

A Seder Companion

by Rabbi Moshe Hauer

לשנה הבאה בירושלים הבנויה



A SEDER COMPANION

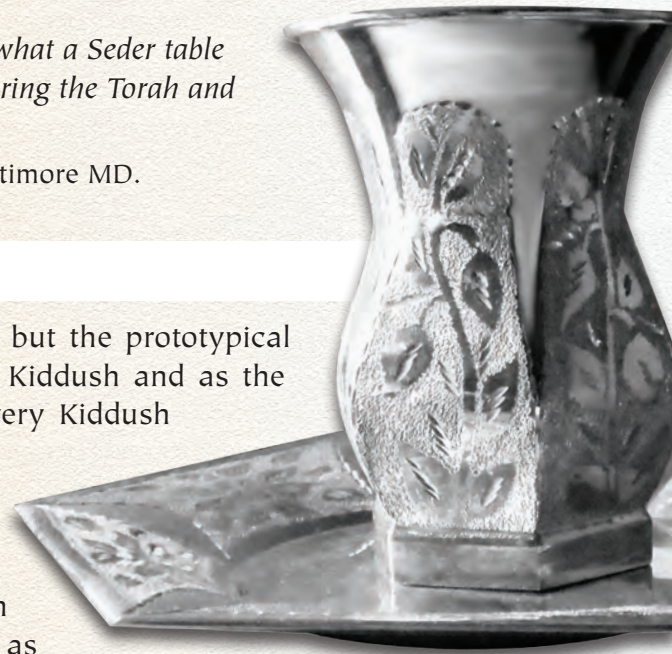
The notes below distill the fundamental goals and purpose of the Pesach Haggadah. They are meant to be basic but thorough, a starting point for a clear understanding of the Haggadah's magnificent structure and content. Please do not read them all at once as an article but one paragraph at a time, as you reach or study the referenced paragraph in the Haggadah. It is my hope and prayer that these notes will enhance your Seder experience.

I dedicate these notes to my parents, שיהיו לאוי"ט, who taught me what a Seder table should look and feel like, and who have devoted their lives to sharing the Torah and the Mesorah with their children and students.

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קדש: Kiddush & Pesach

Every Shabbos and Yom Tov meal begins with Kiddush, but the prototypical Kiddush is the one recited tonight at the Seder as both Kiddush and as the first of the Four Cups of the Seder. While as part of every Kiddush we note that we are celebrating that Shabbos or Holiday as a commemoration of our Exodus from Egypt, tonight we actually celebrate the anniversary of that formative event. We recognize that this is the point where G-d "chose us from among the nations", demonstrating through the miracles of the Exodus His own existence and power, as well as our significance to Him as His People.¹



זרח: Preparing for the Service in our Home Mikdash

While currently we do not normally wash for dipped vegetables, tonight at the Seder we do, adopting the *Mikdash* practices. In doing so we can recall how, when we left Egypt and we offered the Pesach offering, our private home served as the *Mikdash*, our doorway as the altar upon which the blood was sprinkled, and we – perhaps dressed in the simple white garments (*Kittel*) that Moshe wore when he served in the *Mikdash* – as the *Kohanim*. Tonight, as we prepare for our own home/*Mikdash* service, we begin as they did by washing our hands.²

כרפס: Setting the Tone

There are many symbolic meanings to the curious ritual of *Karpas*, however its most basic purpose is to stimulate curiosity.³ As we will see, the Seder is structured in Q&A form and is not meant to be limited to the formal Four Questions. The curious *Karpas* helps us begin to get the questions flowing.

יחז: Preparing the Matzah for the Haggadah

We are about to introduce the לחם עוני, the Bread of Affliction/Poverty. Breaking the *Matzah* makes it into the real thing, as the way of the poor is to eat broken pieces.⁴

הא לחמא עניא: Introducing the *Matzah*; Initiating the Discussion

The Seder is an audio-visual presentation, a discussion of our history presented as an explanation of the *Mitzvos* performed during the Seder. In our day, when the Seder is celebrated without the *Korban Pesach* (Passover offering), the dominant Torah commandment of the night is the *Matzah*. As such we begin telling the story of the Exodus by presenting its principal prop, the *Matzah* that our forefathers ate in Egypt. We specifically refer here to the *Matzah* by its Biblical description, *Lechem Oni*, a term that the Talmud⁵ took as a double-entendre, meaning at once the “Bread of Affliction” as well as the “Bread of Discussion”, לחם שעונין עליו דברים הרבה. This “Bread of Affliction” will be the focal point of the “Discussion” known as *Magid*, the main body of our *Haggadah*.

