Our Journey in the Haggadah

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Rabbi Hayyim Angel, National Scholar of the Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals, teaches Tanakh at Yeshiva University. He is the author of many books and articles. This article appeared in his book, Creating Space between Peshat and Derash:
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OUR JOURNEY IN THE HAGGADAH:
HOW ITS NARRATIVES AND OBSERVANCES ENABLE US TO EXPERIENCE THE EXODUS[1]

By Rabbi Hayyim Angel

INTRODUCTION

The Haggadah is a compilation of biblical, talmudic and midrashic texts, with several other passages that were added over the centuries.[1] Despite its composite nature, the Haggadah in its current form may be understood as containing a fairly coherent structure. It creates a collective effect that enables us to experience the journey of our ancestors. As the Haggadah exhorts us, we must consider ourselves as though we left Egypt, actively identifying with our forebears rather than merely recounting ancient history. The exodus lies at the root of our eternal covenantal relationship with God.

The Haggadah merges laws with narrative. Its text and symbols take us on a journey that begins with freedom, then a descent into slavery, to the exodus, and on into the messianic era. Although we may feel free today, we are in exile as long as the Temple is not rebuilt. Many of our Seder observances remind us of the Temple and we pray for its rebuilding.

The Haggadah also presents an educational agenda. Although most traditions are passed from the older generation to the younger, the older generation must be open to learning from the younger. Often it is their questions that remind us of how much we still must learn and explore.

This essay will use these axioms to outline the journey of the Haggadah, using the text and translation of Rabbi Marc D. Angel's *A Sephardic Passover Haggadah* (Ktav, 1988). This study is not an attempt to uncover the original historical meaning of the Passover symbols or to explain why certain passages were incorporated into the Haggadah. However, perhaps we will approach the inner logic of our current version of the Haggadah and its symbols as they came to be traditionally understood.

THE FIRST FOUR STAGES: FROM FREEDOM INTO SLAVERY

Kaddesh: Wine symbolizes festivity and happiness. Kiddush represents our sanctification of time, another sign of freedom. We recline as we drink the wine, a sign of freedom dating back to Greco-Roman times, when the core observances of the Seder were codified by the rabbis of the Mishnah. Some also have the custom of having others pour the wine for them, which serves as another symbol of luxury and freedom. The Haggadah begins by making us feel free and noble.

Rehatz (or Urhatz): We ritually wash our hands before dipping the *karpas* vegetable into salt water or vinegar. As with the pouring of the wine, some have the custom for others to wash their hands, symbolizing luxury and freedom. Rabbi Naftali Tzvi Yehudah Berlin (Netziv, 1817–1893, Lithuania) observes that many Jews no longer follow this talmudic practice of washing hands before dipping any food into a liquid. Doing so at the Seder serves as a reminder of the practice in Temple times. We remain in freedom mode for *rehatz*, but we begin to think about

the absence of the Temple.

Karpas: Dipping an appetizer is another sign of freedom and nobility that dates back to Greco-Roman times. However, we dip the vegetable into either salt water or vinegar, which came to be interpreted as symbolic of the tears of slavery. In addition, the technical ritual reason behind eating *karpas* resolves a halakhic debate over whether we are required to make a blessing of *Borei peri ha-adamah* over the maror later. On the one hand, we eat maror after matzah and therefore have already washed and recited the blessing of *ha-motzi*. On the other hand, it is unclear whether the maror should be subsumed under the meal covered by the matzah, since it is its own independent mitzvah. Consequently, the *ha-adamah* we recite over the *karpas* absolves us of this doubt, and we are required to keep the maror in mind for this blessing.[2] Interpreting this halakhic discussion into symbolic terms: while we are dipping an appetizer as a sign of freedom and luxury, we experience the tears of slavery, and we think about the maror, which the Haggadah explains as a symbol of the bitterness of slavery.[3] We are beginning our descent into slavery.

Yahatz: The Haggadah identifies two reasons for eating matzah. One is explicit in the Torah, that our ancestors had to rush out of Egypt during the exodus (Exodus 12:39). However, the Haggadah introduces another element: The Israelites ate matzah while they were yet slaves in Egypt. The Torah's expression *lehem oni*, bread of affliction (Deuteronomy 16:3) lends itself to this midrashic interpretation.

Yahatz focuses exclusively on this slavery aspect of matzah—poor people break their bread and save some for later, not knowing when they will next receive more food (*Berakhot* 39b). By this point, then, we have descended into slavery. At the same time, the other half of this matzah is saved for the *tzafun-afikoman*, which represents the Passover offering and is part of the freedom section of the Seder. Even as we descend into slavery with our ancestors, then. the Haggadah provides a glimpse of the redemption.

