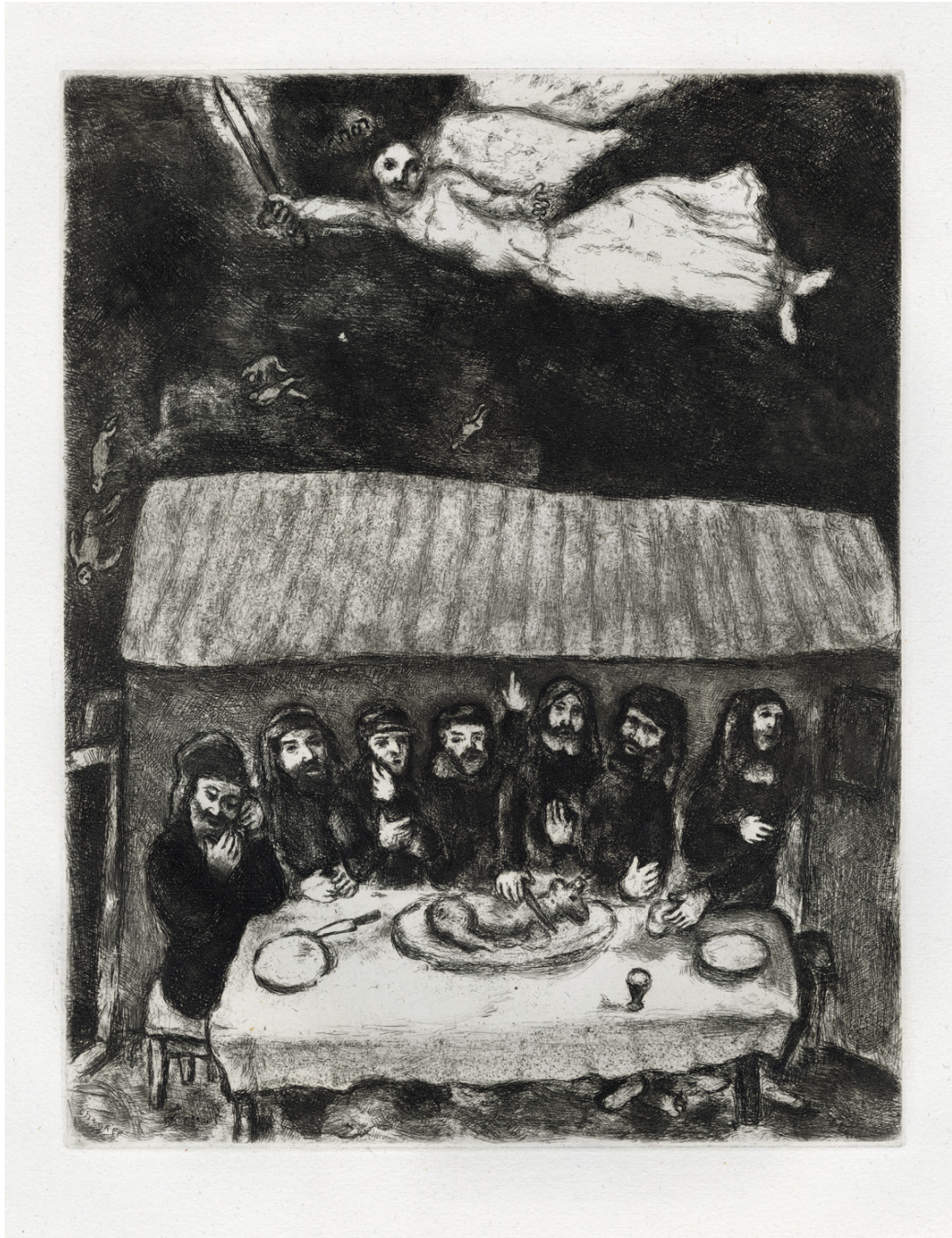


# Disordered Love: A Pesach Reader

 [18forty.org/articles/disordered-love-a-pesach-reader](https://18forty.org/articles/disordered-love-a-pesach-reader)

By: Yehuda Fogel



For many people, and even more lecturers, the Seder night is a night of order. Many have the tradition to sing the order of the Seder, in what may offer its own slightly delightful commentary on life: order and discipline are not always poetic, but every once and a while we are able to make order itself sing. As Rabbi Avraham Yitzchak Kook put it: “Just as there are laws to poetry, there is poetry to laws.” This is one truth we discover on the Seder night.

But another truth we discover is that even within order, there is disorder. For all the talk of the order of the Seder night, there is a certain chaotic structure baked into the Haggadah itself. The sages argue about the construction of the text, and in our attempt to honor all perspectives, we are left with a complex, multi-layered Haggadah, one that shifts back and forth and back again from slavery to freedom to slavery to freedom. Some seek to dispel the anxiety of this disorder, with beautiful maps and guidelines to the order within it all. Yet others sip their wine and dribble Matzoh crumbs and wipe away wine stains from their pillow cases with a smile on their face. We support both (we really do!).

