

Thematic Introduction

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Source: Original

In the absence of a stable homeland, Jews have made their home in books – a Jewish home without books is not a Jewish home – and the Haggadah – the core of which is the re-telling of the Exodus from Egypt – has been translated more widely, and revised more often, than any other Jewish book. Everywhere Jews have wandered, they have produced Haggadot (plural: there are 7,000 known versions, not to mention the countless homemade editions like this one), including the most famous of all – the 14th-century Sarajevo Haggadah, which is said to have survived World War II under the floorboards of a mosque and the siege of Sarajevo in a bank vault (cf: 2008 novel *People of the Book* by Geraldine Brooks).

Although it means “the telling,” the Haggadah does not merely tell a story: it is our book of living memory. Because it is not enough to re-tell the story: we must make the leap of empathy into it. *“In every generation a person is obligated to view himself as if she or he were the one who went out of Egypt,”* the Haggadah tells us. And, in the midst of this empathic exercise, it is our role to dissect, extrapolate and discuss its meanings for ourselves – now – in this contemporary world. Those of us who are Jews, who are the Children of Israel, should know the origin of our name: we are named after Jacob (Ya’akov, variation: Akiva) who became Yisrael (Israel); which translates as: ‘he who wrestles with God.’ And, in keeping with our origins and our tradition, on Pesach the story of the Exodus is not meant to be merely recited, but wrestled with.

{with acknowledgement to Jonathan Foer}

So/Nu/Tak, as we enter the Haggadah and begin to tell the story and engage in the symbolic rituals that are part of this event, I invite you to loosen up, get your hands dirty and join with me in wrestling with the ideas, promises, challenges and contradictions of what lies therein.