The Torah repeatedly urges us to use our formative experience of slavery and exile in Egypt to develop a deeper sensitivity towards the plight of those who suffer various forms of deprivation. Thus upon seeing the Bread of (past) Affliction we are immediately moved to action, declaring our readiness to provide for the hungry and needy of the present. It is this kind of sensitivity and generosity that will lead to our ultimate redemption. ציון במשפט תפדה ושביה בצדקה.⁶

מה נשתנה: Freedom to Question

The *Mitzvah* of *Haggadah*, of telling the story of the Exodus, is always presented in the Torah as a response to the question: “Why are we performing the Pesach rituals?”⁷ This is the basis for the *Haggadah*’s structure as an explanation of the *Mitzvos*. The Four Questions begin this process by laying out an initial sample of basic questions regarding the night’s unusual practices.

Aside from its role in connecting the story to the *Mitzvos* of the night, the Q&A format is itself an expression of the freedom we celebrate at the Seder. To question is to search for meaning. A slave’s life is not personally meaningful, as he is there to serve at the whim of his master. The slavery of Egypt was especially distinguished by its purposelessness, as in the construction of the ערי מסכנות, cities built on quicksand that would collapse upon completion.⁸ Now, liberated from that slavery to serve G-d, we recognize that everything we do is meaningful and we search for that meaning by questioning.

עבדים היינו: Outlining the Answer and the Task Ahead

The four questions notably highlight both the limitations and the luxuries practiced at the Seder. The contradictory nature of these different practices can be seen as the single overall question.⁹ We address this here by recalling both the agony and the ecstasy of our experience in Egypt, our slavery and our miraculous redemption, מתחיל בגנות ומסיים בשבה. We recall and relive both, through the contrasting practices of Pesach’s limits and luxuries, so that we can personalize the experience. We treat it not as a relic of the past but as part of the present. As a result the discussion of the story is not limited to the uninformed. Old stories do not need to be repeated to those who have already heard them; current events grab the attention of all present.

In this introductory paragraph we have been given the abstract of the story we are about to elaborately tell. Before doing so, we proceed to learn a bit more about how to tell that story.



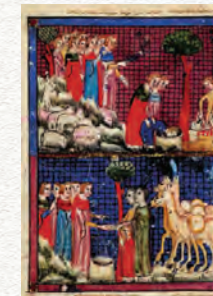
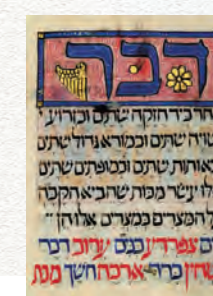
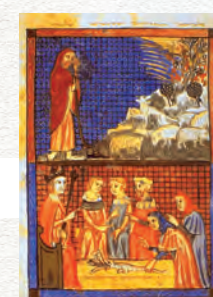
מצה זו שאנו אוכלים על שום טעם

מעשה: The Model Seder

This story is a vivid illustration of “how it’s done”. A group of the greatest Sages get together for the Seder and become so completely engrossed in reliving the story that they forget where they are! Our goal tonight is not to spend a lot of time; it is to lose track of time.¹⁰

אמר רבי אלעזר בן עזריה: Today and Every Day

Tonight our obligation is to spend much of the night telling the full, elaborate story of the Exodus as we relive it. The significance of this undertaking is underscored in this passage by teaching us that we must reinforce the Seder lessons constantly, as recalling the Exodus is a twice-daily obligation. In fact our Sages joined this *Mitzvah* to the *Mitzvah* of *Krias Shema*, as these readings together affirm and substantiate our faith. Whether in recalling the Exodus today or the events of the Messianic era in the future, our awareness of these experiences of our People supports and strengthens our belief in G-d and His connection with our People.¹¹



כנגד ארבעה בנים דברה תורה: Individuation in Education

The *Haggadah* proceeds to study the Torah text (ברוך שנתן תורה לעמו ישראל)¹² to derive greater understanding regarding how and when to fulfill this *Mitzvah*. We immediately discover that the Torah has multiple passages addressing the questions of our children, with each passage addressing a different kind of questioner/child in his own way.¹³ This yields the fundamental mandate of the night of Pesach and of all education: לפי דעתו של בן אביו מלמדו¹⁴, each child must be taught in the manner that suits his disposition. Whether the child’s curiosity focuses on the details of the *Mitzvos* (חכם) or the basics of the story (תם); whether he is rebelliously confrontational (רשע) or passively disinterested (שאינו יודע לשאול); each child requires an approach that will engage him where he is and move him to where he needs to be.