In Rachel Sharansky Danziger's words, at *Tablet*:

We start the storytelling part of the Seder conventionally enough, with the words, "This is the bread of destitution that our ancestors ate in the land of Egypt." But before we have time to settle into a third-person account of our ancestors' story, we are made to say, "We were slaves to Pharaoh in the land of Egypt" in the first person. We conclude that part by acknowledging that we are commanded to "tell the story of the Exodus ... and anyone who spends extra time in telling the story of the Exodus from Egypt, behold he is praiseworthy." But instead of letting us progress to actually telling the story, as we might expect at this point, the authors of the Haggadah veer into a story about other people telling the story of the Exodus instead.

In case these shifts failed to give us whiplash yet, the Haggadah goes on to compound our disorientation by moving in quick succession through a halachic dispute, the rabbis' pedagogic instructions, and a walk down history lane all the way to Avraham's beginnings. Only then does it actually delve into the story of the Exodus. But instead of setting the scene and describing the action, this section of the Haggadah takes the form of hermeneutics, matching words in Deuteronomy's account of the salvation from Egypt to appropriate passages in other biblical sources. Without even the benefit of characters to root for, how can we lose ourselves in a story that constantly shifts between genres, topics, and points of view?

Why does the night of order, of freedom and liberation, have so much disorder to it? Why is it so chaotic, disjointed?

In approaching this question, Yosef Lindell, in the *Lehrhaus*, argues that the structure of the night reflects the educational and discussion-oriented nature of the night. In his words:

The disorganized Haggadah may not have the markings of a great novel, but perhaps it was never meant to be easy, its meaning delivered on a silver platter. With its non-sequiturs and cryptic passages, the Haggadah looks a lot like any page of the Talmud. So perhaps you can't just read the Haggadah. Instead, you learn it. The freewheeling, disjointed Haggadah creates a Seder that mimics the dynamics of a beit midrash. It is no accident that its central portion is a midrash, the sine qua non of the Oral Torah.

The Haggadah is meant to be learnt, together, according to Lindell, and it is in the questioning and discussion that the chaotic night has its sweet meaning.

Rachel Sharansky Danziger has her own response to this question about the night of questions, seeing in the chaos instead an invitation to participate in the complicated nature of our own stories, and those of our parents. She puts it well:

By pulling us out of the story, the abrupt jumps from tangent to tangent in the Haggadah function like Iser's gaps and discrepancies: They invite us to involve ourselves in making sense of the story. Though the Haggadah instructs us to say "we were slaves" in the first person, for example, it doesn't allow us to lose our actual "I" in a sweeping narrative that will make that fictional "we" feel natural. It forces us to pause and consider how we feel about it instead. When the text then drops the first person in favor of other genres, it forces us to pause and try and understand how that "we" is connected to the fragments that follow.

The Seder night asks us: How do we tell the story of our selves, our families, and our nation? In Bruce Feiler's *New York Times* article "The Stories that Bind Us," he speaks to Dr. Marshall Duke, a psychologist at Emory University, who has studied the effects of these stories we tell on our family structures. According to Duke, it is precisely the stories that embrace both the chaos and order into the narrative that have the most resilient quality, what he calls the 'oscillatory narratives.' These are the narratives that are not easy or simple, not linear or direct. It is these very narratives that bind families tightly together.

Perhaps the Seder night reflects this truth. Perhaps in the oscillatory movements in the Haggadah back and forth from slavery to freedom to slavery to freedom, we are meant to learn something about the chaotic path that redemption sometimes embodies. We often expect redemption from our struggles to be direct and easy, but so often this is not the case. We succeed, grow, ascend, only to find ourselves in the valley of life yet again. The stories of our families' love is the same way. Many of our families have been challenged by difference, change, and struggle, and we hope that in the end, it is these very differences and challenges that tell the story of our love.

This Pesach Reader honors this love and asks you to join us in reflecting on order, divergence, and the ways we tell the stories of our lives this Pesach. We have readings from Rachel Sharansky Danziger, Yosef Lindell, and Bruce Feiler, each of whom offer a particular look at this night. We hope you enjoy the journey, and travel towards greater freedom and meaning together with your loved ones.

## HOLIDAYS

# My Own Private Haggadah

My father, Natan Sharansky, lived through his own Exodus. The seminal Passover text taught me how to tell his story.

BY RACHEL SHARANSKY DANZIGER

MARCH 27, 2020



TABLET MAGAZINE; ORIGINAL PHOTO: VITALY ARMAND/AFP VIA GETTY IMAGES

“W  
ERE THERE ANIMALS IN PRISON?”

