

Singing at the Seder - Music and Memory

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The authors of the Haggadah had only one night in which to distill the entire Jewish corpus of freedom, to imprint the story of the Exodus into the Jewish memory of our children. So much to cover— dozens of topics, hundreds of questions— and the authors of the Haggadah decided to have us sing the table of contents, “Dayenu,” the Four Questions, and others?

Similarly, one observing Pesach from afar might think it is a religiously themed cooking show. The Seder leader ensures the presence of special foods, arranges them thoughtfully, points to them, and discusses them. Yes, clearly, the Jewish New Year celebration commands a good meal. So do other Jewish events. Yet only on Pesach, when we have dozens of the most fundamental questions to discuss in one short evening, do we devote so much time to preparing and talking about the food.

What is going on? First, music. One of the seminal themes and functions of the Pesach experience is the constructing and strengthening of Jewish community. This purpose is evident from when the Torah establishes that the Pesach meal would be constituted by households joining together— and, as we will see, rises to maximal importance in the Haggadah text. From military fight songs to chants at protest marches, from national anthems to school cheers, from the Four Questions to “Dayenu” at the Seder, groups of people often express their fidelity to each other and build their shared commitments to each other by singing together.

Why? Again, 21st Century science explains the logic informing an ancient Jewish practice. Oxytocin is the neuropeptide that is produced by the most profound activities of human bonding— sexual intercourse and breastfeeding. Hence its nickname: the “love hormone.” Experiments in the 2000s have shown that there is another activity that induces the release of oxytocin: singing together.

Another deeply important purpose of the Seder is to strengthen and instill Jewish memory. The Haggadah guides us to consider Jewish life from the Torah as a continuous story, and the enslavement of our ancestors as part of our experience rather than our history. And the Seder itself is designed, in ways that we will see, to create lasting Jewish memories for our children.

In 2018, the Journal of Prevention of Alzheimer’s Disease published a paper about the autonomous sensory meridian response (ASMR)— which is the brain function that is aroused by music. Even as Alzheimer’s and other forms of dementia destroy the memory, the ASMR generally remains unaffected. Music, modern science instructs us, is the most durable part of the memory.

A night devoted to the cultivation of memory, as the Seder in large part is, would need music. Long before social science, the authors of the Haggadah seemed to know that and acted accordingly.