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5786

מצוה לספר: Stories That Bind



*Dedicated as a zechus for a continued refuah sheleimah for
Yitzchak ben Hadassah
and shalom in Eretz Yisrael bekarov*

Belinda and Steven Raikin

*Transliterations in this publication are based on Sephardic or Ashkenazic
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A message from
**REBBETZIN DR.
 ADINA SHMIDMAN**
 Director, OU Women's Initiative



Dear Friend,

Thank you to our educators and contributors for your thoughtful words and messages. We are deeply grateful that this collection was sponsored in the merit of a *refuah sheleimah* for Yitzchak ben Hadassah. Finally, thank you to the Women's Initiative commission and its co-chairs, Miriam Greenspan and Nomi Rotblat, and to the dedicated team: Nechama Epstein, Emma Katz, Adeena Mayerfeld, Rachel Mazurek, Rachel Miller, and Ayelet Shachar, and Nechama Friedman, the Saul Bernstein OU Women's Initiative department intern.

On Pesach night, we gather around the Seder table to do something profoundly simple and deeply powerful: we tell a story.

A story has the power to connect people across generations and across time. When we tell a story, we do more than recall the events of the past; we step into a shared memory. On Pesach night, as we recount *Yetziat Mitzrayim*, we join a chain that stretches back to those who first walked out of Egypt. The Haggadah enjoins us: “בְּכָל דּוֹר—In every generation, each person is obligated to see themselves as if they personally left Egypt”. By telling our shared story, the distance of centuries disappears. Around the Seder table, we become part of the same unfolding narrative that began with those who stood at the threshold of

redemption. The Haggadah reminds us that this story is meant to be shared widely—with the poor invited to our table, with children full of questions, and with the Sages who continue discussing the Exodus deep into the night.

Pesach reminds us that the story of our people is not frozen in the past. It lives each time it is told. As we gather this year around our Seder tables, surrounded by family, friends, and guests, we become the next link in that enduring chain, retelling the story that began with those who left Mitzrayim and ensuring that it continues for generations to come.

And just as we open our doors on Seder night to welcome guests, may we soon open them once again for Eliyahu HaNavi and the ultimate redemption.

Chag kasher Ve'sameach,



Our Individual Story: The Haggadah and The Messiness of the Middle By Channah Cohen



Let's explore a thought experiment based on an ancient story of servitude and salvation. A strange start to an essay on Pesach? Yes, but I invite you to set that concern aside for a moment and contemplate the following paradox:

Long ago, Athens was forced to send seven boys and seven girls a year to Crete, where they were fed to a monster, the Minotaur. One year, Theseus volunteered to be one of them. With courage and cleverness, he entered the labyrinth of the monster, defeated it, and sailed the captives back home alive. When Theseus returned to Athens, his ship was preserved as a memorial. Over time, as planks rotted, they were replaced. Years passed, and then decades, until eventually none of the original wood remained.

If only one or two of the ship's planks were replaced, we would all agree that the ship was still Theseus' Ship. But what if all of them were replaced? Furthermore, if the discarded planks were reassembled elsewhere, which ship would really be the Ship of Theseus? Philosophers have debated this question for centuries, not merely as an intellectual exercise, but because it presses on something deeply human. The paradox asks how identity persists over time, even as its parts change. Theseus' Ship, somehow, is more than any one wooden plank, and even more than all of them together.

This is often how we relate to the story that the Haggadah tells about the Jewish people. At first blush, it is a story about the formation of their identity. A group of slaves went through miracles and emerged transformed into G-d's people in a way that none of them had been before.

While all this is true, this is not the level at which the Haggadah *wants* to be read. Its rendering of the Exodus is far more intimate. It does not allow us to remain observers of a collective past. It pushes us inward, demanding that each individual Jew locate himself, personally, within its narrative. The Haggadah makes this intention clear from the very beginning: “בְּכֹל דּוֹר וָדוֹר חַיִּיב אָדָם לְרֹאוֹת אֶת עַצְמוֹ כְּאִילוּ הוּא יֵצֵא מִמִּצְרַיִם”—In every generation, each person is obligated to see themselves as if they personally left Egypt.”

The language is almost startling in its insistence: *Not* your ancestors. *Not* the Jewish people in the abstract. *You*. Moreover, this is framed as an obligation, not as a metaphor or poetic flourish. The Exodus is not meant to remain a story about collective identity alone. The story we are obligated to tell about the Jewish people is actually a call for us to understand *our own individual stories*.