The table was beautifully set on the afternoon I asked this question, and my sister and I wore our Shabbat clothes, even though it was a weekday. My father, Natan Sharansky, wore the odd white kippa that a fellow inmate made for him from a boot sock back in the Soviet gulag. Young though I was, I knew that my father only wore it on Passover and on the “family Seder” we hold annually on the anniversary of his release. Since it wasn’t Passover, I knew that we were celebrating *Abba’s* freedom. And I knew that it was time, once again, to ask my parents questions about their experiences. Obsessed as I was with cats as a child, animals seemed like the best place to start.

In subsequent family Seders, our questions changed to reflect our evolving interests. Queries about *Abba’s* clashes with the KGB replaced questions about animals, only to be replaced in turn by questions about love. How did you fall in love, we asked once we both crossed the threshold into adolescence? How did you later survive 12 long years of separation? Adulthood, and especially parenthood, changed our questions yet again. Was it hard to resume normal life after *Abba’s* release and your reunion, we wondered? How did the years of your struggle affect you once we came along?

With every new question and every new answer, my parents’ experiences seeped into my own sense of self. When I had to confront potentially embarrassing situations, for example, I found myself thinking about the day of my father’s arrest. The jailers stripped him, hoping to leave him humiliated and vulnerable to manipulation. “Only you have the power humiliate yourself,” I’d tell myself in an echo of his thoughts from that day. “Only you have the power to decide you feel humiliated.” When I watched my friends lash out against each other over the disengagement from Gaza, I felt confident that we will recover our unity in time. We have it within us to stand together despite this temporary crisis, I thought. After all, didn’t we do it when we fought for Soviet Jewry? The fact that I wasn’t born in time to be part of that “we” didn’t make it feel less real to me.

When it was time to include our children in the family Seder, I was thrilled. My parents' story gave me so much, and I couldn't wait to see how it will affect my kids in turn. My son and my nephew, who were 3 years old at the time, had a hard time coming up with questions. So I shooed them under the table, told them they're in prison now, and gave them a basic introduction to the family story.

“Bad people didn't want *Saba* to come here to Eretz Yisrael, so they locked him in a little room,” I explained, and invited the kids to try and escape their “prison.” The adults, playing jailers, stopped them. I continued with the story: “*Savta* yelled, ‘Let *Saba* come to Eretz Yisrael,’ but they didn't listen to her. So *Savta* went all over the world, and because all Israel are responsible for one another, Jews everywhere started yelling with her. They yelled so loud, and for so long, that the bad people had to let *Saba*, and his fellow Jews in Russia, come home.” And then we let the kids come out from under the table, and sang “*hine ma tov umanaim*,” just as my father did with my mother and thousands of others when he landed all those years ago in Tel Aviv.

This story became a favorite with my children. But as the years went by, I became concerned that it wasn't affecting them as profoundly as it affected my sister and myself at their age. They'd beg me to “tell us about *Saba* in prison” one moment, and ask for a retelling of *Sleeping Beauty* in the next. Somehow, the stories that shaped my world as a child failed to evoke more enthusiasm than a fairy tale in my kids. It entertained them, but also didn't seem to touch them beyond a moment's thrill.

I must not be telling the story well enough, I concluded, and poured everything I knew of storytelling into more and more elaborate retellings. I set the scene with vivid details to engage my children's imagination. I gave them characters to root for, stakes to worry about, and opportunities to feel elation and horror. In short, I did everything I could to make the story what some scholars call “transportive”—a story that activates our imagination and empathy to such an extent that it makes us lose ourselves in its world, identify with its values, and forget its artificiality.

Surely, I thought, if my kids would only experience my parents' struggle for themselves, they will be affected by it.

My kids laughed and shrieked and paled in all the right places. And then they said, eyes alight, "now tell us a story about pirates at sea!"

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During the Passover Seder, we declare that "in each and every generation, a person must see himself as if he himself left Egypt." And one year, fresh from another failed attempt to make my parents' story leave a lasting impact, these words made me feel an odd kinship with the authors of the Haggadah. They, too, wanted to tell a story that will do more than entertain its audience. In fact, their challenge was far greater than my own, since they wanted their audience to experience an event millennia after its occurrence. Perhaps if I could understand *how* they tried to achieve this objective, I could transport my kids across the meagre generation and a half that separates them from my parents' struggle.

To my surprise, a careful rereading of the Haggadah revealed that its authors didn't try to activate our imagination, transport us to the world of their story, make us lose ourselves in it, or do any of the things I tried to do to my children. If anything, they seemed bent on pulling us *out* of the story of the Exodus in every opportunity; in fact, they barely let us get into it in the first place.

