

Who Owns the Exodus? Who Owns the Seder? Who Owns the
Haggadah? Who Owns the Hebrew language?

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Temple Aliyah

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Introduction:

I want to begin this morning by sharing a Hebrew poem with you.

Then I want to talk with you about how I came to learn about and study this poem.

Finally, I want to share with you why I'm sharing this poem with you, and what we might learn from it.

Part I: The poem

ענה לי שוטר
מה נשתנה הלילה הזה
מכל הלילות
מה נשתנה הלילה הזה
שכל הלילות לאט עוברים
והלילה הזה לאט עובר
ענה לי שוטר

Answer me, guard
What makes this night different
From all other nights
What makes this night different
That all the nights
Pass slowly
And this night passes slowly
Answer me, guard.

What is this poem about? What is the situation that the poem captures?

It seems, from its words, to be the cry of an imprisoned person, right? It's a cry by a prisoner to his or her guard, right? [When presented in synagogue on April 9th, the first response to this question was that the poem was the cry of a concentration camp inmate.]

This poem, written in Hebrew, alludes to a very famous Hebrew passage in a very famous Hebrew text. What's the passage, and what's the text?

Yes, it's an allusion to the "Four Questions" in the Haggadah, the script we use on the night of the seder.

As is the case with all poetic allusions, there have to be reasons for that allusion. What might they be? Why would the poet be alluding to the Four Questions?

Well, the purpose of the seder is to help us re-enact the Exodus, the transition of our people from slavery to freedom. The author of the poem is writing from the perspective of one who is imprisoned. In a sense, the author is inviting us, challenging us, to identify with him, whoever he or she is, as we celebrate Pesach, right?

Now, how is the question in the poem similar to, and how is it different from, the *Mah Nishtanah* in the Haggadah?

On the one hand, this poem seems to recite the simple question from the Haggadah, repeated verbatim: "How is this night different?" It has a child-like innocence to it, doesn't it? And yet, the author is presumably a prisoner, which suggests that he isn't so innocent, right?

There's one big difference between this question and the question in the Haggadah.

In the Haggadah, the *Mah Nishtanah* is a literal question: the child is asking, "Why is this night different?" The night of the seder is indeed different, and the child wants to know why.

In the poem, the poet asks a *rhetorical* question: How, indeed, is this night different from all other nights—for this night is just like the ones before and it will be just like the ones afterwards.

That’s a big difference!

What else can we say about the poem? (I don’t want—yet—to get into the question of *who* wrote it, or anything else about the poem that is *external* to it; we’ll get to that in a few minutes. Right now, let’s just look at the words of the poem itself.)

[Discussion.]

Part Two: How did I come to learn about and study this poem?

As some of you may know, during this past year, I was privileged to take part in the initial year of the LEAP Rabbinic Fellowship program at the Herbert D. Katz Center for Advanced Judaic Studies at the University of Pennsylvania, in partnership with Clal—the National Jewish Center for Learning and Leadership.

Three times this past year I travelled to Philadelphia, to the Katz Center at Penn, one of a group of a minyan of rabbis recruited to serve, collectively, as a group of “translators”.

Now, what does that mean? Well, each time, we would meet with and learn from two different world-class scholars in Judaic studies. These scholars engage in high-level research published in high-quality peer-reviewed journals and books. Unfortunately, though, a lot of this work is technical and arcane, and not many people have the expertise or, frankly, the interest to read it.

During our fellowship gatherings, these scholars would speak to us, and then our job was to ask: How can we take this learning and put it in front of non-academics, ordinary people, Jews in the pews? How can we expand the pool of people exposed to this learning? How can we help these scholars’ work become better understood and appreciated by the broader public?

We were charged to come up with three independent presentations designed to do just that. This is the first of them.

This morning, I want to introduce to you the work of one particular scholar, Professor Lital Levy.

Let me tell you about her.

Lital Levy is an assistant professor of comparative literature at Princeton University, where she teaches Modern Hebrew and Arabic literatures and literary theory.



But giving her academic credentials doesn't fully capture who she is. Lital Levy was born and raised in Los Angeles. She was, as she described herself to us, a "Valley girl."

Only she wasn't, really.

Because although her mother was raised in a Conservative Jewish household in Baltimore, her father's family came from Iraq. They'd left Iraq in 1950. Some of them settled in Israel, and others made it to Los Angeles. They remained Arabic-speaking.