In this role we are not only serving as parents but as an extension of G-d’s own voice, passing along the word He has shared with us. It is noteworthy that according to the Midrash, when G-d first appeared to Moshe to charge him with leading the Jews from Egypt, G-d engaged Moshe by calling to him in his father’s familiar voice, knowing that this was what Moshe would respond to.¹⁵ The Seder night continues this process as we use our voices to convey G-d’s word, and we use our understanding of our children so that they will securely and confidently respond.

יכול מראש חודש: The Story of a Mitzvah

Pesach is more than a holiday; it is a season known as *Chodesh HaAviv*, the Month of Spring (שמור את חודש האביב ועשית פסח¹⁶). Were the *Mitzvah* simply to command us to share our history with the next generation, the *Mitzvah* could span the month. We clearly note here, however, that the Torah expects us to share the story not as a free-standing narrative but as an explanation of the *Mitzvos* we are performing: בעבור זה, as the *Matzah* and the *Maror* are arrayed before you.

After establishing this rule, we nevertheless move for the moment from directly discussing the *Mitzvos* arrayed before us to a free-standing discussion of the narrative.

600 year old Sarajevo Haggadah

מתחילה: Broadening the Story

While the pattern of story-telling includes the agony and the ecstasy, מתחיל בגנות ומסיים בשבח, there is an opinion represented here that has us go beyond the narrow confines of the slavery and freedom of Egypt to discuss the broader story of the attachment of the Jewish People to G-d, beginning with our father Avraham.¹⁷ By broadening the discussion we turn the discussion from the physical bondage and freedom to the spiritual transformation which is central to these events. This shift also changes our perspective from being driven by indebtedness to G-d for the freedom He has granted us, to the sense of privilege for having found ultimate meaning and our true destiny. A quick review of Yehoshua Chapter 24 – from where this passage is drawn – shows us how he originally used this passage to move the Jews of his time from a sense of duty to G-d to a sense of privilege at the opportunity to serve Him. Tonight this is what we seek to accomplish as well.

ברוך שזמר הבטחתו לישראל: A People of Destiny

The Egyptian exile did not just “happen”. Rather as G-d was establishing His covenant with Avraham he affirmed that it would be a covenant for all time, לרשתה.¹⁸ The first illustration of that was to be the predicted exile in Egypt, where – despite the Jews virtually sinking into the oblivion of slavery – G-d would ultimately rescue them. G-d’s promise to Avraham established the ultimate, indispensable role of our People in the world. While there can be shorter and longer detours on the road to our destiny, we are always returned to it.

זהיא שעמדה: The Promise for All Time

This was not only true for the Egyptian experience, but remains true for all time. The destiny of the Jewish People assures us that whatever the difficulties we face, ultimately לא ישקר, the Eternity of the Jewish People will never fail.¹⁹ It is noteworthy that in the passage where G-d delivers the original promise to Avraham²⁰, our Sages²¹ saw allusions (והנה אימה חשיכה גדולה נופלת עליי) to the four major periods of Exile that would make up the course of our history, implying that all of them are equally limited by the same promise and destiny that assured our redemption from Egypt. In our own time we continuously see the ongoing relevance of that wonderful promise.

צא ולמד: The Main Body of the Haggadah

The Mishnah²² teaches that *Haggadah* should be accomplished through extrapolation of the *Parsha* of ארמי אובד אבי, “The Aramean Who Sought to Destroy My Father”.²³ Instead of studying the original narrative from *Shemos*, we expand upon this tightly worded “borrowed” passage from *Devarim*, initially written to be recited during the offering of the *Bikkurim*, the First Fruits of the season in the *Mikdash*. This choice reflects the idea that at the Seder we tell the story not simply to transmit history but as an expression of thanks to G-d,²⁴ making this thanksgiving passage more suitable for the Seder than the original historical narrative. And like the individual offering the First Fruits, who does not express simple gratitude for what he has in hand but looks back in history at the many steps it took for him to get there, we too – who have never seen Egypt – recognize that to properly appreciate our current freedoms we must explore their roots in the redemption from Egypt. Appreciation expressed with depth, detail and nuance is infinitely more meaningful. Finally, one can see in the chosen format of this main section of the *Haggadah* a true experience of צא ולמד, as we learn and teach the Torah of *Haggadah* to our children in the classic manner of Torah study, taking the verses in the quoted passage one by one and parsing them, explaining and expanding upon every phrase.²⁵

ארמי אובד אבי: Verse One: Lavan, Pharaoh and the Development of the Jewish People

