

אברהם יצחק גרין

פירושים להגדה של פסח

## COMMENTS ON THE PASSOVER HAGGADAH

Arthur Green

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מקרא קדש **Miqra Qodesh.** The word *miqra* derives from the root QRA, "to call." The festival is a *miqra' qodesh*, literally a "holy calling," as though the day itself calls forth to us to respond to it. Each of the festivals has its own "call." On Pesah we are *called to freedom*. The sense of call makes for a different type of freedom than that of simply breaking all restraints. We respond to it by examining our own enslavements and asking

how we can become more free and bring others more freedom. As Jews we understand that “more free” means “more free to live in God’s presence” or less subjugated to those forces – whether they be social, economic, political, or even “religious” – that keep us from Y-H-W-H. Pesah calls out to us to renew our commitment to freedom on these most profound levels, both for ourselves and for others.

ארבע כוסות **Arba Kosot**. The four cups of wine. Most Haggadah commentators relate these to four terms used for redemption in the Exodus narrative. But that is a wholly internal co-ordination of symbols, and does not really tell us much. The Kabbalists refer them to four rungs of *qelipot*, “shells” of defilement that the Israelites had to overcome in order to be redeemed. Their years in Egypt had taken them down to the lowest of spiritual rungs. They needed to be purified step by step before they could be taken forth. The fourth *qelipah, nogah*, lets a little light shine through. That masks its true nature, thus making it the hardest to detect. It’s often the one that keeps us in “Egypt,” even without our realizing it.

But my favorite interpretation of the four cups is found on an old glass goblet I treasure. Made in Bohemia in the eighteenth century, it is inscribed *arba ‘kosot neged arba ‘imahot*: the four cups stand for the four mothers. This interpretation is already found, it turns out, in the Haggadah commentary of the MaHaRaL of Prague, who lived two centuries earlier. I wonder what it was about those Bohemian Jewish mothers that inspired such a thought!

Playing it out, we can understand how the first cup represents Sarah. This is the cup of hospitality, welcoming the guests, just like Mother Sarah kept the flaps of her tent ever open to welcome sojourning strangers. The second cup is that of Rebecca, who switched her sons before Isaac’s blessing. The cleverness, even trickery, she showed also protected Israel’s children in Egypt and allowed them to survive, deceiving Pharaoh and his armies both in Egypt and at the shore of the sea. Sometimes liberation requires trickery. But how about Leah and Rachel? How do the last two cups apply to them? I leave that for conversation around *your* seder table.

השתא כבדי **Ha-shata ‘avdey**. "Now we are slaves." This phrase sets up the dramatic tension that embraces the entire seder. In a moment we will say: "We were slaves to Pharaoh in Egypt...and had God not taken our ancestors out of Egypt, we...would still be enslaved." Liberation happened long ago, but as good faithful Jews we still remember it. But first, in this opening to the seder, we say the opposite: We are *still* slaves! Next year may we be *really* free! We recognize, in other words, that our liberation from “Egypt” never quite succeeded; we are still on the road to liberation, not quite wholly free.

Both of these versions of liberation are true. When seen from the viewpoint of our onetime total bondage, and that of Jews and others within our own memory, we indeed have every reason to be grateful. We live in a society that offers us freedom and opportunities that were far beyond the dreams of prior generations. But the human condition is such that we still, and always, struggle to be free. Let the conversation at the seder table encompass both of these truths and highlight the tension between them.

מצווה עלינו לספר **Mitsvah 'alenu le-sapper.** "We are commanded to tell the tale." Even if we all know the story, we are commanded to tell it again. The commandment of *haggadah* comes from the verse: "You shall tell your child..." But even a person who is childless is bound to tell the story. We tell it to pass it down from generation to generation. But at the Jewish old folks home, where the youngest participant is seventy-five years old, everyone is still required to tell the tale. Story-telling for its own sake, you might call it, whether there is anyone "new" who needs to hear it or not.

You might call this the miracle of Pesah. Think about Hanukkah for a moment. The grand events happened on the stage of history: the challenge to the Seleucid rulers, the establishment of a small but free Jewish kingdom under the Hasmonean family. But what we celebrate is the growing light that lasted for eight days. That is where we see the miraculous presence of God. We could have chosen to focus on the victory, but we chose the light instead. On Pesah too, the great events are those of our historical saga: liberation, defeat of Pharaoh's army, and so on. But we see the miracle in something else: the telling of the tale. That is why Jews have survived so long and bear such a rich culture: because we love telling stories. So the *mitsvah* here, parallel to the kindling of the Hanukkah lights, lies in the telling of the tale.