As a result, Lital grew up as a part of, but also apart from, the prevailing Jewish culture. She grew up in LA, but she would spend summers in

Israel with her father's relatives. Somehow, she came to be interested in exploring how people on the linguistic margins of a society use language.

Lital earned a master's degree in journalism at Columbia, and then spent a formative year as a journalist in Israel, which drew her to become interested in two, specifically Israeli, cultural phenomena:

(a) Israeli Arabs writing in Hebrew; and (b) Israeli Jews from Arab countries (known as *Mizrachim*) writing in Arabic.

This interest, in turn, became the basis for her doctoral work in comparative literature at Berkeley, work that she has continued to research for almost twenty years. At our gathering in Philadelphia a few months ago, we read excerpts from her recently published book, *Poetic Trespass*.

The poem that we've studied today, which appears in *Poetic Trespass* and was translated by Professor Levy, was not written by a Jew. It was written by **Na'im 'Araidi**, who died, coincidentally, just a few months ago at the age of 65. His is the second photograph on the reverse side of the study sheet. As many Israeli Arabs now describe themselves, he is referred to in Levy's book as a "Palestinian Israeli."



I could tell you much, much more about Na'im 'Araidi, and I will, but first: What is our reaction when we learn that a poem—a Hebrew poem, a poem that refers to the *Mah Nishtanah*—was written by an Arab, and not by a Jew?

What thoughts come into our minds? What feelings come into our hearts? Anyone?

[Discussion]

Now let me tell you more about the poet and the poem, and then I'll ask you how this alters your understanding of, or your feelings toward, the poem:

Na'im 'Araidi "was interned in an Israeli prison for six months in 1972-1973." (*Poetic Trespass*, p. 155) Now, you may be wondering why. Well, did anyone here read the book that many of us in our congregation studied last year, *Like Dreamers*, by Yossi Klein Halevi? That book explored the lives of a group of Israeli soldiers who fought in the battles to reunite the city of Jerusalem during the Six Day War of 1967. Those who read the book may recall that one of those soldiers, Udi Adiv, became a radical, travelled to Syria, and upon his return was arrested and convicted of spying for Syria. Do you remember that? Well, "[a]ccording to the Israeli writer, David Grossman, 'Araidi spent six months in jail in the 1970s because he knew about but did not report the Syrian spy ring led by ... Udi Adiv.'" (*Ibid.*, 155, n. 54). "A few years later, he published a group of 'prison poems,' one of which" is the one we read, "Answer me, guard!"

Now, how does that impact our reading of the poem? How does it change our understanding to read this as an autobiographical poem by a Hebrew-speaking Israeli-Palestinian poet-prisoner addressing a Jewish Israeli guard in Hebrew with the words, *Mah Nishtanah Ha-Layla Hazeh*?

Here's Professor Levy's response:

"'Araidi depends on the reader's recognition of his speaker's subject position as a Palestinian and non-Jew in order to invest [the poem's] allusions and cultural references with irony, to give them that double edge."

This clearly enhances the meaning of the poem, does it not?

What is 'Araidi doing? In Levy's words—and I apologize for the technical language:

“‘Araidi’s poem speaks to Samia Mehrez’s analysis of ‘radical bilingualism’ as a ‘subversive poetics’ seeking to forge a new literary space for the bilingual, postcolonial writer. ‘It is a space that subverts hierarchies, whether linguistic or cultural; where *separate systems of signification and different symbolic worlds* are brought together in a relation of *perpetual interference, interdependence, and intersignification.*’” (footnote omitted; Professor Levy’s emphasis)

(That kind of language is one reason why books like this—even high quality books like this—do not have a broad readership.)

‘Araidi isn’t just writing in Hebrew. He’s doing more than that. He’s using traditional Jewish tropes; he’s using Jewish words and concepts to make a point.

In a sense, Palestinian Israeli poets like ‘Araidi are doing just what secular Jewish Israeli poets have been doing for decades. Consider Yehudah Amichai’s famous poem, “*El Malei Rachamim*,” “God, full of mercy”:

God is full of mercy,
Were God not so full of mercy
There would be some mercy in the world
And not just in Him!

In Levy’s words, “Like Amichai, Araidi transposes the Four Questions from a traditional ritualized context to a desacralized Israeli idiom.