This framing of the Haggadah should not surprise us. After all, many biblical texts instruct us to tell a story, as opposed to merely recite facts or concepts. Over and over, the Torah stresses that this obligation is verbal, relational, and alive. The *meaning* of the Exodus is not transmitted through analysis, but through *storytelling*. The Haggadah was not meant to be turned from a drama into a dissertation. It was meant to sound like a story told around a table to people who are meant to hear themselves in it. We are asked to do something difficult and personal: to read history as *autobiography*.

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Strikingly, although the story of the Haggadah is sometimes framed as one of triumph and resolution, the text is unabashed in its description of the people in the muddled midst of a story still being written: “Our ancestors served idols...

You grew wild like meadow plants...

[You were] wallowing in your own blood...

They groaned under the burden of work and cried out.”

The lesson is clear and critically important. The Jewish people were neither redeemed when they reached some lofty spiritual level, nor as a reward for perfection attained. G-d intervened in history on behalf of the Jewish people well *before* the resolution of their national narrative. G-d interceded in the middle of their story, while they were still hurting and broken in many ways.

This nuance makes a profound difference. G-d entered their story while it was unresolved—amid confusion, pain, and incompleteness. This may be the most personal lesson of Pesach, and it is certainly what the Haggadah begs us to believe: G-d is involved in our personal story, just as He was involved in our national story, not only in moments of resolution, but also in moments of change and becoming. We are asked by G-d to shape our lives into a good story, and to remember that He is with us, every step of the way, as we do so.

The story of the Exodus forms the moral backbone of Jewish life and law: care for the vulnerable, act with compassion, and build a just society because you were slaves in Egypt. Even belief in G-d is not introduced as a philosophical proposition but as an outgrowth of this story—“I am the Lord your G-d, Who took you out of the land of Egypt.” Locating the mitzvah of faith in the story of the Exodus teaches us what true faith is. Faith is not the belief that G-d is present only in lives that are orderly and resolved. It is the belief that He is with us in the messiness of the middle. And the Haggadah insists that this story is not only theirs, but ours as well. The same G-d Who entered their unfinished narrative intercedes in ours too, and so, like them, we have hope.

On the night of the Seder, we are not historians preserving the past. We sit around the Seder table as humans struggling to understand the story of the present. The Haggadah asks us to step inside the Exodus story and hear our *own* story, still being written, echoed within its words. Pesach teaches that our stories begin well before our messiness is resolved. G-d meets each of us in the midst of our own story, not at the end, when everything has already been resolved, but right in the middle, where we are right now, just as the Jewish people were back then.

Channah Cohen is an adult educator for OU JLIC (Jewish Learning Initiative on Campus) and OU ECP (Emerging Career Professionals).



Our Family Story: The Heart of the Home

By Rebbetzin Rivka Segal



Pesach is the celebration of our national birth and our national salvation, and it all begins in our homes. At the Seder, we recount how Hashem took us from slavery to freedom and formed us into a people. We learn that redemption is not born suddenly, but is rather shaped by struggle, effort, and faith.

Yetzias Mitzrayim is not only a past event, but the model of how exile leads to *geulah*. To understand our first redemption more deeply, it is instructive to closely consider how it unfolded.

Although the Jewish people had witnessed the ten plagues, leaving Egypt still required stepping into the unknown. Life there had been bitter, yet familiar. When Moshe instructed them to prepare to leave, fear naturally surfaced. Where would they go? How would they survive in the desert? Redemption demanded abandoning a comfort zone that was familiar, even though it was painful, for a future they could not yet see.

Not everyone was willing to take this step. The Midrash teaches that many Jews remained behind, unable to leave the security of what they knew for the uncertainty of freedom.¹ Miracles alone were not enough. Redemption required active participation, courage, and trust.

That leap of faith reached its climax at the Red Sea. Tehillim 114 describes how the sea fled before them. When the Jewish people stepped toward the raging waters and prepared to enter them despite their fear, the sea responded.² Nature itself yielded to their *emunah*. In that moment, salvation unfolded, and the nation was transformed, as the Torah states: “They believed in Hashem and in Moshe His servant.”³

Where did this courage to leave their comfort zone come from?

The courage that transformed a nation at the Red Sea did not emerge suddenly. It had been nurtured for years within Jewish homes, and the first Pesach in Egypt exposed the strength that had already taken root there.