We start the storytelling part of the Seder conventionally enough, with the words, "This is the bread of destitution that our ancestors ate in the land of Egypt." But before we have time to settle into a third-person account of our ancestors' story, we are made to say, "We were slaves to Pharaoh in the land of Egypt" in the first person. We conclude that part by acknowledging that we are commanded to "tell the story of the Exodus ... and anyone who spends extra time in telling the story of the Exodus from Egypt, behold he is praiseworthy." But instead of letting us progress to actually telling the story, as we might expect at this point, the authors

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In case these shifts failed to give us whiplash yet, the Haggadah goes on to compound our disorientation by moving in quick succession through a halachic dispute, the rabbis' pedagogic instructions, and a walk down history lane all the way to Avraham's beginnings. Only then does it actually delve into the story of the Exodus. But instead of setting the scene and describing the action, this section of the Haggadah takes the form of hermeneutics, matching words in Deuteronomy's account of the salvation from Egypt to appropriate passages in other biblical sources. Without even the benefit of characters to root for, how can we lose ourselves in a story that constantly shifts between genres, topics, and points of view?

Perhaps, I realized, we're not supposed to lose ourselves in the story at all. Perhaps the authors of the Haggadah recognized a truth that I ignored in all my attempts to make my parents' story conventionally transportive: Stories that transport us away from our day-to-day life can be very powerful, but they also leave our actual lives untouched. By creating a story world that's so removed from our reality we allow the two to remain separate. In other words, a story we visit to lose ourselves in, is also a story that we can leave behind when it's time to find ourselves again. Perhaps the authors of the Haggadah wanted to prevent the Exodus from becoming a place that we could visit—and abandon. Perhaps they wanted us to entwine it into our actual lives instead.

The literary scholar Wolfgang Iser wrote extensively about the reader's role in creating a text's meaning. An author can place various building blocks in the reader's path, but it's up to the latter to connect these blocks as he or she reads and make them come to life. The gaps and discrepancies that exist in any text serve a crucial role in this process, according to Iser, since they function as "a network of response-inviting structures" that activate the reader's dynamic participation. (*The Act of Reading*, 34)



By pulling us out of the story, the abrupt jumps from tangent to tangent in the Haggadah function like Iser's gaps and discrepancies: They invite us to involve ourselves in making sense of the story. Though the Haggadah instructs us to say "we were slaves" in the first person, for example, it doesn't allow us to lose our actual "I" in a sweeping narrative that will make that fictional "we" feel natural. It forces us to pause and consider how we feel about it instead. When the text then drops the first person in favor of other genres, it forces us to pause and try and understand how that "we" is connected to the fragments that follow.

This process of evaluation and reevaluation goes beyond the normal reading process Iser describes, because the Haggadah doesn't even give us the benefit of a discernible story arc. Since we must rely on ourselves to give the evening any form of coherence, we are forced to draw upon resources that lie beyond the bounds of the text itself, such as our familiarity with the Exodus story in the books of Exodus and Deuteronomy, and, even more importantly, our own concerns, experiences, and ideas. This process forces us to act as authors and interpreters and recreate the Exodus story in our own image. By the end we can no longer simply place the story of the Exodus on a shelf and move on to *Sleeping Beauty*. We poured too much of ourselves into it to ever fully let it go.

Like the authors of the Haggadah, my parents never tried to offer us polished versions of their story. They gave us a segment here and an episode there, and always in answer to questions that stemmed from our own inner lives. Looking back, I can see that it was this lack of editorial intervention that made their story so impactful. Their story shaped us because they didn't treat it as their story to tell and to give, but rather as building blocks that we could use in the stories that we told to ourselves. We were the ones who wove my parents' memories into our obsession with animals, interest in adventure, or preoccupation with romance. We were the ones who worked them, like disparate and disconnected notes, into the soundtrack of our lives.

By polishing my parents' story into a sweeping narrative, I was limiting my children's opportunity to do the same. I told them how my parents strove for

freedom, and how hundreds of thousands marched together and cried “let my people go.” But to make this story truly meaningful to them, *I* needed to let go of my control of the narrative. I had to take my lead from my children’s questions, and recognize that it was time to let them recreate the story for themselves.

The Haggadah taught me how to tell my parents’ story, and how to give my kids the liberty to explore it for themselves. Time will tell what they’ll make of it. But in the meantime, my struggles with the latter taught me something about Passover in turn. Perhaps when the authors of the Haggadah told us to see ourselves as if we came out of Egypt, they meant something more than envisioning ourselves wearing tunics, marching out of Egypt with matzos in our sacks. Perhaps they meant that we should take this opportunity to experience what it means to become the authors of our own story. By liberating us from the mindset of a passive audience, the Haggadah frees us to taste self-determination, in an echo of the very event which it so circuitously explores.

Rachel Sharansky Danziger is a Boston-based writer and educator who blogs about Judaism, storytelling and daily life. Her work can be found on The Times of Israel, Project 929 and other online venues.

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#NATAN SHARANSKY   #PASSOVER READ   #PASSOVER

# The Seder is Anything but Orderly

 thelehrhaus.com/scholarship/the-seder-is-anything-but-orderly

Yosef Lindell

March 22, 2021

## Yosef Lindell

The Passover Seder seems like a tightly scripted affair. The final chapter of the Mishnah in *Pesahim*, the primary rabbinic source detailing the event, reads like a checklist. We pour the first cup, and *matzah*, *hazeret*, *haroset*, and cooked dishes follow. We pour the second cup, ask *Mah Nishtanah*, and so on, until *Birkat ha-Mazon* and *Hallel*.

