

The haggadah - lessons in gratitude

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The Haggadah is not just about the Exodus from Egypt. Look below its surface and you'll discover a rich subtext that imparts essential lessons about gratitude and how to thank God for Divine benevolence.

The Haggadah's name comes from the Hebrew verb, " *l'hagid* ," "to tell." There are other verbs that mean "to tell," but " *l'hagid* " implies paying attention to details.

On Seder night we go over the fine points of what actually happened. We dwell on the details.

When we sing " *Dayeinu* ," we list what seems like an itemized account of everything God did to take us out of Egypt. After each line, we say " *dayeinu* ," it would have been enough if that was all God did for us. Then, but wait! There's more! The next verse lists another. We say "it would have been enough" to show that we recognize and appreciate the benefit of every single thing the Almighty did for us.

At our Seder, one of the guests inevitably protests, "But it *wouldn't* have been enough if God had divided the sea for us, but not brought us across on dry land. We wouldn't have been saved, and the whole purpose of taking us out of Egypt would have been negated."

The itemized list of " *Dayeinu* " is not to assert that the steps which follow each item were expendable. *Dayeinu* is not an intellectual construct, but rather an attitude, a sense of fullness, of having received so much that one feels satisfied.

Dayeinu consciousness is the opposite of the attitude, "He/she/they didn't do enough for me." I once had a conversation with a young man who was full of complaints about his parents. I asked, "When you were young, did they take care of you when you were sick?"

He answered, "Sure, all parents do."

"Did they provide you with clothes, books, toys, a bicycle, and your own P.C.?"

"Sure, but so what?" he replied. "There were plenty of things I didn't get."

The foundation for any loving relationship – with parents, with one's spouse, or with God – is appreciation. And the foundation of appreciation is noticing and being grateful for each specific thing we receive. " *Dayeinu* ."

Right before we sing " *Dayeinu* ," the Haggadah recounts a disagreement among Rabbi Yossi the Galilean, Rabbi Eliezer, and Rabbi Akiva over just how many facets there were to the Ten Plagues and exactly how many miracles occurred at the splitting of the Red Sea.

In many Seders, this section elicits a disgruntled, "Who cares?" (especially among those who are hungry for dinner). Ten Plagues, 50 plagues, 200 Plagues. What's the difference?

The secret of gratitude is specificity. Let's say that on their wedding anniversary, Jon gave his wife Ruth a heart-shaped box tied with a beautiful ribbon filled with chocolates of different shapes and flavors. How does Jon know Ruth is really grateful? If she thanks him not only for the chocolates, but also for the box and the ribbon, and as she eats each one she points out, "Oh, this one is in the shape of a butterfly." "Look at this one; it looks like a cameo." "This one tastes like mocha, my favorite," then Jon is certain that her gratitude is genuine.

A child's self-esteem is not promoted by general compliments. The child dismisses, "Oh, that's a beautiful picture you drew," as a stock reply, not real praise. If you want her to feel good about your compliment, be specific: "I like the red color you drew the flowers with; it's so bright. And that butterfly with the blue and green dots is the happiest butterfly I ever saw." Children, who are experts at discerning what's genuine, know that real appreciation hones in on the details.

The sages mentioned in the Haggadah knew this secret 2,000 years ago. The more details we can point out, the more we can be thankful for. If there were an additional fifty miracles at the splitting of the sea, that means we can thank God an additional fifty times.

Passover is about developing a loving relationship with God. Since loving relationships are based on gratitude, the Haggadah highlights all the details of the Exodus, so that we will feel overwhelmed with gratitude to God.

The relationship that is given such a spur at Passover must be sustained throughout the year. That's why Judaism mandates three prayer periods a day and blessings to be said before and after everything a Jew eats or drinks. When a Jew is grateful for every little thing, he or she realizes that nothing is little. Even a glass of water is a way of connecting to God who created it. Loving God means being grateful for the amazing way each finger moves and feels, for the immune-system's full-time, assiduous protection, and for even the services provided by the little hairs inside the nose. *Dayeinu*.