repress pain.

We say, “I don’t want my child to feel pain.” But for me, what’s important is that whatever pain has to teach my child, I want it to teach him or her quickly, so it doesn’t pile up. The *maror* helps us wake up some more.



17***Shulchan, Nirtzah***
/ Meal,
Acceptance

*“As we have been
graced to relive
now, may we merit
to make it real for
all.”*

The Yiddish rubrics in the old *Haggadahs* said that at the meal one is to... “*Men esst un’ trinkt un’ lozt zich woyl gayen* - one eats and drinks and permits oneself to feel good.” Then comes the 3rd cup of Thanksgiving, *Bentshen*, the rest of Hallel, more singing and celebration, welcoming Elijah and the 4th cup.

“This is the way we complete

the order - Seder of *Pessach*

according to its process.

With the things we can explain

and those that are beyond words

And as we have been graced to

Relive it now

May we merit to make it real for all

Next Year in Jerusalem!”

