

The Secret Meaning of the Seder

A Seder Reading: to be inserted before the Ten Plagues
(based on the work of Rabbi Lawrence Hoffman)
as retold by Rabbi Michael Feshbach)

READER:

The traditional Haggadah tells the story of Passover in a special and somewhat tricky way. It uses an approach called a “Midrash.” A “Midrash” is “a story about a story in the Bible.” But there is something slippery -- and at the same time profoundly powerful about a Midrash. Because in *retelling* an old story, we use references and respond to issues that come not from the ancient past, but from our own lives. We thus inevitably filter an old story through the lens of our own experience. In doing so the tale becomes not about “then,” and “them,” but, in deep and often hidden ways, about “here” and “now.” It is about us.

READER:

Before we get to the Ten Plagues, then, we want to take a few moments to look at the story as it is recast by the tradition. For in the Haggadah’s Midrash we can, perhaps, uncover, and discover... the “secret message” of the Seder. And if we understand that message, put into the seder long ago, we will feel a newfound freedom... to really apply the lessons of this Festival in our own lives.

READER:

In telling the story, the rabbis who wrote the Haggadah began with words that remain familiar to us. They are words from the Book of Deuteronomy, and they *seem* to be a straightforward reference back to the story in Genesis about Abraham. For the story begins:

אַרְמִי אֵבֶד אָבִי

Arami Oveid Avi.

“My father was a wandering Aramean.”

But the Midrash is tricky, and depends on a deliberate misreading of the words we inherited from the Torah. Here is the traditional Midrash, with an explanation about what is going on. Before we go any further, we need to understand that the whole premise of what follows, the citation of the Torah and the interpretation around it, all depends on... reading the middle word of the three word phrase above in an entirely new way. Changing the vowels -- which is a bold but legitimate thing to do, since the words as they appear in the scroll of the Torah have no vowels. But the phrase is now presumed to say: *Arami IBEID Avi* -- an Aramean (no longer a reference to Abraham, but now, instead, seen as referring to

Laban) sought to destroy my father (seen now, also, not as Abraham, but as Jacob!)” By just changing the vowels, the sentence is totally new. It refers not to one story in Genesis (Abraham leaving Ancient Iraq) but to another (Jacob and Laban). It is no longer in the form of a subject-adverb-adjective, but, instead, subject-verb-object. Just change the vowels, and a whole new possible meaning emerges. That is what the traditional Haggadah did, in order for the writers to “read themselves,” and their own life situation, into the story. Here, now, is the traditional Midrash:

צא וּלְמַד, מֵה בְּקִשׁ לָבוֹן הָאֲרָמִי לַעֲשׂוֹת לְיַעֲקֹב אָבִינוּ.
 שְׁפָרְעָה לֹא גָזַר אֶלָּא עַל הַזְּכָרִים, וְלָבוֹן בְּקִשׁ לַעֲקֹר אֶת־הַכֹּל.
 “Come and learn” what Laban the Aramean sought to do to Jacob our father. [He was worse than Pharaoh, for] Pharaoh issued a decree against only the males, yet Laban sought to uproot the Israelites altogether.

As it is written:

אֲרָמִי אִבֵּד אָבִי,

Arami oveid avi

[meaning: “my father was a wandering Aramean,”
 but rereading this as *Arami ibbeid Avi*,
 “an Aramean sought to destroy my father.”]

**וַיֵּרַד מִצְרַיִם,
 וַיֵּגֶר שָׁם
 בְּמִתֵּי מֵעֹט
 וַיְהִי שָׁם לְגוֹי גָּדוֹל,
 עָצוּם וְרַב:**

The words above are rest of the verse from Deuteronomy 25:5:

“My father was a wandering Aramean.
 He went down to Egypt
 and sojourned there
 with meager numbers;
 but there he became a great nation,
 very populous.

וַיֵּרֶד מִצְרַיִם, אָנוּס עַל פִּי הַדְּבָר.
וַיֵּגֶר שָׁם. מְלִמְד שְׂלָא יָרַד יַעֲקֹב אָבִינוּ לְהַשְׁתַּקֵּעַ בְּמִצְרַיִם, אֶלָּא
לְגוֹר שָׁם

The Midrash comments on each of these phrases, thereby retelling the story to suit the purposes of the rabbis who wrote it:

“And he went down to Egypt” *forced by the divine decree*
[there was a famine; they wanted to survive; they had no choice].

“And sojourned there” *to teach us that he did not come down to settle in*
Egypt but only to live there temporarily.

The writers?

Does this retelling of the tale reflect any particular period in Jewish history? Was there ever a Jewish community that fit this description geographically, existentially, and emotionally?

There was! For in the second century of the common era, a Jewish community took up residence in Alexandria (Egypt, not Virginia.) They did so -- because they were being persecuted elsewhere. And they felt guilty about it! Because Jews were supposed to *leave* Egypt, not settle there. So they emphasized: it was circumstances that drove them out of their ancestral homeland. They were living here, but watching there. “With their suitcases packed,” as it were. Temporary sojourners, ready to return when circumstances would allow.

The secret

How do we *know* that this Midrash comes from that time period, and that mind-set? We don't. But perhaps the verse was chosen with even more subtlety than it seems. For after all, changing the vowels in a word is a clumsy limb on which to hang so great a weight of meaning. Unless it was a signal to us that we were to carry the tradition forward... and change the vowels in another word as well. Perhaps we were meant to look even at the *first* word of the first phrase quoted above. Without vowels, we would not know to read *Arami*. Since the *aleph* is silent, we simply would see, transliterated: ‘ r m i. And with new vowels we *could* read this words not as *Arami* but as... ‘ *Romi*. Not as an “Aramean” but as... “a Roman.” *A ROMAN sought to destroy my father!* A reading with a secret message, a central lesson which... fits with the whole rest of the Haggadah, reflects the same time period... and justifies the choices of those who felt compelled to flee Roman rule and seek refuge in the Jewish community of Alexandria.

The implication

If this is right, then we get an even more powerful message at the Seder table than we might even have realized before. For here we have a Jewish community boldly reading its needs, and its circumstances, back in to the Biblical story. And if that is the message at the heart of the *original* Haggadah, the pages of this tale cry out to us: can we do any less? Can we not remember that the slaves in the American south saw Pharaoh in the face of their oppressors? That the Jews of the Soviet Union viewed their regime as a metaphorical Egypt? That the sign on the hills leading to Dharamsala, India, the Tibetan Buddhist government-in-exile, reads "Next year in Lhasa," a reference to both their ancestral seat inside China, and to Jewish influence on Buddhism. Wherever people have suffered, people have looked to this tale for hope. Wherever there is oppression and persecution, people see the faces of Pharaoh, the narrow places of *Mitzrayim*, the promise of redemption. In *this* story are *all* our stories, and that is the real reason we tell it and turn it over and over, year after year. It is a tale which only seems to be about yesterday. It is really about tomorrow.