“Even so, there is a critical difference between the poetic iconoclasm of Amichai and ‘Araidi. Amichai’s is a complaint with the way of the world.... Araidi’s poem, by contrast, is written in an oppositional voice whose Other is not a remote ‘Him’ (God) but a present ‘you’ (the guard); obliquely, that “you” is also the implied Jewish Israeli reader.

“At the same time, ‘Araidi’s poem serves as an Amichai-like naturalization of Jewishness, illustrating the movement between major and minor that characterizes Palestinian Hebrew poetry.” (*Ibid.*, pp. 157-158)

This raises a broader question for all of us, whether we live in Israel or not, whether we’re thinking or writing about the Arab-Israeli conflict or not:

Who owns the Exodus? Who owns the Seder? Who owns the Haggadah? Who owns the Hebrew language? Is it OK with us when “our” language, “our” script, “our” sacred ritual, or “our” sacred mythic story is appropriated by others? Well, whether it’s OK with us or not; whether it’s done tastefully or properly or not, one thing is clear: we have no control over how people make use of our words, our images, our practices, or our stories.

By the way, here are a few more facts about Na’im ‘Araidi that you may not know: Although he may be identified as an Israeli Arab or a Palestinian Israeli, he was part of the Druze community in Israel. He earned two B.A.’s and an M.A. from the University of Haifa, in Hebrew language, literature and comparative literature; and then earned his PhD in Hebrew Literature at none other than Bar-Ilan University, established by Jewish religious Zionist leaders in 1955. Also, in 2012 he was appointed Israel’s ambassador to Norway. (As Efraim Kishon used to say, “Only in Israel!”)

Does any of that information change how we feel about his poem?

Conclusion: What’s the take-away?

A few days ago, I led a seder workshop for a lovely group from one of the local Catholic parishes in town. About twenty people from the church joined about twenty young people and adults from our congregation. Some of the kids who were there are here today, and I want to thank them, including Aiden (celebrating his bar mitzvah today) and some of his friends.

One of our guests was a priest from Uganda, named Father Peter. At one point, I invited people to talk about people who are enslaved. Father Peter turned to our rabbinic intern, Aliza Berger, and said, “This is all very nice, but what do you actually do? Do you pass around a collection plate at the seder? For instance, in my country people don’t even know how to put shoes on because they’ve never seen them, people are dying of cholera, AIDS, or the ebola virus; women are walking miles and miles

with heavy jars on their heads and the water isn't clean. What do you do to help these people???"

I don't believe he meant to be provocative, but he sure asked a great question. Perhaps we need someone from outside of our community to pose the question: How do we take the lessons from our texts and our experiences and actually make the effort to make the world a better place?

(Incidentally, far in excess of our numbers, Jews in general and Israelis in particular have been involved in helping people and societies in third-world countries. See, for example, www.ajws.org and <http://tinyurl.com/z68tfhx> .)

What's the take-away from our study today? As interesting and intriguing as the poem we explored is, what is the importance of this study for all of us going forward?

Let me share one more statement by Lital Levy:

"[A]fter reading 'Araidi's poem as a Palestinian rewriting of the Four Questions," she writes, "how do we continue to read the Four Questions themselves? How does 'Araidi's cultural 'translation' contribute to the modern afterlife of the Haggadah? Will the reader recall this one-way dialogue between prisoner and guard during his or her next Passover seder?"

I think what Professor Levy is saying is that this poem deserves to be read and explicated, just like we read and explicate the texts of the Haggadah in light of our own personal experience. Even though—and maybe especially because—it's written by someone on the margins of a Jewish society, someone who is not part of the traditional chain of explication, who is not even Jewish—yet who reads and writes in Hebrew and even, for a time, represented Israel as a diplomat—it deserves our attention. It cries out for our attention.

Now, as we know, no poet controls how a poem will be read or understood. There are many ways to read this poem. Its impact might end up being broader than its author intended. For example, I could see this poem being used by Jews in this country to serve as the basis of a discussion at the seder

of the phenomenon of mass incarceration in this country—an issue which doesn't have to do with Jews and Israelis per se, but which Teruah (formerly, Rabbis for Human Rights) believes is a Jewish issue that should be reflected upon and addressed by Jews on Passover (see: http://www.truah.org/images/Haggadah_Supplement_final.pdf .)

However we do or do not make use of this particular poem, I hope that we will see this year's *sedarim* as opportunities to grapple not only with historical questions but with contemporary political, religious and ethical ones. Let's choose for our *sedarim*, and let's read with care, texts that challenge as well as inspire us.

Shabbat shalom.