How will you tell the tale this year? How will you make it come alive, both for yourself and for those who need to hear it? The Haggadah will soon tell us that "*in every generation* they rose up against us to destroy us." Just as the "Egypt" of each generation is unique, so too must the telling of the tale each Pesah be different and renewed.

והיו מספרים **Ve-hayu mesapperim.** "...telling the tale all night." Two interpretations are offered to this event. Some see it as the ultimate activists' seder: Rabbi Akiva was a supporter of Bar Kokhba's rebellion against the Romans, one that ended in a tragedy that included his own martyrdom. The event depicted here is the heady beginning of that revolution. The rabbis on the rebels' side told the tale of liberation all night long, so ready were they to apply it to the great struggle for freedom that lay directly before them. But the Hasidic haggadah reads it differently. Here the rabbis are depicted as entering into the story of inner liberation with such excitement and wholeness that they are caught up in ecstatic fervor. Their "faces shone like the sun" and "their words came forth and

flew across the sky” until they lost all sense of time and did not realize that the physical dawn had come.

Both of these strands together make up the best of our tradition - the activist and the ecstatic. How to balance them, or even better, to weave them together – that is the challenge for today’s Jewish seeker. But telling the tale all night is probably a good beginning.

הלילות **Ha-leylot**. “So that you recall the day you came out of Egypt all the days of your life’ teaches that the Exodus from Egypt has to be mentioned (that is to say: the final paragraph of the *shema*’ needs to be recited) at night as well as during the day. “The Hasidic commentators tell us that it is “at night,” here in the dark night of exile, when we most need to remember that we have already come out of Egypt. For Jews living in the ghetto or *shtetl* and under the constant threat of oppression, that was indeed a saving message. The fact that God had already redeemed us from an even worse burden of enslavement held out the hope that another redemption might come as well. “He will redeem us at the end as in the beginning,” as the sephardic version of *mussaf* words it. For Jews in places of great darkness, no memory was more precious. Even during the Holocaust, when the terror was even greater than that of Egypt, the memory served as an inspiration for the uprising in the Warsaw Ghetto.

But what of us Jews who are not oppressed, or at least not in the obvious ways that our ancestors suffered? We too are commanded to remember the Exodus every day. What is that memory supposed to mean for the likes of us? I look to two ways in which the *commandment* to remember (and it is considered one of the Torah’s 248 positive commandments!) applies to us. We need to ask ourselves every day: “To what am I enslaved?” We have neither Pharaoh or Czar restricting our lives, but let’s try on a few other categories to see where the shoe might fit. My need for a big monthly paycheck? Is that an “enslavement?” My vision of success, the constant push to higher and higher achievement? Am I enslaved to that? Or worse – am I enslaving my children to it? A life of affluence? Do I suffer from the “affluenza” disease that marks too many Americans? (Are we Jews especially susceptible to that one?) An unhealthy relationship? Addictions? Entertainment? The computer screen? Are these not “enslavements” in my life? “So that you recall” means that we need to ask ourselves these questions every day. Remember each morning and night what it is like to wake up to newly-won freedom, and ask yourself how you can get there again, back to that moment of singing at the shore of the sea.

But we who are not obviously oppressed also have to remember that moment each day for the sake of those who still do suffer the old-fashioned kind of Egyptian bondage. There are real slaveries in the world, terrible sites and times of human oppression. In our post-Holocaust memory we have seen one episode after another of terrible human

suffering, whether caused by natural disaster or at the hands of brutal humanity. Biafra. Rwanda. Bosnia. Kosovo. Cambodia. Afghanistan. Iraq. Darfur. Syria. War, famine, earthquake, tsunami. and war again. Each of these creates misery and oppression, as we live on in comfort, busily securing our own successes.

Remember every day. Be there to extend a hand, even both hands. As we live and thrive in a society where the economic gaps widen every day, we need to tithe – or better – for the poor, as well as working and voting to change that social disorder.

ברוך המקום **Barukh ha-maqom**. Literally: “Blessed is the place.” In Hebrew *maqom*, “place” is a name for God. We are not sure exactly how this came about, but it seems related to the rabbinic adage that: “God is the *maqom* of the world, but the world is not God’s *maqom*.” This means that the universe is located “inside” Y-H-W-H, both surrounded and filled by divine presence. All we need to do is to open our eyes to that reality. At the same time, the perceptible universe is not co-extensive with God; the mystery of Y-H-W-H reaches infinitely beyond our grasp.

