

Go forth and see ... what's missing

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Source:

If you search the traditional Haggadah, you won't find the name of the man who led the Israelites out of Egypt. Moses is strangely absent, written out of the annual ritual of reenactment. The Torah tells us that Moses was the most humble of men, but surely this is taking humility too far! The message in Moses's absence, though, is clear: we cannot wait for a Moses before tackling redemption in our time – whether saving the planet from the threat of climate disaster, or redeeming our brothers and sisters from modern slavery and trafficking.

There's something else missing from the Haggadah – the great moral imperative of the Torah – *YOU SHALL NOT OPPRESS THE STRANGER ... because you know what it's like to be one*. Over and over, the Torah tells us not to wrong the stranger – to take our experience of slavery and turn it into ethical action. It seems that the most important memory we are to take with us from our hundreds of years of oppression ... is what it feels like to be aliens. And not to inflict that experience on others.

So what happened? Here I think the rabbis of the Haggadah got a little off course when they arrived at the heart of Maggid. As a framework for telling the story of the Exodus, they selected the simple, proud paragraph in Deuteronomy that the free Israelite was supposed to proclaim when bringing a harvest basket of fruit to the Temple. It begins: "A wandering Aramean was my father...."

But then the rabbis of the Haggadah turned that straightforward recollection into a victim's lament – "Go forth and inquire what the Aramean tried to do to my father." Now the victimhood extends back to Jacob, who suffered at the hands of his father-in-law Laban the Aramean (although as I recall the story, Jacob gave as good as he got).

In any case, here's how I'd like the Haggadah to remember the Torah's mandate at the beginning of the retelling of the Exodus story each year:

Tzei u-l'mad. .. Go forth and learn how the Torah teaches us to act upon our experience of slavery in Egypt. *She-neemar*, as it is said, "You shall not oppress a stranger, for you know the feelings of the stranger, having yourself been strangers in the land of Egypt." (Ex. 23:9). And when we came to the land of Israel, we recalled: "A wandering Aramean was my father and he went down to Egypt (in search of food) and sojourned there with only a few, and there he became a great and populous nation."