

Passover as Improvisational Theatre

In structuring the Seder and creating the Haggadah, Ha"zal, our sages designed an incredible, interactive learning experience, enabling multiple generations to teach each other and become part of a centuries old dialogue of discovering the inner meaning of Pesach and its implications for their own lives. The rituals of the Seder and the texts of the Haggadah were our teachers' vehicle for translating one of the meta-messages of Pesach, "That each person is supposed to feel as if they themselves left Egyptian servitude to go forward into the wilderness, to encounter the Holy One, and become a sacred nation." It is this journey that the Seder attempts to take us on; transporting us back into our people's past so that we can emerge transformed and ready to build our Jewish future.

While the text of the Haggadah has remained relatively unchanged, at least for the last 1000 years¹, our ancestors through the ages found ways to add their own unique elements to the Haggadah. Through the middle ages, the Haggadah was often illuminated and illustrated, reflecting the artistic style of the day, capturing the realia of Pesach celebrations and introducing visual midrashic messages into the text.

One such midrash depicts a woman surrounded by six "newborn" children; a visual depiction of the midrashic interpretation of the verse in Exodus (1:7), "But the Israelites were fertile and prolific; they multiplied and increased very greatly," in which the seeming redundancy of using six words to express the growth of the Jewish people was interpreted as meaning each pregnancy resulted in sextuplets. (Imagine what a field day The Learning Channel would have had!)

Regardless of the midrash's historic accuracy, its inclusion is noteworthy for two reasons. First, the presumption that the person viewing the illustration would know the midrash which under-girded the illustration and second, that the reader would understand its message, that as Jews, living in a foreign land, fraught with challenges, the need for large Jewish families to insure Jewish continuity was incumbent on all Jews of that era.

Another example would be the inclusion of a man riding on a donkey either approaching or going through an arched doorway. This illustration occurs frequently as an illustration on the page wherein the passage "pour out your wrath" שפוך חמתך, appears. Again, the artist relies upon the reader, this time to recognize the depiction as the arrival of the



messiah through the Golden Gate of the city of Jerusalem thus ushering in the messianic era of peace, harmony and redemption. Living with the weight of the Diaspora experience on their shoulders, this expression of future redemption transformed the entire Pesach narrative from an historical account into a template for the future when God would again redeem the Jewish people, gather them from their exile and return them to their ancestral land.

The common thread between these examples, and that weaves itself through all these visual midrashic interpolations, is the ability of the artist to rely on the reader to make the necessary connections; to bring sufficient knowledge to the dynamic interplay between text and illustration, between the midrashic interpretation of the past and its meaning in the unfolding Jewish experience.

Many contemporary Haggadot have continued and expanded this process, adding rich illustrations, innovative readings and modern midrashic interpretations. While many of these Haggadot also include guidance for the Seder leader, direction to participants and commentary for learning, all of these Haggadot demand of us what the Haggadah has always demanded – that we bring to the table a knowledge of the Pesach story, our ability to read beyond the surface of the narrative, our commitment to enter into the centuries old dialogue, recognizing that the Haggadah is not a fixed script to be read slavishly but rather the structure of improvisational theatre which comes alive by virtue of our creative expression.

Posted on the synagogue's website you can find resources that can help you in creating a truly dynamic and exciting Seder experience.

Jodi, Sarah, Yonatan and Miriam join me in wishing all of you a Chag Kasher v'sameyach, a happy, kosher and joyous holiday.

B'vracha,

Rabbi David M. Eligberg

1 This is based on the oldest Haggadah manuscript believed to exist today and is in the Library of the Jewish Theological Seminary in New York