

The Secret Message of the Seder **Rabbi Michael L. Feshbach**

All those years, and all those meals. And you just *thought* you knew what Passover was all about!

Centuries of study, hours of arguments, generations of swilling sweet wine, and now, suddenly, after all this time – a new theory! A new idea, which maybe, if it is right, has uncovered a secret, hidden all along... in the pages of our *haggadot*.

Now, let's talk about those *haggadot* for a moment. Which one to use? How to choose? So many choices, it's like brand new flavors of an old familiar candy.

And the choices vary so widely – is it a case of “political correctness” gone mad, the venerable tradition twisted into contortions to fit with every passing fad and fancy? Or is there something subtle, and serious --and relevant and “right” -- about the recent spate of “new” *haggadot* appearing on the scene.

For the last several years *has* seen a rash of new publications, new versions of the telling of the ancient tale. My shelf alone bears witness to many of these politically motivated revisions. First, of course, there are the beautiful editions of the *haggadah* published by the Reform, Reconstructionist and Conservative movements -- and, this year especially, I call your attention to the new Reform movement *haggadah*; it appeared right before Pesach last year, it is called *Kol Dichfin; The Open Door*, it has many innovative features, and there is information about how to order it elsewhere in this edition of the *Shofar*.

But beyond the movement publications is a book for every fad or fancy. There is the *Haggadah for the Liberated Lamb* -- a special *seder* for vegetarians. And there is the recently revised *Common Road to Freedom* -- a *seder* of liberation designed to celebrate similarities in the experiences of blacks and Jews. There is the redundantly titled *Exodus Haggadah* -- this one focusing on the exodus of the Jews of the Former Soviet Union, as well as the Exodus of old. There is the *San Diego Women 's Haggadah*, and *The Rainbow Haggadah*, published by the New Jewish Agenda, and containing three complete *haggadot* -- one focusing on women's liberation, another on the threat of nuclear war, and yet a third on a topic much on our minds these days, *A Haggadah for the Children of Abraham*, which focuses on peace between Israelis and Palestinians.

So far away from the Maxwell House days.* It is all so very “hip.” It is all like an assault on an ancient ritual, a hunger for relevance that perverts the tradition.

Or is it? Perhaps... perhaps if we look into the history of the *haggadah* more deeply... we will discover that even the “traditional” “Orthodox” “undiluted” *haggadah* of the past... even that was an accommodation to the relevant issues of its day. Even the old-time religion was once “politically correct.” And in unlocking the secret message of the traditional *haggadah*, we can, in fact, be reassured about the legitimacy of all these newfangled versions.

At the center of the traditional *haggadah*, before the meal and beyond the parsley, is a midrash. What is a midrash? It is a story about a story in the Bible. Or, better: it is an interpretation, a retelling of the tale, a giving of an answer to which, Jeopardy-like, we need to know the question. It is a way of making an ancient text speak to us, and our issues, today.

The midrash at the center of the *haggadah* begins with a familiar line. "My father was a wandering Aramean." We read it every year. It is the beginning of the sacred national myth, the "four score and seven years ago" typology of history recited by the ancient Israelite farmer. It comes from the book of Deuteronomy, and was originally associated with the first fruits ceremony of Shavuot. And it seems to refer back to one particular story in Genesis, the journey of Abraham.

We read it every year -- and we understand it less often than that. But knowing how it came to be part of the story of Passover rather than Shavuot is the key to unlocking the original meaning of the *haggadah*.

'Arami 'oveid 'avi. My father was a wandering Aramean." That is what the text of Deuteronomy says. But. In the retelling in the *haggadah*, after quoting this verse, the tradition reinterprets the line.., by using different vowels with the same letters (a perfectly legitimate hermeneutical maneuver, since the text of the Torah appears without vowels).

And the result is startling. "*'Arami 'oveid 'avi*" becomes "*'Arami 'ibeid 'avi;*" not "my father was a wandering Aramean," but, "an Aramean (Laban?) sought to *destroy* my father (Jacob)," thus *now* seeing this Biblical verse from Deuteronomy as a reference back to a *different* story in Genesis. It tells a tale not of Abraham, but of Jacob.

The midrash in the traditional *haggadah* continues, retelling the tale, verse by verse, citing the Biblical verses but then adding a phrase to each of them, changing the passage from a sacred history to... something else. The text from Deuteronomy is presented... along with (*italicized*) interpretive comments that frame its meaning in a new way:

"He went down to Egypt" *compelled by the Divine command.*

"He sojourned there" *implies that he did not come dowitz to settle in Egypt, but only to reside there temporarily.*

The essence of the story, then, is cast as that of a community oppressed, forced to reside in Egypt... almost as their only chance at survival..., and hoping one day to return. It is a story of a community attempting to justify its own residence... outside the land of Israel.

Can we be more specific yet? Can we see still more clearly the hand of history in the pages of the *haggadah*? According to one of my teachers, Rabbi Lawrence Hoffman, the answer is: perhaps. For perhaps the writers who changed the vowels in *one* Hebrew word, subtly – secretly -- meant us to do the same with another.

The unvocalized Hebrew letters of the first words, transcribed into English, are 'RMI (since the *aleph* is silent). Perhaps we should read not "*arami*" but "*romi*"! Perhaps the author of the Midrash hint to us here to see not an Aramean enemy, but a more contemporary foe. Not an Aramean – but a Roman! And perhaps, in reading it this way, the whole story unfolds before us.

It is the time after the destruction of the Temple. The old Passover rite, which centered on the Paschal lamb sacrifice, can no longer be observed. Life in the land is unbearable... because an enemy is making it so. Who is the enemy? The *Romans*! Some Jews, just to survive, find themselves forced -- almost compelled -- to leave the land. And where do they settle? Egypt. Only, they feel guilty about it. For; after all, Egypt is a place we are supposed to leave, not one in which we are supposed to dwell.

In all probability, then, the *haggadah* as we have it today is the work of sensitive Jewish writers living in the community of Alexandria. After all, the seder is a Roman-style meal. And the message, if recast in this way, seems clear:

"Look, we know we shouldn't really be here. But we were forced to. The Romans oppressed us. God made us leave, for God wants us to survive. Someday, somehow, we'll go back. In the meantime, pass the *matzah*, will you?"

When it first appeared, the *haggadah* of old served a holy purpose: to take the ancient central, sacred story of redemption from oppression and make it live in a new way, speak in a new voice to the contemporary community. From the very outset, the *haggadah* played out its own central imperative: "*bechol dor vador chayav adam lirot et 'atzmo k'ilu hu yatza' mimitzrayim*; in every generation, *each one of us* must feel as if we *ourselves* have gone forth from Egypt."

The very first *haggadah* made the message real, it made the story live, by making it relevant. Just as all those "new" *haggadot* try to do today.

For now and forever, this year and always, may we see ourselves in the story of redemption. May we each be able to see our own life stories of liberation in the dusty wine-stained pages of an ancient tale.