

Haggadah and Liberation

Contributed by [Mark Hurvitz](#)

Source: A Growing Haggadah

Through the ages, our people's Spring festival has expanded to express an ever greater understanding of the concept of liberation. The earliest meanings of the holiday relate back to pre-Israelite times and refer to two distinct holidays: the Feast of the Pascal Lamb and the Festival of Matzot, or Feast of Unleavened Bread. Each of these feasts, occurring at the lambing season and the beginning of the wheat and barley harvest respectively, celebrate the renewal of the year's growth and, so, a liberation from the fear of economic destruction. In biblical times, both of these holidays gained historical associations and related to the liberation of the Hebrews from slavery in Egypt. During the biblical period the Exodus event became the central idea of Jewish life and the experience from which the core values of our people grew. Prescriptions for social, civil and ritual practices all harkened back to the experience of the liberation because: "You were strangers in the land of Egypt." Some of these rules instituted the Sabbath (Deuteronomy 5:12-15), regulated loans (Leviticus 25:35-38) and the treatment of servants (Leviticus 25:29-43), as well as widows, orphans and the poor (Deuteronomy 16:11, 12), and set the guidelines for sexual morality (Leviticus 18:3ff).

Toward the close of the biblical period individual families celebrated the Passover by bringing their sacrifice to the Temple in Jerusalem, then returning to their homes to cook the meal and eat it with the matzot and bitter herbs. Except that the slaughtering occurred in the Temple, the celebration differed little from what Exodus prescribed. This is still essentially the practice among the Samaritans who gather each year to observe the Passover on Mount Gerizim. The late biblical period was a time of tremendous spiritual creativity among our people and new interpretations as well as modes of observing the festival developed. We did not discard earlier ideas about the Passover. Rather, we expanded some of them to relate to then-contemporary spiritual and political concerns. The Passover Seder and its Haggadah developed to express these ideas.

The biblical text lends itself to this process. The Passover Haggadah uses a variety of terms to describe the transformation of the ancient Hebrews when they left Egypt. After the Exodus, according to the Bible, God simply tells the people (Ex. 11:17) "I brought your ranks out of the land of Egypt." However, before the Exodus, the Bible relates a more detailed description of what is to happen. There (Ex. 6:6-7), the text uses a series of terms that make their way into the Haggadah and shape how we have understood the Exodus ever since: "...I will free you from the burdens of the Egyptians and deliver you from their bondage. I will redeem you with an outstretched arm and through extraordinary chastisements. And I will take you to be my people...."

Each of these terms has an ancient tradition of meaning. Nonetheless, together, they have come to connote words which, in American usage of our day, suggest "liberation." While "redemption" in a religious context implies a spiritual state, in its ancient biblical context, it referred to an individual act of physically saving someone from danger or bondage. "Deliverance" has also been understood with its more "spiritual" connotation; yet, as is clear from the Exodus passage, it is also a political term. While the word Haggadah means "narrative," very little of the classic Haggadah is devoted to a simple telling of the Exodus story. Instead the rabbis wove a variety of activities into the Seder event that purportedly serve to highlight the values of the Exodus and enable the participants to "learn by doing." There have been many textual additions to the Haggadah as well as commentaries on the meaning of the texts and actions over the ages, still, a basic structure (Seder means "order") remains. The Seder and the Haggadah begin with a recitation of the fourteen major segments of the evening's program:

1. Sanctifying the holiday

8. Eating the Bitter Herb

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| 2. Washing the Hands | 9. Eating the Matzah with the Bitter Herb |
| 3. Eating the green vegetable dipped in salt water; | 10. Eating the meal |
| 4. Break the middle Matzah; | 11. Finding the Afikoman |
| 5. Reciting the Narrative; | 12. Reciting the grace after meals |
| 6. Washing the hands (before eating the meal); | 13. Singing Psalms of praise |
| 7. Blessing for the bread and the Matzah | 14. Concluding with the hope that we have reenacted the Exodus with the appropriate intention. |

Each section of the Seder has non-narrative interpretations that show the value of liberation. Even the segment of the Seder devoted to the formal reciting of the Haggadah, has little direct narrative. Instead, the text consists of questions, biblical passages, rabbinic tales and songs woven together. All these relate to the various aspects of the Exodus as we expanded and redefined the holiday as the spiritual liberation from idolatry to the belief in ethical monotheism ("God"). One of the earliest additional understandings of the Seder understood the "Exodus" as redemption from our spiritual inadequacies. The Jewish messianic movement of the first century CE which followed the teachings of Jesus of Nazareth highlighted this aspect. According to Solomon Zeitlin, their texts describe the "Last Supper" as either a celebration of the Passover Seder, or the meal of the night preceding. Three of the synoptic gospels state that Jesus was arrested the night of the Passover meal. He was thereby identified as the paschal lamb sacrificed to redeem them from sin. Justin Martyr made this idea explicit by saying: "For the pascha was Christ who was afterwards sacrificed...; And as the blood of the Passover saved us who were in Egypt, so also the blood of Christ will deliver from death those who have believed." In order to make Jesus more obviously the Passover sacrifice, the Gospel of John sets the last supper as a simple meal the night before the sacrifice.

The idea that the Passover could refer to the awaited messianic redeemer was not a novum of the Christian sect. Evidence exists for this was presented by the Jewish scholar David Daube. Toward the beginning of the Seder, early in the narrative section, we break the middle of three matzot on the Seder table and hide one of the halves. We must find this piece of Matzah, called the Afikoman, by the end of the meal and eat it before the Seder can continue. The word Afikoman is commonly understood to come from the Greek word for dessert. Daube, however, suggests that it refers to the messiah, who, separated from the Jewish people, will during the course of the Passover celebration be reunited with us, saving us once again.

Approximately a hundred years following the rise of Christianity, during the Hadrianic persecutions (circa 135-150 CE), the rabbis added a more political understanding to the Passover observance. The text relates the story of five rabbis who spent Seder night together deeply involved in discussing the Exodus from Egypt. Finally, at dawn, their pupils told them that the time for the morning prayers had arrived. The event was finally written down in the Amoraic period (225-650) and added to the Haggadah, once again in the narrative section, by the Gaonic period (650-1075). At first glance it is not obvious what political relevance the text has. Nonetheless, the commentators are unanimous in understanding the text as referring to a clandestine meeting of leaders of the rebellion against Rome who met under cover to celebrate the liberation from oppression of an earlier despot and plan the revolt against a contemporary oppressor.

The Haggadah does not tell us a tale of how our greatest sages did not know that the time had come for saying the Shema in the morning.... Could anyone imagine that the students would come to tell their teachers what had to be done?... The students were guards posted to alert the rabbis of any Roman patrols. When day broke, the students told their masters, using a code phrase that "the time has arrived for saying the Shema prayer," and they needed to be more careful because of the daylight. The many editions of the Haggadah issued from the late medieval period through the early modern period both in manuscript and printed versions differed primarily by way of their illustrations, translations or the commentaries attached to them.