Where do we find Lavan actively seeking to destroy our nation as a whole? Looking at the continuation of this passage, it seems that it was Lavan's embrace of Yaakov and his family as his own, his desire to assimilate us, which posed the greatest threat to the Jewish People. Thus the verse goes on to describe that we actually grew and matured into a great and distinct nation specifically in Egypt, where there was even less of a threat of assimilation than in Canaan, due to the fierce cultural clash between the Egyptians and the Jews.²⁶

זירעו אותנו המצרים: Verse Two: The Bitter Slavery

While we originally arrived in Egypt as refugees of the severe famine in Canaan, our relationship quickly turned. The Egyptians not only treated us badly, they also made us out as "bad guys", as a hostile "fifth column" within their society, a charge which has been repeated throughout our history. This was an important shift that reached its height when Pharaoh withheld any kind of support from the Egyptians for the slave labor of the Jews, leaving us to collect the straw to make the bricks. This was critical to making us feel completely on our own, to losing any sense that we could rely on the Egyptians. While this was painful in the short term, it was an important step in our own recognition of the one and only source of our salvation.²⁷ We were now ready to pray.

ונצעה אל ד' אלקי אבותינו: Verse Three: We Pray to Hashem the G-d of our Fathers

In Egypt we were to become a "great nation". The Torah itself²⁸ describes two aspects of the greatness of the Jewish nation: "For where is there a great nation with a G-d close to them as Hashem our G-d is whenever we call out to Him?! And where is there a great nation that has just rules and laws like this Torah?!" The Exodus itself would demonstrate the first facet of the greatness of our people, as G-d responded to our prayers for salvation. And the Exodus would lead us to Sinai, where the second facet of our greatness would be achieved through the gift of Torah. The unique privilege of having G-d listen to our prayers is part of the legacy of our forefathers and the covenant they established with G-d. This is described in the verse cited here, and serves as the basis for the way we introduce every prayer that we offer, where we bless "Hashem, our G-d and the G-d of our fathers, Avraham, Yitzchak and Yaakov."

זוציאנו ד' ממצרים: Verse Four: G-d Himself Responds

The essence of the Redemption is the introduction of G-d's tangible presence to the forsaken land of Egypt. Egypt is generally the land of sorcery that denies and contradicts G-d's rule,²⁹ the land utterly removed from the heavens as seen in its independence from the rainwaters.³⁰ Here at the point of Redemption the opposite occurs as G-d Himself comes to liberate the Jews from Egypt. While at times He uses His extended arm – i.e. the host of intermediaries at His disposal, human and otherwise³¹ – at the ultimate moment of Exodus G-d Himself was there to remove us. Just as the climactic moment at Sinai was achieved when we communicated directly with G-d without intermediaries, the same was true for the moment of the Exodus. Moshe played no active role in bringing on the final act, the Plague of the First-born, which is why tonight, on the anniversary of that plague, we avoid mentioning Moshe at the Seder, enabling us to have an unobstructed connection to the G-d Who arrived to redeem us.



מכות ומעלות: Plagues and Gifts

The *Haggadah* elaborates on the wide-ranging plagues that G-d visited upon the Egyptians, followed by a parallel elaboration on the multiple gifts and advantages that G-d granted us. The plurality of plagues was to demonstrate G-d's absolute, comprehensive power within the world, with the ten plagues and their offshoots as broad as the original ten statements with which the world was created. Yet at the very same time as G-d was producing the cries of terror and pain to the Egyptians, He was also bringing songs of joy and redemption to the lips of the Jews. מוציא אסירים בכושרות – בכי ושירות. ... אלקים.³² The prisoners were freed accompanied by cries on one side and song on the other.

דיינו: That's Enough!

The above section – that tells and elaborates upon the story of the Exodus – closes with the poem *Dayeinu*, perhaps the most popular Seder song of all time. In the traditional tune the chorus repeats over and over again the one word “*Dayeinu*”, literally translated as a happy version of “we have enough.” Rav Yitzchak Hutner ז”ל pointed out³³ that this term is used and repeated as a fulfillment of a beautiful prophesy of Malachi (Chapter 3), where he describes G-d opening the heavens and showering us with blessing עד בלי די, which our Sages³⁴ read as meaning “until our lips will become worn out from (happily) repeating “*Dayeinu*”, “we have had enough”!

