



והגדת לבתך  
*Vehigadet Levitekh*  
*And You Shall Tell Your Daughters...*

A *D'var Torah* for Pesach

By Rachel Keren

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increase the number of divrei Torah written by women.*

# The Miracle of Haggadah

By Rachel Keren<sup>1</sup>

This year, we will once again gather around the Seder table, and once again, feelings of excitement and anticipation will abound. Similar emotions are felt by scores of Jewish families around the world as they too gather around their Seder tables, Haggadah in hand. We all read the same story of our Exodus from Egypt. This ritual has been conducted year after year, generation after generation, using the age-old, familiar text and yet, in every home, the story is told as it has never been told before. What is the secret of this wondrous text—the Passover Haggadah—that enables us to relive a miraculous event that occurred over 3,000 years ago and encourages us to define and strengthen both our personal and collective identities as members of the Jewish nation?

## CREATING A MEMORY

“והיה היום הזה לכם לזכרון וחגתם אתו חג לה' לדרתיכם, חקת עולם תחגוהו”

“Now this day will be a memorial to you, and you shall celebrate it as a feast to the Lord throughout your generations; you are to celebrate it as a permanent ordinance.”<sup>2</sup>

The people are commanded to create a memory to serve as the basis for the identity of the Jewish people for generations to come. The collective memory of the Exodus, the shift from slavery to freedom, is to become the foundation of the cultural composition of the nation in the future. This commandment is given to Bnei Yisrael while they are still slaves in Egypt, at a time when the concept of fashioning guidelines for the future seems a dubious proposition. Slaves are not masters of their own time. How could they envision and shape the commemoration of the Exodus for future generations? Furthermore, as this Torah commandment is directed to all, how would Jews in future generations be able to continue developing a collective, cultural “memory” of an event that happened so long ago?

## TURNING A MEMORY INTO AN EDUCATIONAL EXPERIENCE

“והגדת לבנך ביום ההוא לאמר בעבור זה עשה ה' לי בצאתי ממצרים”

“You shall tell your son on that day, saying: It is because of what the Lord did for me when I came out of Egypt.”<sup>3</sup>

The Torah tells us that from this moment onwards, each and every Jew is obligated to remember and commemorate the Exodus from Egypt, making it not only part of the nation’s collective memory, but a personal memory as well. “One is obligated to see oneself as one who personally went out from Egypt.” This has become the focal point of the Seder night, and the format of the Haggadah and the ceremony of the Seder night are the tools at hand to help every Jew internalize the meaning of the original Passover experience. From an educational standpoint, the success of the Seder night is quite impressive. In each and every generation, the Jewish people have learned to view themselves as having gone out of Egypt. When asked “Why do we celebrate Passover?” every young Jewish child automatically answers, “Because we were taken out of Egypt!” We so closely identify ourselves with this monumental event; its values have become the cornerstone of the collective memory of the entire nation and the basis for our national identity.

How can this didactic accomplishment be explained? What can we learn from it? The Mishnah offers a guideline for success in education:

“מזוג לו כוס שני וכאן הבן שואל אביו, ואם אין דעת בבן אביו מלמדו: מה נשתנה הלילה הזה מכל הלילות... ולפי דעתו של בן אביו מלמדו מתחיל בגנות ומסיים בשבח ודורש מארמי אובד אבי עד שיגמור כל הפרשה כולה”

“The second cup is poured for him, and now the son asks his father, and if the son is not knowledgeable, the father will teach him. How is this night different from all other nights...And the father will teach the son according to his knowledge, beginning with defamation and ending with praise and he teaches from ‘My ancestor was a wandering Aramean’ until he finishes the entire chapter.”<sup>4</sup>

This Mishnah clearly specifies that the educational approach towards our sons and daughters is the most important aspect of the Seder night. Each child must be taught on a personal level, according to his/her capabilities, so that he/she will be able to internalize the Exodus from Egypt and adopt this experience as part of his/her Jewish identity. The Mishnah stresses that educational methodology is of utter importance, taking precedence even over educational content. If so, it might be wise to turn to the Haggadah, the text used on the Seder night, to learn the secrets of success of this educational approach and then implement this method for all educational endeavors.

### NOT AS SIMPLE AS IT SEEMS

A closer look at the Haggadah’s text poses a number of questions. Is this truly the proper didactic way to present such an important message to the diverse group of participants gathered around the Seder table? The language and style of the Haggadah text are not always clear even to native Hebrew speakers. The number of topics covered in one night can be mind-boggling: the miracle of Passover and the journey from slavery to freedom, the obligation to remember the Exodus, the experiences of the Sages, our ways to celebrate the holiday, the laws of Passover, the implications Passover has on the future redemption, and of course, praise and thanksgiving for the miracle.

Implementation of this educational method is also not as simple as it may seem. The Haggadah jumps from topic to topic, seemingly without any predetermined order. Even the tale of the Exodus from Egypt, the severity of slavery, or the stages of the miraculous redemption are not described as a riveting plot aimed to capture the attention of all readers. The story is presented in the form of a Midrash as a complicated homily, quoting verse upon verse from the Scriptures. In order to understand the depth of the slavery, we are sent to read passages from Deuteronomy, Samuel, Ezekiel, and other holy texts.

How can this diverse and at times complicated text comply with the educational instructions defined by the Mishnah? How can we explain the undeniable educational success of the Seder night despite the difficult text? An additional look at the Mishnah and, in turn, the Haggadah, offers further insight.