To summarize, *kaddesh* begins with our experiencing freedom and luxury. *Rehatz* also is a sign of freedom but raises the specter of there no longer being a Temple.

Karpas continues the trend of freedom but more overtly gives us a taste of slavery by reminding us of tears and bitterness. *Yahatz* completes the descent into slavery. Even before we begin the *maggid*, then, the Haggadah has enabled us to experience the freedom and nobility of the Patriarchs, the descent to Egypt with Joseph and his brothers, and the enslavement of their descendants.

MAGGID: FROM SLAVERY TO FREEDOM

A. EDUCATIONAL FRAMEWORK

At this point in our journey, we are slaves. We begin the primary component of the Haggadah—*maggid*—from this state of slavery.

Ha Lahma Anya: We employ the "bread of affliction" imagery of the matzah, since we are slaves now. This opening passage of *maggid* also connects us to our ancestors: "This is the bread of affliction which our ancestors ate in the land of Egypt.…Now we are here enslaved." The passage begins our experience by identifying with the slavery of our ancestors, then moves into our own exile and desire for redemption.

Mah Nishtanah–The Four Children: Before continuing our journey, we shift our focus to education. The Haggadah prizes the spirit of questioning. The wisdom of the wise child is found in questioning, not in knowledge: "What are the testimonies, statutes, and laws which the Lord our God has commanded you?" To create a society of wise children, the Haggadah challenges us to explore and live our traditions.

Avadim Hayinu: We are not simply recounting ancient history. We are a living part of that memory and connect to our ancestors through an acknowledgement that all later generations are indebted to God for the original exodus: "If the Holy One blessed be He had not brought out our ancestors from Egypt, we and our children and grandchildren would yet be enslaved to Pharaoh in Egypt."

Ma'aseh Be-Ribbi Eliezer: The five rabbis who stayed up all night in B'nei B'rak teach that the more knowledgeable one is, the more exciting this learning

becomes. These rabbis allowed their conversation to take flight, losing track of time as they experienced the exodus and actively connected to our texts and traditions.[4] This passage venerates our teachers.

Amar Ribbi Elazar: As a complement to the previous paragraph, the lesser scholar Ben Zoma had something valuable to teach the greatest Sages of his generation. Learning moves in both directions, and everyone has something important to contribute to the conversation.

Yakhol Me-Rosh Hodesh: The Haggadah stresses the value of combining education and experience. “The commandment [to discuss the exodus from Egypt] applies specifically to the time when matzah and maror are set before you.”

B. THE JOURNEY RESUMES

Now that we have established a proper educational framework, we return to our journey. At the last checkpoint, we were slaves pointing to our bread of affliction, longing for redemption. Each passage in the next section of the Haggadah moves us further ahead in the journey.

Mi-Tehillah Ovedei Avodah Zarah: We quote from the Book of Joshua:

In olden times, your forefathers—Terah, father of Abraham and father of Nahor—lived beyond the Euphrates and worshiped other gods. But I took your father Abraham from beyond the Euphrates and led him through the whole land of Canaan and multiplied his offspring. I gave him Isaac, and to Isaac I gave Jacob and Esau. I gave Esau the hill country of Seir as his possession, while Jacob and his children went down to Egypt. (Joshua 24:2–4)

To experience the full redemption, halakhah requires us to begin the narrative with negative elements and then move to the redemption (see *Pesahim* 116a). However, the Haggadah surprisingly cuts the story line of this narrative in the middle of the Passover story. The very next verses read:

Then I sent Moses and Aaron, and I plagued Egypt with [the wonders] that I wrought in their midst, after which I freed you—I freed your fathers—from Egypt, and you came to the Sea. But the Egyptians pursued your fathers to the Sea of Reeds with chariots and horsemen. They cried out to the Lord, and He put darkness between you and the Egyptians; then He brought the Sea upon them, and it covered them. Your own eyes saw what I did to the Egyptians. (Joshua 24:5–7)

Given the direct relevance of these verses to the Passover story, why are they not included in the Haggadah? It appears that the Haggadah does not cite these verses because we are not yet up to that stage in our journey. The Haggadah thus far has brought us only to Egypt.

Hi She-Amedah: The Haggadah again affirms the connection between our ancestors and our contemporary lives. “This promise has held true for our ancestors and for us. Not only one enemy has risen against us; but in every generation enemies rise against us to destroy us. And the Holy One, blessed be He, saves us from their hand.” The slavery and exodus are a paradigm for all later history.