But why should this particular name of God, almost never used in liturgy, appear in the Haggadah? Perhaps it is to teach us that *every* place is a place of Y-H-W-H. The story of Pesah happens not in the Holy Land, but in Egypt. There is much in our memory that could make Egypt a detested place, associated only with suffering and enslavement. To say tonight that God is *Ha-Maqom* reminds us that the One may be revealed everywhere, even in what may seem the most unlikely places. The rabbis asked why Y-H-W-H was revealed to Moses in a humble thornbush, rather than a more stately tree. Their answer: “to teach you that no place is devoid of God, not even a thornbush.” Not even Egypt, not even the house of bondage.

אילו היה שם לא היה נגאל **Illu hayah sham lo hayah nig'al**. "Had he been there he would not have been redeemed."

Why would this person not have been redeemed? Could you imagine either God or Moses being so judgmental or vindictive as to leave someone behind? What sin is so awful that it would cause one to deserve being left in Egypt?

No, the point is not that they would have abandoned the "wicked child." This person who denies the community would have refused redemption! "What do you mean? Why should *I* leave Egypt? How could they possibly mean *me* when they say "Jew?" Or "*Jude*." Or "*Zhyd*." This refers to the Jews who denied their communal identity, or tried

to hide themselves from reality. The World War One veteran who stayed in Germany until it was too late, sure that they would never harm a German hero...The Soviet Jew who could not let herself believe that Communism had betrayed her...The Syrian Jew who could not give up his business interests... “He would not have been redeemed” because he would have chosen not to leave, even when he knew the time had come.

This lesson also applies to our own enslavements. The call to liberation comes, but we have to respond to it. That is not always as easy as it sounds. Sometimes liberation is offered us as a gift, and *still* we refuse to leave Egypt.

אילו קרבנו לפני הר סיני **Illu qervanu lifney har Sinai...** "Had God brought us near to Mount Sinai, without giving us the Torah..." This verse of *dayyenu*, says Rabbi Levi Yizhak of Berdichev, makes no sense. What would be the purpose of coming to Sinai if there was to be no Torah, no revelation? The answer, he says, lies in what happened to Israel in the three days of preparation for the great event. Each one who was present, he says (and of course all of us were present at Sinai!), so sincerely and deeply opened his /her heart to Torah, casting aside all material concerns in order to hear only God's word, that they were able to discover the entire Torah already implanted within their own hearts. Each of us contains Torah within us; it is only our preoccupation with trivial and superficial pursuits that keeps us from turning inward to find it. The *promise* of revelation was enough, he says, to evoke this discovery/revelation from within.

*Avraham Avinu*, Abraham our Father, the Talmud tells us, fulfilled the entire Torah, even down to the last detail. (He even fed the angels milk *before* meat, just as the law permits!) But how did he know Torah, living hundreds of years before it was given? Abraham was able to look within. Having left his homeland and his father's house, following God faithfully across the desert, Abraham was stripped of all but the most basic physical needs. There was no wall left that separated him from his own innermost self, where he was able to discover all the secrets of the Torah.

This teaching is as fresh for us non-literalists as it was for the Hasidic ears that first heard it two hundred years ago. We too understand its eternal truths: the sacred journey into the heart, the call for letting go, and the discovery that all we need to know is already inscribed within us. Nothing in our Jewish journey contradicts this.

והיא שעמדה **Ve-hi she-'amdah**. Literally: “She who stood up for our ancestors and for us...” Kabbalistic tradition insists that the redemption from Egypt has its root in *binah*, mother of the seven lower divine rungs, the inner womb of God. Exodus/liberation is a rebirth, a new beginning of life in awareness of God's creation, so it has to go back to the place within the godhead that speaks to such a moment.

Let me try to put this insight into the language of a contemporary religious psychology. I have long believed that the journey up the ladder of the ten *sefirot* is really to be seen as a journey inward, through ten successively deeper modes of spiritual consciousness. There is a time, the *haggadah* is teaching us, when all our outer senses, all the aspects of our own personalities, dwell in darkness. “Jacob and his sons went down to Egypt” means that our entire “household,” all the various emotions that we might think comprise us as selves, sometimes are “in exile,” unable to function. We are shut down, our inner lights are all dimmed. The Kabbalist’s response to such a moment is to dig a deeper wellspring within the self. There is an inner place that is deeper than any of our wounds, an endless resource from which redemption will yet spring forth. This is the mothering aspect of God active within the self. *Binah* is the place of *teshuvah*, the rebirthing energy within Y-H-W-H, and hence within every human soul. *She* is the One who stands up for us, always.

