

The Seder in Bnei Brak


Contributed by [The Telling By Mark Gerson](#)

Source: The Telling

Life is

not a

but a



It must have been quite a Seder in Bnei Brak, with these five rabbis telling the story with such fervor that they had to be interrupted in the morning by their students! The ideas, the perspectives, the wisdom, the analysis, the connections, the dreams, the predictions that must have filled the Seder! One wonders, what did they talk about?

We are only given one subject that they discussed. It is not about any of the great men and women of the Exodus or their precursors in Genesis. It is not about freedom, slavery, and liberation; it does not contain anything of ritual significance; it does not address any of the obligations or questions that are aroused on this Jewish New Year; it does not reference anything from the Torah.

We don't even get to it right away, and that's not only because the discussion of its conclusion comes first. First, we learn who brings up the subject— Elazar ben Azariah. He is known as “the young man who became gray overnight”— a distinction manifested by his being put on the Sanhedrin, the ancient Jewish court, as a teenager.

He was likely a teenager at the time of this Seder at Bnei Brak that is immortalized in the Haggadah. We also learn how Rabbi Elazar ben Azariah introduces the subject of discussion. He says, “I am like a seventy-year-old man.” This is interesting and instructive for multiple reasons, which build on the fact that this self-reference is regarded positively.

That Rabbi Elazar ben Azariah would so positively describe himself as being like an old person is just one of the striking things about his introduction. The even more striking thing is that he describes himself so positively at all. We have a word for publicly describing oneself positively, and it does not have a positive connotation. It is: bragging. If this young rabbi really had the wisdom of a seventy-year-old, wouldn't he just make his point and let others marvel at his being wise beyond his years? Why would a great rabbi be immortalized for bragging, an act for which he suffers no criticism— at the Seder or subsequently?

The inclusion of such a mystery in the Haggadah can only exist to teach us something, to lead us to consider something that will help us in the new year, to guide us in some way. And sure enough, it does.

The Torah almost never uses adjectives to describe people. Instead, the Torah presents its characters in stories and allows readers to come to their own conclusions. There is an exception, illustrating the importance of the quality it wants to establish with perfect clarity. In Numbers 12:3, God calls Moses “a very humble man, more than any man on the face of the earth.” Yet Moses single-handedly takes on a gang that is harassing women, flares with anger at the Pharaoh, confidently leads a maddening people through wars and rebellions in the desert, and defiantly confronts God multiple times.

This is the humblest of all men?

There is more. Moses acquiesces when the artisan of the Torah, Bezalel, effectively tells him that there is a better way to design the Tabernacle. Moses tells God to “blot me out of your Torah” if God abandons the Jewish people. Moses is delighted when two other people, Eldad and Medad, are “prophesying in the camp”—an act that even his protégé, Joshua, thought should be reserved for Moses. When Moses is insulted by his sister and she falls ill, he prays for her.

Like God who praises his own creation and allows his name to be erased to save a marriage, Moses fully acknowledges his accomplishments and the abilities that enable them— and always sublimates himself to the principles that he stands for. At seemingly every opportunity, he demonstrates his willingness and even eagerness to sacrifice his honor in order to benefit his family, his people, his faith, or his mission. It is only because of his robust self-assuredness that Moses is able to appreciate where others are better than him, brush off slights (and focus on genuine threats), and always sacrifice his personal interests for the principles that he is devoted to serving. The humble person, the Christian writer C. S. Lewis says, “will not be thinking about himself at all.”

How can the lesson in humility be best understood and lived by those at the Seder? Perhaps by starting with the question: Is life a gift from God? Most people, from every faith, would answer: “Yes, of course.” However, Rabbi Moshe Scheiner suggests another approach— which begins by understanding the nature of a gift.

A gift is something valuable that is given with nothing expected in return. In fact, any reciprocal obligation negates its status as a gift. A recipient of a gift may want to reciprocate, but he has no need to do so.

Life, unlike a gift, comes with substantial obligations to the giver. Life is not a gift but a loan. And every loan comes with a detailed agreement, full of detailed obligations (sometimes called covenants). God's side of the agreement contains the unique and substantial abilities he has given each of us. Our side of the agreement— our loan covenants— are the products of these abilities, deployed in service of making the world a dwelling place for God. If one does not read the loan agreement, he is not being humble. He is being irresponsible. One who does not acknowledge and appreciate his special abilities will not be able to do the work God intends for him. For a scientist to advance human knowledge, a doctor to ameliorate human suffering, a lineman to install electrical systems, a parent to raise children, a businessperson to create jobs and donate to sacred causes, a teacher to inspire students, a firefighter to save families, that individual must be fully aware of her significant talents. With that confidence, she can

work to develop and deploy them. A falsely humble person will be incapable of participating in that process to the detriment of people and the disappointment of God.

What an inspiration to the young and the old at the Seder! A young person can achieve the wisdom of the elder and warrant a space at the table with the sages of the era. And a 120-year-old person can have the vitality of a youth whose eyes are undimmed. And to everyone: God has extended us an enormous loan— and in his role as the divine credit officer would only have done so if he had the confidence that we had the resources to make good on it.