Tzei Ve-Lammed: The midrashic expansion is based on Deuteronomy 26, the confession that a farmer would make upon bringing his first fruits:

My father was a fugitive Aramean. He went down to Egypt with meager numbers and sojourned there; but there he became a great and very populous nation. The Egyptians dealt harshly with us and oppressed us; they imposed heavy labor upon us. We cried to the Lord, the God of our fathers, and the Lord heard our plea and saw our plight, our misery, and our oppression. The Lord freed us from Egypt by a mighty hand, by an outstretched arm and awesome power, and by signs and portents. (Deuteronomy 26:5–8)

We continue our journey from our arrival in Egypt, where the passage in Joshua had left off. Through a midrashic discussion of the biblical verses, we move from Jacob’s descent into Egypt, to the growth of the family into a nation, to the slavery, and then on through the plagues and exodus. By the end of this passage we have been redeemed from Egypt.

Like the passage from Joshua 24, the Haggadah once again cuts off this biblical passage before the end of its story. The next verse reads:

He brought us to this place and gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey. (Deuteronomy 26:9)

In Temple times, Jews evidently did read that next verse (see Mishnah *Pesahim* 10:4).[5] However, the conceptual value of stopping the story is consistent with our experience in the Haggadah. This biblical passage as employed by the Haggadah takes us through our ancestors’ exodus from Egypt, so we have not yet arrived in the land of Israel.

Ribbi Yosei Ha-Gelili Omer—Dayyenu: After enumerating the plagues, the Haggadah quotes from *Midrash Psalms* 78, where Sages successively suggest that there were 50, 200, or even 250 plagues at the Red Sea. Psalm 78 is concerned primarily with God's benevolent acts toward Israel, coupled with Israel's ingratitude. Psalm 78 attempts to inspire later generations not to emulate their ancestors with this ingratitude:

He established a decree in Jacob, ordained a teaching in Israel, charging our fathers to make them known to their children, that a future generation might know—children yet to be born—and in turn tell their children that they might put their confidence in God, and not forget God's great deeds, but observe His commandments, and not be like their fathers, a wayward and defiant generation, a generation whose heart was inconstant, whose spirit was not true to God. (Psalm 78:5–8)

Several midrashim on this Psalm magnify God's miracles even more than in the accounts in Tanakh, including the passage incorporated in the Haggadah that multiplies the plagues at the Red Sea. From this vantage point, our ancestors were even more ungrateful to God. The Haggadah then follows this excerpt with *Dayyenu* to express gratitude over every step of the exodus process. The juxtaposition of these passages conveys the lesson that the psalmist and the midrashic expansions wanted us to learn.

In addition to expressing proper gratitude for God's goodness, *Dayyenu* carries our journey forward. It picks up with the plagues and exodus—precisely where the passage we read from Deuteronomy 26 had left off. It then takes us ahead to the reception of the Torah at Sinai, to the land of Israel, and finally to the Temple: "He gave us the Torah, He led us into the land of Israel, and He built for us the chosen Temple to atone for our sins."

Rabban Gamliel Hayah Omer: Now that we are in the land of Israel and standing at the Temple, we can observe the laws of Passover! We describe the Passover offering during Temple times, matzah and maror, and their significance. It also is noteworthy that the reason given for eating matzah is freedom—unlike the slavery section earlier that focused on bread of affliction (*yahatz-ha lahma anya*). "This matzah which we eat is…because the dough of our ancestors did not

have time to leaven before the Holy One blessed be He…redeemed them suddenly."

Be-Khol Dor Va-Dor—Hallel: The primary purpose of the Haggadah is completely spelled out by now. "In each generation a person is obligated to see himself as though he went out of Egypt.…For not only did the Holy One blessed be He redeem our ancestors, but He also redeemed us along with them.…" Since we have been redeemed along with our ancestors, we recite the first two chapters of the *Hallel* (Psalms 113–114). These Psalms likewise take us from the exodus to entry into Israel. R. Judah Loew of Prague (Maharal, c. 1520–1609) explains that we save the other half of *Hallel* (Psalms 115–118) for after the Grace after Meals, when we pray for our own redemption. Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik adds that Psalms 113–114 consist of pure praise, befitting an account of the exodus from Egypt which already has occurred. Psalms 115–118 contain both praise and petition, relevant to our future redemption, for which we long.[6]

Asher Ge'alanu: Now that we have completed our journey and have chanted the *Hallel* thanking God for redeeming us, we conclude *maggid* with a blessing: "You are blessed, Lord our God…Who has redeemed us and redeemed our ancestors from Egypt and has brought us to this night to eat matzah and maror." For the first time in the Haggadah, we place ourselves before our ancestors, since our experience has become primary. As we express gratitude to God for bringing us to this point and for giving us the commandments, we also petition for the rebuilding of the Temple and ultimate redemption.

