

Torah Table Talk

Back To the Sources: How We Tell the Story of the Exodus Sedar Night, Passover



While most people realize that the purpose of the Seder is to tell the story of the Exodus from Egypt, many find that when they reach the end of the Seder they are not certain that they have actually told the story in a clear and coherent fashion. The Haggadah is written in the style of Rabbinic literature with which includes commentary, digressions and many other biblical associations which make it hard to identify the main components of the story from the copious details in this little book.

At the core of the Haggadah is a simple passage made up of four verses taken from the book of Deuteronomy which tells the story of the Exodus in very personal terms. Ironically, this passage has nothing to do with Passover! It was originally part of the Bikkurim, the first fruit, ceremony which took place in the ancient temple. The Rabbis adopted this passage, elaborated on it through Midrash, and included it at the heart of the Maggid, the section of the Haggadah which includes the “telling.”

Special thanks to Rabbinical Student and Intern, Annie Tucker for gathering the insights on this passage. Why not read them before the Seder, and consider their significance both separate from the Seder and in the context of the Haggadah.

Deuteronomy 26:1-8

When you enter the land that the Lord your God is giving you as a heritage, and you possess it and settle in it, you shall take some of every first fruit of the soil, which you harvest from the land that the Lord your God is giving you, put it in a basket and go to the place where the Lord your God will choose to establish God's name. You shall go to the priest in charge at that time and say to him, "I acknowledge this day before the Lord your God that I have entered the land that the Lord swore to our fathers to assign to us." The priest shall take the basket from your hand and set it down in front of the altar of the Lord your God. You shall then recite as follows before the Lord your God: *"My father was a wandering Aramean, and with just a few people he went down to Egypt and sojourned there. And there he became a great nation, mighty and numerous. The Egyptians dealt harshly with us and oppressed us; and they imposed hard labor upon us. We cried out to Adonai, the God of our ancestors; and Adonai heard our plea and saw our affliction, our misery and our oppression. Then Adonai took us out of Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, with awesome power, with signs and with wonders. He brought us to this place and gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey. Wherefore I now bring the first fruits of the soil which You, O Lord, have given me."*

Mishnah Bikkurim 7:3

In the beginning anyone who knew how to read would read and anyone who did not know how to read, it would be read for him. The refrained from bringing, the rabbis decreed that it would be read both for those who knew how to read and for those who did not

JPS Commentary on Deuteronomy (Jeff Tigay)

Offerings of the first products of the soil are a way of acknowledging God as the source of the land's fertility and the true owner of its produce. In the present ceremony, however, the theme of fertility plays only a secondary role as the farmer is led from his immediate situation to a recognition of the land's fertility as merely one aspect of a larger picture, namely God's guidance of Israel's history from its humble beginnings, freeing it from oppression and giving it land. One may compare the way the biblical description of the pre-harvest rites of the *pesach* sacrifice and the Festival of Unleavened Bread focus exclusively on the Exodus, not on the upcoming harvest. This shift of the focus of a religious ceremony from exclusive attention to the role of God in nature to an emphasis on His role in history is one of the most important and original features of the Bible. Its effect on liturgy is this type of prescribed prayer, which leads the worshiper from the immediate experience to an understanding of the larger picture.

Rashi on Deuteronomy 26:5

Arami oved Avi. (An Aramean sought to destroy my father). Laban sought to uproot all when he pursued after Jacob. And because he contemplated doing so, God charges him as though he had done it for as regards the nations of the world the Holy One Blessed Be God considers a thought equivalent to a deed.

Rashbam on Deuteronomy 26:5

Arami oved Avi. (My father was a wandering Aramean). My father Abraham was an Aramean, wandering and exiled in the land of Aram. As it is written, "Go forth from your land" (Genesis 12:1) and as it's written, "So when God made me wander from my father's house" (Genesis 20:13).

Ibn Ezra on Deuteronomy 26:5

Oved Avi. (a lost Aramean). The word "oved" is intransitive. And if the word "Arami" were to indicate Laban, the text would have written "ma'abed" or "ma'avid." And furthermore, what is the reason to say that Laban wanted to kill my father and went down to Egypt, and Laban never turned to go down to Egypt! The closer reading is that the Aramean was Jacob. As if the text said, when my father was in Aram he was enslaved, a poor person without money.

Nechama Leibowitz on *Parashat Ki Tavo*

The farmer who brings his fruit thanks God for having delivered him from Egyptian bondage and brought him to Eretz Yisrael. Why should he hark back to the wickedness of Laban? For this reason, Rashbam and Ibn Ezra's understanding of the text in the sense of "a wandering Aramean" is more plausible – first the reference to the exile and wandering, and then the bondage and redemption. The story thus begins with wandering and ends with its converse – permanent settlement.