With so many requirements to fulfill in sequence, it is no surprise that we refer to the rituals of *Pesah* night as a *seder*, or an “order.” It is a term found in the earliest versions of the Haggadah in use today,<sup>[1]</sup> and although it is an obvious choice—little different than calling the prayer book a Siddur or referring to the Temple service of the *kohen gadol* on Yom Kippur as the *Seder ha-Avodah*<sup>[2]</sup>—the rituals of the night of the fifteenth of Nisan have become synonymous with the word *seder* in a way that little else did. Nowadays, for example, it is common to call the entire night the *Leil ha-Seder*. The Passover Seder thus promises to be the structured evening par excellence.

Furthering this semblance of orderliness, poets in the Middle Ages composed lists of the Seder’s steps as mnemonic devices so that participants would know what to do and when. The list beginning *Kadesh*, *urhatz*, *karpas*, etc.—probably composed by the twelfth century Tosafist R. Samuel of Falaise—has even become part of the Haggadah, recited or sung as the Seder begins. One might suppose that if the Seder has steps, it must be organized.

Yet a closer read of the Haggadah reveals a puzzlingly disorganized structure that demands explanation. The Haggadah tells the story of the Exodus in a seriously disjointed fashion. We seem to begin this narrative with the paragraph of *Avadim Hayinu*—“We were slaves to Pharaoh in Egypt and the Lord our God took us out with a strong hand and an outstretched arm.” Yet the Haggadah quickly gets sidetracked, speaking of rabbis who stayed up all night telling the story, expounding on the commandment to say the *Shema* morning and night, discussing four different types of children, trying to determine the appropriate day for holding the Seder, and backtracking to the patriarchs and their idol worshipping ancestors. When we then raise our glasses in joyful praise of the One who saves us time and again, it is long after sundown, and we still haven’t begun explaining how God redeemed the Children of Israel from Egypt.

Matters get more confusing when the storytelling starts in earnest. Instead of relying on the full story in the Book of Exodus, the Haggadah uses a succinct passage from Deuteronomy (26:5-8) recited by a farmer bringing first fruits to the Temple as a springboard for a dazzling

exercise in rabbinic hermeneutics and midrashic derivation. Centuries of commentators have struggled to explain the more difficult parts of this *midrash*. To give one example, what is the basis for the Haggadah's assertion that the word "*amaleinu*" – "our toil" refers to the children who Pharaoh ordered thrown in the Nile?

And there is another problem with the story that is arguably more bewildering: from the Haggadah alone, it is hard to piece together many of the basic facts about what happened. We learn that the Egyptians oppressed the Children of Israel, who cried out to God for mercy. Then, in a powerful revelation of the Divine Presence, God—and not an angel—saved the Children of Israel by means of a cattle plague, a sword, a staff, blood, fire, pillars of smoke, and finally, the Ten Plagues. Next, we learn of additional plagues at the sea (250 according to Rabbi Akiva), but the Haggadah has not yet explained how the Children of Israel found themselves at the sea to begin with or what happened there. In fact, from the way the Haggadah tells it, we would never know that after the plague of the firstborn, Pharaoh relented and expelled the Children of Israel from his land. And in the end, we only learn about the splitting of the sea from a brief reference in *Dayeinu*—a poetic litany of miracles—which assumes that the reader already knows the story. And where, as many have wondered, is Moses in all of this? He is essentially absent from the Haggadah.

In short, the Haggadah tells its story out of sequence, adds events from *midrashim* not found in the *Humash*, and omits crucial details. Paragraph after paragraph, *midrash* after *midrash*, the storyline becomes more muddled. One must be thoroughly familiar with the biblical account of the Exodus to understand the Haggadah's version at all. As the scholar of religion Vanessa Ochs puts it in her recent book, *The Passover Haggadah: A Biography*, "Questions are asked in the Haggadah that are not answered. Answers are given to questions that have not been asked. The pedantry can overwhelm. Biblical narratives are referred to, but in such oblique and cryptic ways that it is hard to piece a coherent story together." The Seder may be orderly, but the Haggadah's account of the Exodus is disorienting.

In a masterful essay well worth reading, Rachel Sharansky Danziger suggests that the Haggadah's circumlocution is quite purposeful. By telling the story in a barebones and haphazard fashion, the Haggadah allows the Seder's participants to create their own story and to feel as if they were personally redeemed from Egypt. "By liberating us from the mindset of a passive audience," she writes, "the Haggadah frees us to taste self-determination, in an echo of the very event which it so circuitously explores." But I would like to offer an additional perspective.