THE REMAINDER OF THE SEDER: CELEBRATORY OBSERVANCE IN FREEDOM AND YEARNING FOR THE MESSIANIC REDEMPTION

At this point we observe the laws of Passover. Although there is no Passover offering, we eat the matzah and maror and then the festive meal (*shulhan orekh*). Our eating of the *korekh*, Hillel's wrap of matzah, maror, and haroset together, reenacts a Temple observance (*Pesahim* 115a). Similarly, we use the final piece of matzah (*tzafun*) to symbolize the Passover offering, the last taste we should have in our mouths (*Pesahim* 119b).[7] By consuming the second half of the matzah from *yahatz*, we take from the slavery matzah and transform its other half into a

symbol of freedom.

After the Grace after Meals (*barekh*), we pray for salvation from our enemies and for the messianic era. By reading the verses "*shefokh hamatekha*, pour out Your wrath" (Psalm 79:6–7), we express the truism that we cannot fully praise God in Hallel until we sigh from enemy oppression and recognize contemporary suffering.[8] Many communities customarily open the door at this point for Elijah the Prophet, also expressing hope for redemption. We then recite the remainder of the Hallel which focuses on our redemption, as discussed above. Some of the later songs added to *nirtzah* likewise express these themes of festive singing and redemption.

CONCLUSION

The Haggadah is a composite text that expanded and evolved over the centuries. The symbols, along with traditional explanations for their meanings, similarly developed over time. Our Haggadah—with its core over 1,000 years old—takes us on a remarkable journey that combines narrative and observance into an intellectual and experiential event for people of all ages and backgrounds. In this manner, we travel alongside our ancestors from freedom to slavery to redemption. We are left with a conscious recognition that although we are free and we bless God for that fact, we long for the Temple in Jerusalem. *La-shanah ha-ba'ah be?Yerushalayim*, *Amen*.

NOTES

[1] Shemuel and Ze'ev Safrai write that most of the core of our Haggadah, including the *Kiddush*, the Four Questions, the Four Children, the midrashic readings, Rabban Gamliel, and the blessing at the end of *maggid* originated in the time of the Mishnah and were set by the ninth century. "This is the bread of affliction" (*ha lahma anya*) and "In each generation" (*be-khol dor va-dor*) hail from the ninth to tenth centuries. Components such as the story of the five rabbis at B'nei B'rak and Rabbi Elazar; the Midrash about the number of plagues at the Red Sea; *Hallel HaGadol* and *Nishmat*; all existed as earlier texts before their incorporation

into the Haggadah. “Pour out Your wrath” (*shefokh hamatekha*) and the custom of hiding the *afikoman* are later additions. All of the above was set by the eleventh century. The only significant additions after the eleventh century are the songs at the end (*Haggadat Hazal* [Jerusalem: Karta, 1998], pp. 70–71).

[2] See *Pesahim* 114b; *Shulhan Arukh, Orah Hayyim* 473:6; 475:2.

[3] The symbol of the maror underwent an evolution. Joseph Tabory notes that during the Roman meal, the dipping of lettuce as a first course was the most common appetizer. By the fourth century, the Talmud ruled that the appetizer must be a different vegetable (*karpas*) so that the maror could be eaten for the first time as a mitzvah with a blessing (*The JPS Commentary on the Haggadah: Historical Introduction, Translation, and Commentary* [Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2008], pp. 23–24).
In *Pesahim* 39a, one Sage explains that we use *hasa* (romaine lettuce, the talmudically preferred maror, even though five different vegetables are suitable) since God pitied (*has*) our ancestors. Another Sage derives additional meaning from the fact that romaine lettuce begins by tasting sweet but then leaves a bitter aftertaste. This sensory process parallels our ancestors’ coming to Egypt as nobles and their subsequent enslavement.

[4] Unlike most other rabbinic passages in the Haggadah which are excerpted from the Talmud and midrashic collections, this paragraph is unattested in rabbinic literature outside the Haggadah. See Joseph Tabory, *JPS Commentary on the Haggadah*, p. 38, for discussion of a parallel in the Tosefta.

[5] Cf. Joseph Tabory, *JPS Commentary on the Haggadah*, p. 33.

[6] Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, *Festival of Freedom: Essays on Passover and the Haggadah*, ed. Joel B. Wolowelsky and Reuven Ziegler (New York: Toras HoRav Foundation, 2006), p. 105.

[7] The word *afikoman* derives from the Greek, referring to anything done at the end of a meal, such as eating dessert or playing music or revelry. This was a common after-dinner feature at Greco-Roman meals (cf. J. T. *Pesahim* 37d). The Sages of the Talmud understood that people needed to retain the taste of the Passover offering in their mouths. It was only in the thirteenth century that the matzah we eat at the end of the meal was called the *afikoman* (Joseph Tabory, *JPS Commentary on the Haggadah*, p. 15).

[8] Shemuel and Ze’ev Safrai enumerate longer lists of related verses that some medieval communities added (*Haggadat Hazal*, pp. 174–175).