וירעו אותנו המצרים **Va-yare‘u otanu ha-mitsrim.** “The Egyptians treated us badly.” But the unusual phrase, read literally, can also mean “The Egyptians made us evil” or “brought out the bad in us.” There is much in our tradition that talks about the nobility of the Hebrew slaves, their loyalty to the ways of their ancestors, and so forth. But it is also important to remember that oppression brings forth qualities in ourselves that do not make us proud: anger, hatred, fear of outsiders, a desire for revenge, and a bitterness about our fate that makes change very slow and painful. All these can be found in the tale of Exodus and its aftermath. It is important to recognize these as the legacy of enslavement, and not to let them dominate us even after we are free. We also need to recall them when dealing with other groups that are still struggling with the long aftermath of oppression. Suffering sometimes “brings out the bad in us” that it often takes many generations to overcome.

זו גילוי שכינה **Zo gilluy shekhinah.** “This refers to the revelation of God’s presence.” Liberation itself is a sacred moment, a time when God is “seen” in a special way. Much in our tradition makes a different claim: that the Exodus was only a first step, a preparation for the journey to Sinai, where God was to be revealed. We count the fifty days of the *‘omer* in anticipation of that great event. The Torah itself says “I am Y-H-W-H your God who brought you out of the Land of Egypt to be your God,” and we often interpret this to mean that liberation was only for the sake of the covenant that was to follow. But here the Haggadah speaks differently, reminding us that we can see God in the moment we become free. “A handmaiden at the Sea saw more than the greatest

prophet,” we are taught. There she was, dancing for freedom, seeing God. Liberation itself is a moment in which God’s face is revealed.

גאל ישראל **Ga’al yisra’el.** “Who has redeemed Israel.” “How dare we recite such a blessing,” asks Rabbi Levi Yizhak, “while we are still in exile? Aren’t we afraid that saying an untrue blessing would be a profanation of God’s name?”

“A child wants to eat a cookie,” the master said. He cries out “Daddy, may I have a cookie?” The father says no. But if the child *really* wants to eat that cookie, what will he do? He’ll loudly call out the blessing *borei miney mezonot*, thanking God for creating foods of grain, the blessing recited before eating a cookie. The father, hearing the child mention God’s name, will not let it be in vain. He *has to* give the child his cookie. So we cry out “Blessed are You O Lord, who has redeemed Israel!” and God will *have to* redeem us.

מצה זו **Matsah zo.** “This matzah...” The haggadah offers us two explanations for the eating of matsah. One is taken directly from the Torah: matsah represents the unleavened bread that the Israelites carried on their shoulders as they departed in haste; it was baked only by the hot desert sun. This interpretation means that in matsah we are to taste the moment of liberation, the rush out of Egypt and into freedom that has forever transformed our lives. But we are also told, earlier in the seder, that “this is the poor people’s bread that our ancestors ate in the Land of Egypt.” Here matsah is about the memory of poverty and suffering, rather than of liberation and joy. Matsah is both of these. If one explanation is not what you need to hear this Pesah, turn the matsah over and try the other.

לא אמות כי אחיה **Lo amut ki ehyeh.** “I shall not die, but live.” The Psalms of Hallel, uniquely recited in the evening at the seder, are filled with exultation and joy. But woven through them is the theme of confrontation with death. The Psalmist has looked death in the face, cried out to God, and been redeemed. This personal struggle with mortality is woven together with the tale of the people’s redemption, “When Israel came forth from Egypt,” which is what makes the text appropriate to the Pesah table.

But the seder, as the great family celebration of all Jews, is also a time when mortality is on our minds. As the tale is passed down from one generation to the next, we inevitably think about those empty places at our table, belonging to those who told *us* the tale and

now are no longer with us. We think of the future seder tables of our children and grandchildren, when we too will be present only as a past memory.

Paradoxically, this is the closest we Jews (many of us, at least) come to a taste of immortality. More than others, we see our lives as a link between generations. The meaning Judaism gives to our lives lies mostly in transmitting Torah to our children and grandchildren. We have a tale to tell, a message to pass down. As we look at our descendents – both physical and spiritual – sitting around the table, we dare to think that the message will survive. In that message, and in the unique ways it will be told by generations to come, we will remain present, long after our physical selves are gone, at this family's seder table.