On the night before the Exodus, the Jewish people were not standing together in public prayer or national gatherings. Hashem had commanded that no one leave their homes until morning. Each home was marked by blood on the doorposts, openly declaring loyalty to Hashem’s will and readiness for *mesiras nefesh*. The home was central because it was there that faith and courage had been cultivated long before the sea ever split. The courage that transformed a nation at sea was built within the strength of Jewish homes.

The Torah refers to the women as “*Bais Yaakov*,” the “House of Yaakov”⁴ for they shape the spiritual atmosphere of the home. Chazal teach that it was in the merit of the righteous women that the Jewish people were redeemed. During years of brutal slavery, when the men were crushed by despair, the women strengthened them, soothed their fears, and urged them not to surrender hope.⁵ They rebuilt families in the shadow of oppression and reminded their husbands that Hashem had not abandoned them.

Chazal teach that the women prepared musical instruments before leaving Egypt, confident that redemption would come.⁶ If they left Egypt with instruments in hand, then song must already have filled their homes. Their *emunah* was expressed in enthusiastic

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songs of faith that strengthened and inspired those around them during the most trying times. Now, on the night before redemption, Hashem commanded the nation to remain in those very houses where faith had taken form, protecting them as the final step toward freedom unfolded.

Each household carried its own fears, dreams, and sacrifices. Redemption was born in countless private moments of trust and perseverance.

And so, each year we return to our own Sedarim. We sit around our tables just as our ancestors did in Egypt. Just as the women of that generation infused their homes with courageous and enthusiastic faith, we too shape the spiritual atmosphere of our homes through our preparations, our words, and the tone we set. The way we speak about Pesach, the joy and anticipation we create, and the confidence we express in Hashem's Presence inspire those around us. The *emunah* that we cultivate gives our children and those around us the courage and excitement to move forward and pursue their own spiritual growth. That growth becomes part of the collective strength through which Hashem brings redemption.

When we look candidly at the Jewish people today, we may see division, confusion, and external threats and wonder how we deserve redemption. This question is not new.

The Midrash relates that when Moshe told the people that Hashem was preparing to redeem them, they worried that they lacked sufficient merit. Moshe answered that Hashem does not focus on the failures of the generation. Instead, He looks to the righteous individuals within it, and in their merit redeems everyone.⁷

The righteous are not only the great figures of history, but also those who choose trust over despair and responsibility over indifference. A mitzvah performed by an individual, a private struggle, or an unseen act of courage is never isolated. These daily choices become the foundation of the salvation of Am Yisrael.

Just as the birth of our nation unfolded within Jewish households in Egypt, so too the unfolding *geulah* continues within our homes today. The redemption of the nation is built from these personal journeys. Pesach reminds us that the miracle of national survival begins in the home, and that each of us bears responsibility to nurture the faith and courage that will form the *geulah* of Am Yisrael.

¹ See *Mechilta* 13:18. The *midrash* gives a detailed analysis of the percentages of Jewish people who remained in Egypt.

² See *Metzudas David* on Tehillim 114:4.

³ Shemos 14:31.

⁴ Shemos 19:3.

⁵ See *Shemos Rabbah* 1;12 and *Sotah* 11b.

⁶ Rashi on Shemos 15:20.

⁷ *Shir HaShirim Rabbah* 2:8.

Rebbetzin Rivka Segal, author of Living Tehillim series, teaches women worldwide how to transform Torah wisdom into inner strength, resilience, and purposeful living.



Our National Story: Dayeinu and the Power of Gratitude

By Dr. Chaya Sima Koenigsberg



One of the highlights of the Seder is singing the *piyut* Dayeinu. Among the songs added to the Haggadah, Dayeinu is uniquely positioned within Maggid, as opposed to the other *piyutim* that are sung during Nirtzah, at the end of the Seder when the formal text of the Haggadah has concluded. This prime placement gives the impression that Dayeinu is central to the Seder and not an embellishment or optional add-on for those still awake. What can we learn from Dayeinu's special prominence?