רבן גמליאל: The Three Main Things

Now that we have concluded the free-standing narrative, we come to the critical point of connecting the story to the *Mitzvos*. Here are the fuller and more specific answers to the questions posed by the *Ma Nishtana*. One who does not “close the loop” by explaining these three things has not fulfilled his obligation in Pesach, as he has told the story without connecting it to the *Mitzvos*, and he has performed the *Mitzvos* without explaining their story.³⁴

בכל דור ודור: Identifying With the Story of our People

The story is complete, and has been linked to the *Mitzvos*. What remains is for it to become our story. “In each and every generation one must view himself as if he left Egypt.” This is not accomplished through a vivid imagination, but rather through identification with the Jewish People. When I truly identify with my People, events that occur to Jews across the globe are experienced personally, and events that have occurred to Jews throughout history are seen as part of my own life experience. Now that we have told the story in vivid detail, we must take the critical step of identifying ourselves so completely with our People that the *Haggadah* will not only be the story of our forefathers redemption but of ours as well; לא את אבותינו בלבד גאל הקב"ה אלא אף אותנו גאל עמם.

לפיכך אנחנו חייבים להודות: The Praise Bursts Forth

The *Hallel* of Pesach night is unique in that it is not a formal recitation, but rather an almost spontaneous burst of praise.³⁵ If we have succeeded in making this story our own, the *Hallel* will come naturally. Indeed the portion of *Hallel* we recite here is that which directly references the story we have just told and relived. In the **first paragraph** we give praise as “servants of Hashem”, a status we attained as a result of being liberated from Pharaoh's servitude. We note how G-d dwells in the uppermost heights, but yet noted and responded to our cries from the depths of slavery, and raised us to the greatest heights mankind can reach. In the **second paragraph** we recall the completion of the redemption at *Yam Suf*, when nature was truly and visibly suspended before G-d's presence.

אשר גאלנו: The Closing Bracha

We close the *Magid* portion with a blessing that is a form of the *Bracha* we say twice daily following the final paragraph of *Shema*, where we recall the Redemption and yearn for it to be completed. The *Bracha* is also a form of the *Shehecheyanu*, as we anticipate shortly fulfilling the *Mitzvos* of *Matzah* and *Maror*.³⁶ Finally, the *Bracha* reflects our successful completion of the *Haggadah* process, as at this point we move from considering ourselves secondary to primary beneficiaries of the Redemption: “Blessed are you *Hashem* ... Who redeemed **us** and our forebears from Egypt.”

הלל: Completing the Song

The *Hallel* of the Seder night is further unique in that it is interrupted by the eating of the *Matzah*, *Maror* and accompanying meal. In truth, however, we do not view it as an interruption, because the *Hallel* is generated not only by the reliving of the story (part one of the *Hallel*) but also by the performance of the *Mitzvos* of the Pesach feast (part two). As the Talmud³⁷ says, “Is it conceivable that the Jews would slaughter their Pesach offerings and *not* recite *Hallel*?!” It is this *Hallel*, generated by this special meal and sung by the joined voices of Jews everywhere celebrating our redemption, which is described in the Talmud as bursting through the roofs of Jerusalem’s homes.³⁸

נרצה: The Incomplete Conclusion

In the *Mikdash*, after offering the daily offerings, we would say *Birchas HaAvodah* – commonly referred to as “*Retzeih*” – expressing the hope that our offerings would be pleasing to G-d. Following this pattern, every *Amidah* prayer that we recite concludes with a similar prayer, where we express the hope that our service was pleasing to G-d, as well as our yearning for the coming day when we will be able to offer the complete service, including the offerings in the *Bais haMikdash*. Here, at the conclusion of the Pesach Seder (*Nirtzah*), we express the same hopes of *Retzeih*, both with regard to the success of what we have just completed and with the prayer that we will soon be able to offer the more complete service in *Yerushalayim*.

This is the great “hole” in our Seder. Every aspect of the Redemption is geared towards our coming to *Eretz Yisrael*. It is seen in G-d’s words to Moshe at the outset of the Redemption, promising that he will take the Jews from Egypt to the Land flowing Milk and Honey. It is there in the “Four Terms of Redemption” which are presented as the fulfillment of the covenant to bring us to the land, והבאתי. Furthermore we have seen how the main body of the *Haggadah* text is the thumbnail sketch of our history taken from the formula recited during the offering of the *Bikkurim*, the First Fruits of the season in the Temple, which is itself an expression of gratitude for our arrival in *Eretz Yisrael*. As such, we pray that we will soon be able to celebrate a complete Seder, with the Redemption being brought to its true conclusion, בבנין בית המקדש במהרה בימינו, with the completion of the Temple soon in our day, Amen.

לשנה הבאה בירושלים הבנויה

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