The disorganized Haggadah may not have the markings of a great novel, but perhaps it was never meant to be easy, its meaning delivered on a silver platter. With its non-sequiturs and cryptic passages, the Haggadah looks a lot like any page of the Talmud. So perhaps you can't just read the Haggadah. Instead, you learn it. The freewheeling, disjointed Haggadah creates a Seder that mimics the dynamics of a *beit midrash*. It is no accident that its central portion is a *midrash*, the *sine qua non* of the Oral Torah.

Thus, spirited discussion becomes central to the Seder. Around the Seder table, we must learn the Haggadah together. Its words are the beginning, not the end, of the conversation. *Maggid* is lively: full of questions, answers, and *divrei torah* the children learned in school. We interrupt, talk over one another, discuss the meaning of passages, or perhaps even demonstrate the plagues with plastic frogs. The Haggadah says that “whoever tells more about the Exodus is praiseworthy,” and the Sages of Bnei Brak led by example: going strong all night until their students reminded them to recite the morning *Shema*.<sup>[3]</sup> Learning Torah in partnership is a heady, engrossing, and sometimes disorganized experience.

In a similar vein, we treat the Haggadah less formally than other ritual texts. Imagine, for a moment, the Haggadah and the Siddur placed side by side. As texts, they share certain similarities. Neither has a single author; they are products of a lengthy and messy evolution. Both are hard to interpret in places. And despite their rough edges, they are both fixed texts.

But that is where the similarities end. The experience of reciting the Haggadah lacks the formality and solemnity of praying from a Siddur. The Siddur is designed for the synagogue, where we speak to God, and preferably not to our neighbors. Ideally, one does not interrupt the Torah reading or the prayers with questions or comments. On the other hand, the Haggadah is said at home, around a table with family, friends, and food. Disruption and interruption are part of the experience. In the daily prayers, when we do not understand a word, we usually let it slide, held in thrall by its familiar rhythm or simply pressed for time. How different is Seder night, where we feel compelled to discuss the Haggadah’s ambiguities, translating and elucidating as we go. The Torah reading and the prayers are chanted precisely. A reader who makes a mistake must sometimes be corrected. There are no such rules for the Haggadah. Its text may be fixed, but there is much leeway in how it can be recited. Some families read every word together. Others go around the table. Both practices are acceptable.

The Siddur, says Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, is the book of Jewish faith. There is a rock-solid certainty to the Siddur, a comfort in its familiarity. Even when the world around us is falling to pieces, we may find solace in the prayer book’s routine and repetition. But the Haggadah is never quite the same. Every year, new insights present themselves, new questions sharpen one’s understanding, and new commentaries are published. Riffing on a Talmudic passage, R. Naftali Maskil Le-Eitan, in his late nineteenth-century essay *Ma’amar Yesod Mosad* quips, “Ten portions of interpretation descended to the world, the Passover Haggadah took nine, and one was left for the rest of the Torah.”<sup>[4]</sup>

The Siddur and the Haggadah look quite different too. There are few illustrated *siddurim*; its pages are typically plain and unadorned. Yet the Haggadah has sported pictures since medieval times. From the enigmatic early fourteenth century Birds’ Head Haggadah, to the exquisite woodcuts of the 1526 Prague Haggadah, to the newly minted Passover Haggadah Graphic Novel, there is no shortage of artwork found on its pages. One of the most widely used *haggadot* in America, the Maxwell House Haggadah, is a walking advertisement for a coffee company. About it, Ochs wonders:

How many other sacred texts could tolerate being branded by a product, by corporate sponsorship? Would we tolerate, much less embrace, a Kleenex Lamentations, or the Lens-Crafters Book of Mormon? Could another sacred text come with tear-out inserts: shopping checklists and advertisements for farfel, gefilte fish balls, macaroons, and candied, jellied slices of “fruit”? Surely, Leviticus could not withstand a centerfold of coupons for an ox of the sacrifice of well-being; the goat for the people’s sin offering; 20 percent off turtledoves and frankincense, two-for-one on pigeons.

But the Haggadah tolerates corporate branding, perhaps even embraces it. And it is not just the Haggadah’s “robust aura,” as Ochs suggests, that allows it to withstand this commercialization without reputational harm. The Haggadah is sacred and ancient, but since it must serve as a guide to experientially reconstructing one of the pivotal moments in our history, the more relatable features it contains, the better. Coffee made by a familiar brand is certainly relatable. Perhaps it ought to lead one to contemplate the peculiarities of the American way station on the Jewish journey toward liberation, where spirituality and commercialization can go hand in hand. Similarly, the “fandom” *haggadot* of recent years—from ones about Harry Potter, to superheroes, zombies, and even the tv show Seinfeld—are more enriching than irreverent, creating points of comparison and discussion that help us internalize the Passover story and make it our own. Whatever allows us to better relate to the sorrows and joys of our ancestors; whatever stimulates discussion; whatever makes the story easier to visualize—all these things belong in the Haggadah, especially if there are children in attendance. For the Seder is not just for those old enough or engaged enough to sit attentively in the pews. It is for the whole family and for an entire people.