While Dayeinu does not appear in early rabbinic sources such as the Mishnah, Talmud, or early Midrashim, and is missing from the Rambam's Haggadah (twelfth century), it is found in early works such as the Haggadot in Seder Rav Amram Gaon (ninth century) and the Siddur of Rav Sa'adiah Gaon (ninth to tenth century).¹ Within Rav Sa'adiah Gaon's Haggadah, Dayeinu is placed at the end of the Haggadah alongside the other *piyutim*, while Seder Rav Amram Gaon (in the version we have) places it within Maggid.²

Dayeinu is considered a very ancient *piyut*, and according to some, it stems all the way back to the Second Temple period. One indication of its antiquity is that it does not address the exile. Rather, its anonymous author traces our national story and gives thanks for the various steps of the redemption from Egypt, through the splitting of the sea, the sojourn in the desert, the giving of the Torah, all the way to entering Israel, and culminates with the building of the Temple. But this is where the narrative ends. There is no plea to return to Israel or rebuild the Temple, as one would expect in a post-Temple *piyut*. It appears that when this *piyut* was composed, the Temple was still standing.³

Very early *piyutim* composed in Eretz Yisrael drew heavily from the language of Tanach and elements of biblical poetry, and Dayeinu is no different. Professor Meir Bar-Ilan suggests that Dayeinu was inspired by Psalm 136, known by Chazal as "*Hallel HaGadol*," which is also recited at the Seder, during Hallel. These two compositions mirror each other in both content and composition style. Dayeinu's national-historical survey parallels the historical survey presented in *Hallel HaGadol* that spans Creation through the conquering of the Land of Israel. Stylistically, both are structured to be recited responsively with the repeated refrain of "*ki le'olam chasdo*" or "*dayeinu*" respectively, after each reference to Hashem's kindness. Additionally, commentators have noted the significance of the number of lines contained in each composition. Chazal explain that *Hallel HaGadol* contains exactly twenty-six lines corresponding to the twenty-six generations from Adam until the giving of Torah, years in which Hashem sustained His world with kindness, even before humanity began fulfilling the Torah's commands.⁴ Similarly, Dayeinu's fifteen lines or stages may correspond to the fifteen chapters of Shir HaMa'ilot, which correspond to the fifteen steps in the Temple, or the fifteen stages of the Seder (Kadesh, Urchatz, etc.) that guide our journey of spiritual elevation as we progress through the Seder.⁵

Together, Dayeinu and *Hallel HaGadol* both highlight the key themes of the Seder Night, namely reviewing the story of our nation and giving thanks.

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Ironically, though we joyously sing Dayeinu and thank Hashem for every incremental step of our salvation, Bnei Yisrael were actually unappreciative and complained or rebelled at each event listed in Dayeinu, as noted by my father, Rabbi Nachman Cohen.⁶ At the Seder, we repair the past by giving thanks for what was not appreciated in the moment. Sometimes, it is easier to see and acknowledge Hashem's kindness in retrospect. Indeed, in the heat of the moment, it's hard to see that everything Hashem does is for our good. Rabbeinu Bachya⁷ suggests that we train our minds to trust Hashem in the moment, by recalling the kindness and *hashgachah peratit* that we have experienced in our lives. Then, when difficult moments arrive, we can react with the refrain of "*ki le'olam chasdo*," certain that just as Hashem has taken care of us in the past, He is taking care of us now. Looking back and connecting the dots to recognize Hashem's guiding hand is a wonderful exercise in *bitachon* year-round, but it takes on special meaning on Pesach night.

The Seder is an opportunity to bring the lesson of Dayeinu into the present by teaching our children to see Hashem's guiding Hand not only in the past, but in our lives today. It's easy to get swept up in our fears and the pressures of daily living. But if we take a step back, like the Psalmist and the *paytan* of Dayeinu, we can recognize the many miracles that surround us. How many open miracles have we witnessed in recent years! The Hagaddah teaches, "*be'chol dor va'dor omdim aleinu*." How many have risen up against us, now, in recent months and years! How many plots have been foiled! How many rockets were intercepted! How many mighty enemies have fallen, before our own eyes, like the Egyptians, like Sichon and Og! Let those sitting around the Seder table reflect on Hashem's guiding Hand in their own lives and not miss the opportunity to offer gratitude. "But we still have so much to fear," you say. "Jews are under attack around the world, and the wars in Israel are ongoing." True, but Dayeinu teaches us to appreciate and celebrate the salvations we have already experienced. And by praising Hashem's goodness in the past, we reinforce our *bitachon* in the present and inculcate *emunah* in the next generation. With this mindset, we can recite Hallel with secure hearts full of gratitude for Hashem's never-ending kindness, then, now, and forever, *ki le'olam chasdo*.

¹ The Haggadah was originally copied and included within the text of *siddurim*, which ordered the prayers for the whole year. Haggadot only appear as separate stand-alone books beginning around the twelfth century.

