

Rereading the Haggadah after Stephen Hawking: A Jewish Theory of Everything

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Last year, Dave Barry put out a Haggadah called *For This We Left Egypt?* It's not a particularly traditional or reverent Haggadah, but it does contain a useful Seder checklist:

Included are things like:

- Wild and sustainably caught gefilte fish;
- Chairs for people to sit in;
- Empty chair to symbolize those not free to celebrate;
- Empty chair to symbolize those who apparently do not care enough about their families, their culture or basic human decency to attend....

There's no holiday that brings families together like this one. And there's no holiday that highlights absence or fractiousness like Pesach. You'd think kids would forget that their brother got a better *Afikomen* present in 1971. But somehow they never forget....

So I want to return this morning to the difficult topic of family dynamics and offer up a new hypothesis for what it is that we're trying to accomplish at the Seder.

Of course we know that our goal is to transmit the *Mesorah* to the next generation. That's the great aspiration of *והגדת לבנך*.

And as we talked about last week, the idea is for us to be transformed in the process: *למען תהיה* *תורה ה' בפוך*. The stages of the Haggadah are intended to leave us in a place where the words of Torah roll off our lips.

But I want to offer up yet another possibility. I want to go back to the beginning and understand anew what it means to celebrate the move from slavery to freedom. I want to suggest a kind of new Jewish Theory of Everything that shifts the paradigm of how we understand the exodus and invites us to reread the Hagaddah – and really the whole book of Exodus – in a new light.

What's the first mention of slavery in the Torah?

It goes all the way back to the story of the flood. We're really privy to only one scene in Noah's post-diluvian life. He becomes intoxicated and retreats into his tent. His son Cham beholds his father's nakedness and prattles about it to his brothers. When Noah regains his composure and becomes aware of what's happened, he issues a curse: *ארור כנען עבד עבדים יהיה לאחיו*. *Accursed be Canaan, the son of Cham, a slave of slaves shall he be to his brothers.*

The question is: What has the sentence got to do with the crime? We know the Torah almost always adheres to a system of *מדה כנגד מדה*. What's the connection between Cham's offense and his punishment?

In his beautiful commentary on Bereishit, Leon Kass writes the following about Cham's sin:

“This overturning of the father is not the overturning of his biological paternity or the taking of his life: on the contrary, he is overturned precisely by being reduced to mere male source of seed. Eliminated is the father as authority, as guide, as teacher of law, custom, and a way of life. Ham sees and celebrates only the natural and barest fact of [masculinity]; he is blind to everything that makes transmission and rearing possible.”

By seeing his father solely as an object of procreation, Cham blinds himself to the notion of the father as the one who bequeaths wisdom and experience to his children.

So for the crime of un-fathering, Cham receives the punishment of slavery. That is to say, his children and grandchildren – as slaves – will live under the yoke of mastery rather than under the blessing of paternal care. To put it differently: For the sin of cutting himself off from his father, Cham suffers the fate of knowing that his children will be cut off from him.

One can think about it this way: Inasmuch as he can be sold as chattel at any moment, the slave is utterly disconnected from past and future – from both children and parents. He is consigned to a life of utter solitude – detached from his biological origins and fated to renounce his natural ties to his would-be offspring.

As the gemara tells us (Yevamot 62a):

הכל מודין בעבד - שאין לו חיים

All agree that a slave has no lineage.

לא למעלה ולא למטה

There is no *Mesorah* – no connection between parents and children. Each generation of slaves stands alone.

So when Hashem redeems the Jewish people, the very first thing he does is give them a family identity.

שה לבית אבות לבית

Every Israelite is going to be part of a family unit. Parents and children are going to stand together. The whole orientation of the Jewish people is going to be oriented around the family.

The Exodus is a celebration of the movement not just from bondage to freedom, but from a horizontal people to a vertical one.

Now if we return to the narrative of Sefer Shemot, everything falls into place:

- Shifra and Puah defy their slave masters; they fear Hashem and are rewarded. ויעש להם בתים. God gives them homes. God gives them descendants.
- The Leviim were never enslaved so the Torah tells us וילך איש מבית לוי ויקח את בת לוי – the family identity was still intact.
- That's why Vaera begins with lineage of Moshe and Aharon. Of all the times or places the Torah could have furnished us with their family tree.... But now it makes perfect sense. These were men with families dispatched on a mission to reintroduce the notion of family to a people that had surrendered that notion under the yoke of slavery.

- And the whole of פסח מצרים is taken up with this theme:

וקחו לכם צאן למשפחתכם
 ושמרתם, את-הדבר הזה, לחק-לך ולבניך, עד-עולם
 והיה, פי-יאמרו אליכם בניכם: מַה הָעֲבֹדָה הַזֹּאת לָכֶם

And so in our celebration on Seder night the medium is the message. We celebrate not being slaves by demonstrating that we are part of a family. We always emphasize the degree to which the night focuses on the children – which is true. But more precisely, it focuses on the relationship between parents and children.

The whole night is set up as a dialogue between the generations. To be a slave meant there was no connection between fathers and sons. So we do everything humanly possible to demonstrate that there is in fact a connection. The Seder is about re-fathering – reconnecting parents to children.

The enduring image of the Seder is the Kos Shel Eliyahu. And we attach to this cup this non-descript, generalized sense of redemption... something about Elijah being the herald of the messianic era... and that's beautiful.

But there's also something very specific that happens when Eliyahu arrives. And it's no accident that we read it as our haftarah on Shabbat Hagadol – the very last prophecy in all of נביאים:

הִנֵּה אֲנֹכִי שֹׁלֵחַ לָכֶם, אֶת אֵלֵיָהּ הַנָּבִיא--לְפָנַי, בּוֹא יוֹם יְהוָה, הַגָּדוֹל, וְהַנּוֹרָא. וְהָשִׁיב לֵב-אֲבוֹת עַל-בָּנִים, וְלֵב בָּנִים עַל-אֲבוֹתָם

Eliyahu will help parents reconcile with their children and children with their parents.

And sometimes it seems that it would take a prophet to make it happen. But the Seder reminds us that we don't have to wait. It really is possible for parents and children to be in conversation.

The Sefat Emet writes that the singular experience of the Seder has the capacity to endow the other 364 days of the year with renewed meaning. In this season of redemption and new beginnings, may Pesach impel us to re-invigorate those of our relationships that are moribund and breathe new life into those in need of inspiration.

To walk away from opportunities for dialogue and reconnection is to fail to exercise our greatest freedom.