The Amazing Haggadah

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April 9, 2020

The Haggadah is an amazing book. Up until this year, it existed in almost 3,000 different published versions—and this year it feels like we have added hundreds more online. There was almost no Jewish organization, or cause, family, or community, that didn't feel compelled to respond to our exceptional circumstances with a version of the Haggadah of their own.

That tradition of personalizing or contemporizing the Haggadah is in some sense present from the beginning of its history, though in another it is a 20th century innovation.

Working with the Biblical core in providing explanations for the three important symbols of the festival—the paschal lamb, the matzah and the bitter herbs—and building on normal practice for holidays which would include the Kiddush and a cup of wine at the conclusion of *Birkat Hamazon* (Grace after Meals), watered wine being the drink of choice in those days—the Haggadah began to take form in the centuries after the destruction of the Temple. While much of the material is found in parallel in the Mishnah and Talmud, it is harder to say when it became a part of the Haggadah.

Early versions of the *Mah Nishtanah* (The Four Questions), for example, ask about eating meat on all other nights, either boiled or roasted, but tonight we eat only roasted meat—a question that would be replaced by a question about reclining,

something that became very important in Roman times and was much less understood in the Middle Ages.

The earliest Haggadot we have are appendices to other works, like the *Siddur Rav Amram Gaon,* but they do help us identify when other parts are added to the Haggadah. *Kadesh Urchatz,* the mnemonic at the beginning of the Haggadah that helps us preserve the order of the seder, became part of the Haggadah in the 12th century. The seder's concluding passage, *Chasal Siddur Pesach,* was composed by Joseph Tov Elem, who lived at about that time. *Shfoch Chamatchah* (Pour Out your Wrath), the Elijah reading, appears first in the Middle Ages, along with many of the songs we associate with the seder: *Adir Hu,* 13th century, and *Echad Mi Yodeah* (Who Knows One) and *Chad Gadya* in the 15th century , a time of trouble for the Jewish people.

I would also like to note that the telling of the story was never the telling of the story from the book of Exodus as many Haggadot do today. In reflecting the roots of the seder as a replacement for the Passover sacrifice, the text that is used is the passage from Deuteronomy that was said in ancient times by the Israelite bringing his offering to the Temple: "My father was a wandering Aramean." While it refers to the suffering of the Israelites in slavery and God's deliverance, it does not reference Moses, and focuses more on God's fulfillment of the promise made to earlier generations. This is the passage, with its associated midrashim that makes up most of the traditional *Magid* (telling of the story).

Once the text of the Haggadah had settled into a more-or-less fixed form, creativity was focused on its illustration. In the 10th to 13th centuries, beautiful

Haggadot were hand illuminated; some of these have survived to this day, including the *Bird's Head Haggadah,* named for its outstanding illustration; the *Sarajevo Haggadah,* named for its origins; and the *Washington Haggadah,* named for the city in which it resides today.

With printing came the proliferation of editions such that every member of the family would eventually have their own copy, no longer dependent on the recitation by the leader of the seder. Some of our oldest members remember seder with grandfather reading or chanting the entire text; that would reflect that earlier practice.

In the modern era, translations proliferated. By the 19th century there were over a thousand unique printed versions, including the first Reform Haggadah in 1886. Haggadahs were good sellers: The *Crown Haggadah* reached a quarter-million copies by 1925, and the *Maxwell House Haggadah,* first printed in 1932, competes with Harry Potter in books printed with more than 55 million copies.

The first Haggadah to make an explicit social statement was Arthur Szyk's 1934 Haggadah, known not only for its art but also for its anti-Nazi commentary. Other famous Haggadahs with a political message were the 1969 *Freedom Haggadah,* which some of us may remember, and the 1995 *Stonewall Seder.* The first Haggadah translated by a woman was published in 1904, and from the late 1970s various feminist Haggadahs have been available.

Where does that leave us today?

Perhaps it is the very flexibility of the Haggadah which has been so key to the overwhelming popularity of Passover. Think of what we have seen this year: humorous adaptations of the four sons to the challenges of Zoom conferences, along with earnest reflections of our concerns and anxieties in facing illness and potential death; emoji Haggadahs for the younger generation; and Haggadahs that help us interpret ancient teachings about compassion for the stranger, relating to the challenges of our own times. It leads me to wonder whether centuries from now there will be a paragraph in the Haggadah that scholars ponder over and wonder if it reflects events in a certain year 2020 when a pandemic challenged Jewish life worldwide. Chag Sameach.

Learn more online: A Brief History of the Haggadah, *Martin Bodek, Jewish Book Council*