Even the differences between the songs at the end of the Seder and those that close the synagogue service speak volumes about their respective settings. In the synagogue on Shabbat and festivals, we end with the mystical Song of Glory (*Shir ha-Kavod*) describing God’s attributes, and *Adon Olam*, a meditation on faith (the words are serious, even if the tune often isn’t). The Haggadah crescendos instead with a boisterous counting song (*Ehad Mi Yodeya*) and a rhyme-like ditty about a little goat (*Had Gadya*). In the *Shir ha-Kavod*, God is portrayed in the most exalted terms. In *Had Gadya*, God metes out justice to those ultimately responsible for the consumption of a two-zuz goat. Four cups of wine after the Seder begins, one ends up buzzed and singing a nursery rhyme. This is yet another demonstration that the Haggadah is nothing like a Siddur, and that the Seder is not a synagogue service.

Instead, the Seder is many other things: a conversation between parents and children, a spirited discussion as colorful and sometimes as inscrutable as the Talmud, a family affair around the table with food. The Seder is not exactly orderly, but it is all the richer for it.

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[1] The earliest text of the version of the Haggadah in use today, found in the ninth century responsa of R. Amram Gaon, the head of the Babylonian academy in Sura, begins, “And the order [*seder*] of *Pesah* you asked about, here is how it goes.” Rambam, in the twelfth century,

recounts the “order [*seder*] of doing the *mitzvot* on the night of the fifteenth” of Nisan. *Mahzor Vitry*, writing a little before Rambam, details the “*Seder Pesah*” of his teacher Rashi, and cautions readers “to follow its order [*sidro*] that the Sages instituted, and not to change its order [*sidro*].”

[2] See, e.g., Rambam, *Mishneh Torah: Hilkhhot Avodat Yom ha-Kippurim* 4:1.

[3] A similar account in rabbinic literature (*Tosefta Pesahim* 10:12), tells of other Sages, in Lod, “engaging in studying the *laws of Pesah* all night until the rooster crowed.” This parallel is significant because it suggests that the authors of the Haggadah, by including the Bnei Brak story in a format that matches the story in the Tosefta, seem to consider telling the story of the Exodus on Seder night an exercise similar to studying traditional Torah topics like Halakhah.

[4] *Ma’amar Yesod Mosad* is a comprehensive attempt to explain the Haggadah’s disorderly structure, well known from its English adaptation, *The Malbim Haggadah*. R. Maskil Le-Eitan (the work was not written by Malbim, a story for another time) suggests that the Haggadah is structured around the verse, “And you shall explain to your son on that day, ‘It is because of what the Lord did for me when I went free from Egypt’” (Exodus 13:8), with each part of *Maggid* corresponding to a different word or phrase. While his explanation often seems too clever to be true, and does not address the difficulties with the *midrash* or the gaps in the story, it remains a fascinating attempt to grapple with the Haggadah as a whole and some of the problems outlined in this essay.

# The Stories That Bind Us

nytimes.com/2013/03/17/fashion/the-family-stories-that-bind-us-this-life.html

March 15, 2013



I hit the breaking point as a parent a few years ago. It was the week of my extended family's annual gathering in August, and we were struggling with assorted crises. My parents were aging; my wife and I were straining under the chaos of young children; my sister was bracing to prepare her preteens for bullying, sex and cyberstalking.

Sure enough, one night all the tensions boiled over. At dinner, I noticed my nephew texting under the table. I knew I shouldn't say anything, but I couldn't help myself and asked him to stop.

Ka-boom! My sister snapped at me to not discipline her child. My dad pointed out that my girls were the ones balancing spoons on their noses. My mom said none of the grandchildren had manners. Within minutes, everyone had fled to separate corners.

Later, my dad called me to his bedside. There was a palpable sense of fear I couldn't remember hearing before.

"Our family's falling apart," he said.



“No it’s not,” I said instinctively. “It’s stronger than ever.”

But lying in bed afterward, I began to wonder: Was he right? What is the secret sauce that holds a family together? What are the ingredients that make some families effective, resilient, happy?

It turns out to be an astonishingly good time to ask that question. The last few years have seen stunning breakthroughs in knowledge about how to make families, along with other groups, work more effectively.

Myth-shattering research has reshaped our understanding of dinnertime, discipline and difficult conversations. Trendsetting programs from Silicon Valley and the military have introduced techniques for making teams function better.

The only problem: most of that knowledge remains ghettoized in these subcultures, hidden from the parents who need it most. I spent the last few years trying to uncover that information, meeting families, scholars and experts ranging from peace negotiators to online game designers to Warren Buffett’s bankers.

After a while, a surprising theme emerged. The single most important thing you can do for your family may be the simplest of all: develop a strong family narrative.

I first heard this idea from Marshall Duke, a colorful psychologist at Emory University. In the mid-1990s, Dr. Duke was asked to help explore myth and ritual in American families.