The Family Participation Haggadah by Noam Zion and David Dishon, p. 81

Why does the Pesach Haggadah's central midrash focus on the story of the first fruits, which is associated with Shavuot? Perhaps the point is that Pesach is not only about the move from slavery to freedom, but from economic dependence to productivity, from the vulnerability of the alien to the security of the citizen.

A Night of Questions Passover Haggadah by Michael Strassfeld and Joy Levitt, p. 52

When the Israelites brought the fruits of their first harvest to the Temple in Jerusalem, they proclaimed the formula that began with the words, "My father was a wandering Aramean." It is recited not from the perspective of slaves, but of successful farmers in the Promised Land. Why was it important to recite this formula? "When you have eaten your fill and built fine houses to live in, and your herds and flocks have multiplied, and your silver and gold have increased, and everything you own has prospered, beware lest your heart grow haughty and you forget Adonai your God, who freed you from the land of Egypt, the house of slavery...and you say to yourselves, 'My own power and the might of my own hand have won this wealth for me' (Deuteronomy 8:12-14, 17)." As we celebrate our freedom and our bounty, we are reminded never

to forget the many sources of our privilege, and the covenantal obligations that these privileges impose upon us.

Questions for Discussion

1. Why do you think the sages chose this particular passage as the central core of the Haggadah when they could have chosen any other passage in the Bible? Wouldn't it have made more sense to choose a passage or a selection of passages from the book of Exodus? What sets this passage apart from all others in the Bible?
2. This passage begins *Arami oved avi*. What do these words mean? Why do the commentators disagree about the exact meaning of this expression? Why does the *Haggadah* (And the commentator, Rashi) appear to offer an interpretation which parts with the literal meaning of these words?
3. Note that only part of the *Bikkurim* speech from Deuteronomy appears in the Passover *Haggadah*. What part of the speech does the Haggadah leave out? Why?
4. What can we learn from the Bikkurim declaration about our responsibilities to the Jewish people, to the land, to God and to our other human beings? What was the purpose of this declaration in the time of the Temple?
5. Write your own commentary on these verses. Read them over verse by verse and ask the following questions:
 - a. What questions do these verses make me ask?
 - b. What parts of the verse are redundant or unclear? What do words or expressions that seem repetitive add to my understanding of the past and my relationship to God?
 - c. What does each verse say? What does each verse mean? How can I apply its lessons to my life?
 - d. If I was re-writing this passage for contemporary society what would it say?
6. This passage presents a certain image of God. Do you agree with it? Why or why not? How have contemporary events such as the Holocaust, the founding of the state of Israel, and our experience as American Jews influenced the way you read this passage?

MAGGID: HOW WE TELL THE STORY

Here is a more contemporary Re-reading of the passage in Deuteronomy which can be used in conjunction with the Haggadah text.

Come and hear the story of our people,
The story we relive on Seder night.

How our ancestors went forth
from the straights of Mitzrayim
to the open places of rejoicing and faith.

This story belongs to you and me.
An age-old story, it becomes our own
when we tell it on Seder night.

“**A** wandering Aramean was my father.
he went down to Mitzraim few in number.

There he became a great nation,

mighty and numerous.”
(Deut. 26:5)

In Egypt we discovered our distinctiveness.
Few in number, we learned
that greatness is more than numbers.

“The Egyptians treated us harshly and oppressed us,
they imposed hard labor on us.”
(Deut. 26:6)

Their harshness wounded us with false accusations
with venom and hate and distrust.

“We cried out to Adonai,
the God of our ancestors,

He heard our voice
and saw our affliction,
our toil and our oppression.”
(Deut. 26:7)

What did Adonai see in Mitzraim?
He saw families torn asunder,
and children made to suffer.
God saw the cruelty of Egypt
and the helplessness of Israel.

“So Adonai brought us out of Egypt
with a mighty hand, with an out-stretched arm
with awe and signs and wonders.”
(Deut. 26:8)

Egypt and Israel felt God’s presence
In every corner of the land.
His signs filled the earth and the sky
His wonders could be seen in every Israelite’s eye.

With a mighty hand He demanded
justice for the oppressed.
With plagues and wonders he taught the Egyptians
the lesson of his power.

So may God’s signs be present today
To teach us of Your justice
and Your mighty acts.

*“All it takes to study Torah is an open heart, a curious mind
and a desire to grow a Jewish soul.”*