² https://www.nli.org.il/he/piyut/Piyut1song_01003520000005171/NLI.

³ For this reason, Professor Daniel Goldschmidt dated it to the first century. However, Professor Meir Bar-Ilan argues that it was likely composed in the Land of Israel in the late fourth or early fifth century. See:

מאיר בר-אילן, "אילו הוציאנו ממצרים," בתוך כתבור בהרים: מחקרים בתורה שבעל פה מוגשים לפרופסור יוסף תבורי, בעריכת ארנון עצמון וצור שפיר (אלון שבות: תבונות – מכללת הרצוג, 2013), 332–305.

⁴ *Pesachim* 118a.

⁵ See Rabbi Nachman Cohen, *The Historical Haggadah* (Jerusalem: Torah Lishmah Institute, 2002), 6–7.

⁶ Cohen, *The Historical Haggadah*, 69–72.

I thank my teacher, Rebbetzin Ester Twersky, for teaching me this beautiful lesson based on *Chovot HaLevavot: Sha'ar HaBitachon*, Chapters 1-3.

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An individual self, rooted in a broader family unit, ultimately develops the end of our continuum—the collective *klal*. In *Sefer Bereishis*, Hashem’s relationships were primarily with righteous individuals. We may discern an emphasis on *family* units in the days of enslavement and in the process leading up to the climactic moments of *geulah*. However, our emergence from Mitzrayim onward underscores Hashem’s relationship with the collective *klal*.

Though we value the individual—those *shemos* that went down to Mitzrayim—each individual only has importance within the collective mission and story of Klal Yisrael. Redemption exists only if we see ourselves as part of a larger Jewish family and story. We begin Maggid with the words “*kol dichfin*,” inviting all Jews in need to join us and reminding ourselves that our relevance to *geulah* and Hashem is directly related to our connection with the *klal*—even with those whom we consider to be beneath us.⁹

The *rasha’s* fatal flaw is not heresy or behavior. Nor is it that he casts off Torah and *mitzvos*. It’s that he denies that these things bind him to others. He may observe every halachah, but because he views Yiddishkeit as his personal endeavor, instead of a shared destiny—*שהוציא את עצמו מן הכלל*—he is considered wicked.

The *rasha* is told he would not have been redeemed, since *geulah* was for the sake of the nation. An orchestra composed of a hundred individual soloists, talented as each one may be, will never produce a symphony. Each individual is indispensable; each story is important. But each person’s *avodas Hashem* stems from their unique role in advancing the broader mission and story of our collective nation.

We have seen this in our times through the poignant letters of soldiers who have been *moser nefesh* defending Eretz Yisrael. These *kedoshim* saw their individual lives as humble yet vital chapters in the unfolding, eternal story of our nation. They understood that an individual’s life story finds ultimate meaning within the collective story of Klal Yisrael.

Stories weave otherwise random, disparate facts into something coherent and connected. Seder night highlights that the stories of self, family, and nation are not disjointed threads, but a single interwoven whole. One who has embraced this integrated identity can leave the Seder asking: How am I developing my own individual story? How am I nurturing my family’s story? And what am I contributing to Klal Yisrael’s story?

¹ McAdams, Dan & McLean, Kate, “Narrative Identity,” *Current Directions in Psychological Science* 22, (2013): 233-238. 10.1177/0963721413475622.

² Rabbi Reuven Leuchter and Eran Feintuch, *The Pesach Haggadah: Living Our History* (Jerusalem: Ayal Press, 2019), 16.

³ *Mishnah Pesachim* 10:5.

⁴ *Chumash Mesoras HaRav on Shemos* 1:1.

⁵ Rabbi Daniel Stein, “Making the Pesach Story Personal,” TorahWeb, 2017 https://www.torahweb.org/torah/2017/moadim/rdst_pesach.html

⁶ *Pirkei De’Rabbi Eliezer* on Yechezkel 16:6.

⁷ *Shemos* 13:3-8.

⁸ Rabbi Immanuel Bernstein, *Darkness to Destiny: The Haggadah Experience* (New York: Feldheim, 2014), 52–53.

⁹ Rabbi Reuven Leuchter and Eran Feintuch, *The Pesach Haggadah: Living Our History* (Jerusalem: Ayal Press, 2019), 6.

¹⁰ *Ibid*, 24.

Dr. Ayelet currently coordinates Torah programming for the OU Women’s Initiative and gives shiurim in a variety of settings that often combine timeless Torah insights with contemporary psychological perspectives.

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