“There was a lot of research at the time into the dissipation of the family,” he told me at his home in suburban Atlanta. “But we were more interested in what families could do to counteract those forces.”

Around that time, Dr. Duke’s wife, Sara, a psychologist who works with children with learning disabilities, noticed something about her students.

“The ones who know a lot about their families tend to do better when they face challenges,” she said.

Her husband was intrigued, and along with a colleague, Robyn Fivush, set out to test her hypothesis. They developed a measure called the “Do You Know?” scale that asked children to answer 20 questions.

Examples included: Do you know where your grandparents grew up? Do you know where your mom and dad went to high school? Do you know where your parents met? Do you know an illness or something really terrible that happened in your family? Do you know the story of your birth?

Dr. Duke and Dr. Fivush asked those questions of four dozen families in the summer of 2001, and taped several of their dinner table conversations. They then compared the children's results to a battery of psychological tests the children had taken, and reached an overwhelming conclusion. The more children knew about their family's history, the stronger their sense of control over their lives, the higher their self-esteem and the more successfully they believed their families functioned. The "Do You Know?" scale turned out to be the best single predictor of children's emotional health and happiness.

"We were blown away," Dr. Duke said.

And then something unexpected happened. Two months later was Sept. 11. As citizens, Dr. Duke and Dr. Fivush were horrified like everyone else, but as psychologists, they knew they had been given a rare opportunity: though the families they studied had not been directly affected by the events, all the children had experienced the same national trauma at the same time. The researchers went back and reassessed the children.

"Once again," Dr. Duke said, "the ones who knew more about their families proved to be more resilient, meaning they could moderate the effects of stress."

Why does knowing where your grandmother went to school help a child overcome something as minor as a skinned knee or as major as a terrorist attack?

"The answers have to do with a child's sense of being part of a larger family," Dr. Duke said.

Psychologists have found that every family has a unifying narrative, he explained, and those narratives take one of three shapes.

First, the ascending family narrative: "Son, when we came to this country, we had nothing. Our family worked. We opened a store. Your grandfather went to high school. Your father went to college. And now you. ..."

Second is the descending narrative: "Sweetheart, we used to have it all. Then we lost everything."

"The most healthful narrative," Dr. Duke continued, "is the third one. It's called the oscillating family narrative: 'Dear, let me tell you, we've had ups and downs in our family. We built a family business. Your grandfather was a pillar of the community. Your mother was on the board of the hospital. But we also had setbacks. You had an uncle who was once arrested. We had a house burn down. Your father lost a job. But no matter what happened, we always stuck together as a family.'"

Dr. Duke said that children who have the most self-confidence have what he and Dr. Fivush call a strong "intergenerational self." They know they belong to something bigger than themselves.

Leaders in other fields have found similar results. Many groups use what sociologists call sense-making, the building of a narrative that explains what the group is about.

Jim Collins, a management expert and author of “Good to Great,” told me that successful human enterprises of any kind, from companies to countries, go out of their way to capture their core identity. In Mr. Collins’s terms, they “preserve core, while stimulating progress.” The same applies to families, he said.

Mr. Collins recommended that families create a mission statement similar to the ones companies and other organizations use to identify their core values.

The military has also found that teaching recruits about the history of their service increases their camaraderie and ability to bond more closely with their unit.

Cmdr. David G. Smith is the chairman of the department of leadership, ethics and law at the Naval Academy and an expert in unit cohesion, the Pentagon’s term for group morale. Until recently, the military taught unit cohesion by “dehumanizing” individuals, Commander Smith said. Think of the bullying drill sergeants in “Full Metal Jacket” or “An Officer and a Gentleman.”

But these days the military spends more time building up identity through communal activities. At the Naval Academy, Commander Smith advises graduating seniors to take incoming freshmen (or plebes) on history-building exercises, like going to the cemetery to pay tribute to the first naval aviator or visiting the original B-1 aircraft on display on campus.

Dr. Duke recommended that parents pursue similar activities with their children. Any number of occasions work to convey this sense of history: holidays, vacations, big family get-togethers, even a ride to the mall. The hokier the family’s tradition, he said, the more likely it is to be passed down. He mentioned his family’s custom of hiding frozen turkeys and canned pumpkin in the bushes during Thanksgiving so grandchildren would have to “hunt for their supper,” like the Pilgrims.

“These traditions become part of your family,” Dr. Duke said.

Decades of research have shown that most happy families communicate effectively. But talking doesn’t mean simply “talking through problems,” as important as that is. Talking also means telling a positive story about yourselves. When faced with a challenge, happy families, like happy people, just add a new chapter to their life story that shows them overcoming the hardship. This skill is particularly important for children, whose identity tends to get locked in during adolescence.

The bottom line: if you want a happier family, create, refine and retell the story of your family’s positive moments and your ability to bounce back from the difficult ones. That act alone may increase the odds that your family will thrive for many generations to come.

# **When Your Partner Writes the Book on 'Happy Families'**

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March 14, 2013