### THE SECRET OF SUCCESS

The aforementioned Mishnah begins with “The son asks his father,” and immediately continues with “...and if the son is not knowledgeable, the father will teach him.” The course of study is based upon questions, “How is this night different?” which may be asked as written in the Mishnah, or as a list of different original questions posed by the son himself.

A *Breytiah* in the Gemarah adds:

“חכם בנו - שואלו, ואם אינו חכם - אשתו שואלתו, ואם לאו - הוא שואל  
לעצמו(!), ואפילו שני תלמידי חכמים שידעים בהלכות הפסח שואלין זה לזה!”

“If his son is wise, he will ask. If he is not wise, his wife will ask. And if not, he asks himself(!), and even two scholars who know the laws of Passover must ask one another!”<sup>5</sup>

In other words, if the leader of the Seder has a smart son, the son asks the questions. If there is no son, the wife asks her husband. If one leads a Seder alone, he asks himself, and if two scholars sit together, they must ask one another as if neither knows the answers.

This *Breiyyah* teaches us a number of important educational principles:

1. Everyone is obligated to continue to learn, even if, and perhaps especially if, one has already reached the level of “We are all wise...we are all knowledgeable.” We must always begin our studies from the beginning, not from the point of view that “I already know.”
2. The “Q&A” learning method creates an ongoing dialogue between the participants, side-stepping the need for a monologue or lecture given by “The One Who Knows” to “Those Who Don’t.” Participants sit at the Seder table as equals. Everyone is entitled to share his/her knowledge with others, and at the same time, everyone is required to ask questions. The quest for knowledge encompasses all, and the diverse list of questions helps pave the way, facilitating the absorption of new knowledge at various levels.
3. Everyone is able to participate in the Seder dialogue, posing questions and suggesting answers. A joint discussion which includes everybody creates a true learning process, one that can be internalized by all.
4. Only a free person has the privilege of asking questions and viewing issues from different perspectives. The structure of the Seder night grants this feeling of freedom to all participants.

These principles also help explain the reason behind the intricate compilation of texts and themes found in the Haggadah. The interwoven texts spark reader curiosity and prompt the learning process. The texts must be deciphered and explained. A dialogue develops around the Seder table, not only between one participant and another, but also between the participants and the text which poses questions, quandaries and possibilities. Each participant sifts through the questions and answers according to his/ her personal capabilities.

The Haggadah does not tell the Passover story by merely quoting verses from the Book of Exodus. The Haggadah offers us new perspectives of the nation’s experiences through a compilation of quotes from the Tanakh and the Midrash. Complex homiletic interpretations describe the story of bondage and redemption; other passages add descriptions of how slavery has been viewed in the eyes of the Jewish people in subsequent generations. We are urged to continue the dialogue with biblical verses and the Midrash and to experience and define slavery and redemption from our own points of view. Thus, we are led to understand the essence of the experience on a personal level and develop our own perspective of the redemption.

## HOW IS THIS NIGHT DIFFERENT?

According to the Mishnah, the Seder night is more than just “teaching our sons and daughters.” We surround ourselves and our children with the most significant and meaningful issues for us and for them on this night. There is no hierarchy. We join together as partners in learning. The interactive study process and ensuing dialogue around the Seder table are all-encompassing. The multi-faceted text opens the door to a myriad of special tastes and smells, liturgy and song, age-old customs and family traditions.

One of the most moving aspects of the Seder night is sitting together at the Seder table with Haggadah in hand, knowing that family after family of Jews all around the world and throughout the generations have read and are still reading the same text at their Seder table. The old and familiar text is a wondrous story! Our participation in the Seder night does not only reflect our connection to the entire Jewish nation celebrating this year. We have established our place in part of a multi-generational partnership, beginning with the very first Passover night, on through the generations of families who gathered together to study the Haggadah on the Seder night, and, God willing, continuing with our children’s children in the years to come. Each generation has defined its own “Exodus from Egypt” in the context of personal life circumstances, places of residence, hardships and bondage, and the hopes for redemption in one’s generation. This year, we will do the same.

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We are in awe of what they have accomplished,  
and even more so, what they have become.  
We thank God every day that they are our daughters.

We all join together, Haggadah in hand. We experience slavery. We experience freedom. We define our role as members of Am Yisrael. We are those who have been redeemed, and at the same time, we are those who are waiting expectantly for the final redemption.

The poem, “The Kid in the Haggadah,”<sup>5</sup> written by the famous Israeli author and poet, Natan Alterman, ends with the following verse:

”ואותה הגדה כה אמרה אז דומם:  
טוב, עמדו לכם, גדי ואבא.  
בדפי מהלכים העשן והדם,  
על גדולות ונצורות שיחתי נסבה.

אך ידעתי כי ים יקרע לא בכדי  
ויש טעם חומות ומדבר להבקיע  
אם בסוף הספור  
עומדים אבא וגדי  
וצופים לתורם שיזרח ויגיע”

*“...And the Haggadah stood still and whispered in silence:  
Good. Stand there, both father and kid.  
A journey of smoke and of blood fills my pages.  
Tales of miracles and siege I do bid.*

*But I know that the sea will be split. There’s a reason.  
A desert to cross. There’s reason and rhyme  
If at the end of the story  
Stand father and kid,  
Awaiting their turn to blossom and shine.”*

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  - 2 Exodus 12:14.
  - 3 Exodus 13:8.
  - 4 Mishnah Pesachim 10:4.
  - 5 TB Pesachim 116 a.
  - 6 Natan Alterman, *The Seventh Column*, (Davar, 1944), 393.

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