

DOV ELBAUM

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THE HAGGADAH OF PESACH -

THE SEARCH FOR A NEW UNDERSTANDING

Introduction

Good evening! Thanks to ... for that cordial introduction. Thanks also to ... for graciously hosting this event.

It is my great pleasure to be with you here at ... in ... in connection with the publication of my new book, *Into the Fullness of the Void*, which is the first of my books to appear in English. *Into the Fullness of the Void* deals with my journey – a never-finished task – in search of the Jewish spirit of freedom. Whenever I visit the United States, I am always excited at the opportunity to encounter such a rich diversity of Jewish life, a living expression of that same spirit of freedom. Having grown up in a very restricted Israeli ultra-Orthodox family, the creative freedom of American Jewish culture, reflected in ..., repeatedly amazes me .

My life has been all about my search for liberation and self-development. Language and words have always served as important tools in that search. Each of my books has been another step on my path to liberation. First I wrote *Elul Term*, a book filled with anger, tears and the settling of scores, a harsh and critical, realistic depiction of the society from which I came. Then I wrote *My Life with the Patriarchs*, which is an intense dialogue with my heritage, a conversation that I have forever been holding with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob about the deep existential problems that emerge from being Jewish.

Into the Fullness of the Void is an outcome of that dialogue. In the book, while describing the road that I have taken as a secular Jew and as an Israeli, I outline the approach to Judaism that I am trying to introduce and promote in Israeli society. To me, this book not only tells the story of my personal going out from Egypt, it is also an attempt to demonstrate how to embody such an exodus in our personal lives. This is why in the book I use teachings of the Kabala to describe how someone like me – who has in him the ultra-Orthodox and the secular, the Ashkenazi and the Sephardi, the believer and unbeliever – can live at peace with his heritage and with his life, and even take part in the regeneration and development of Jewish culture .

In thinking about this trip, my original intention had been to use these precious speaking engagements as a means of whetting the appetites of readers for the book.

However, realizing that the trip was falling in the weeks just before Pesach, the festival of freedom, the teacher in me could not resist the opportunity to share with American audiences my take on the Haggadah of Pesach .

I believe that there are three connections between what I will be saying this evening and *Into the Fullness of the Void*. First, as those of you who read the book will see, like so much else in my life, the issues I will raise tonight are intrinsically connected to the issues the book treats. Second, the approach I will demonstrate for you this evening is the approach I use in teaching as well as employ in the book. Third, the struggle that preoccupied the man I have come to view as the central figure of the Haggadah is the true subject of the book .

Since English is not my native language, I hope you'll forgive my largely reading from notes. I'm doing that in order to express myself as clearly as possible .

The Haggadah

Probably no other work of Jewish literature is as well known to Jews as the Haggadah. Because much of the Haggadah is offensive to modern sensibilities, many modern Haggadot omit or change texts. Tonight, however, I am referring only to the traditional Haggadah as it has come down to us through history.

In some ways, Pesach is the beginning of the Jewish year. Jewish tradition crowns Nissan as the first month. Pesach marks the birth of the Jewish nation. Pesach is also the ultimate achievement of our Jewish being, the festival of our collective freedom. And because so much of my life been a search for personal freedom, every year I feel such exhilaration when the scents of the Israeli spring serve as a fragrant reminder of the coming arrival of Pesach .

Throughout my adult life, I have always followed the same ritual: the heralding of Pesach causes me to take down the Haggadah and reread it in preparation for the holiday. But until a few years ago, my reaction was always the same: the Haggadah is ruthless and terrifying .

An evening that is supposed to celebrate liberty and freedom is framed by a text overflowing with stories of misfortune and pettiness. Early on, there is a strange, even absurd midrash about Lavan the Aramean who tried to wipe out Jacob and his entire family. There is what might seem like the silly debate between Talmudic sages about the precise number of plagues that the Blessed Holy One inflicted upon the Egyptians – ten? fifty? two hundred and fifty? And we are supposed to utter the horrible plea, “[u]nleash your wrath on the nations who have not known you and on kingdoms that did not call out your name”.

Other than the songs of praise, which were not composed especially for the Haggadah, most of the Haggadah is brimming with hatred, malice and vengeance. Even the traditional piyyutim – liturgical poems – which are not an integral part of the text and were composed in later generations, are fearsome and bloody. Like many of you I am sure, I remember childhood nightmares as a result of Had Gadya, featuring the figures of the butcher and the Angel of Death towering over my bed. Even the image of the Blessed Holy One, who “slays the Angel of Death,” could not calm me down .

Even we assume that the sages of the early second century of the Common Era who put together the Haggadah were really trying to frighten and shock the children of all future generations, to make sure that they would never forget the Exodus, why would they choose texts of such poor literary quality? Out of the vast treasures of dazzling beauty from the Bible, aggadah and midrash, this is really what they wanted to put on the Seder plate ?

A group of friends asked me to lead their Seder. My initial response was that I would find alternative sources for reading on Seder night instead of the traditional Haggadah. But then I realized that I did should not and did not want to tamper with the core of the most important commemorative evening in the Jewish tradition. Overturning time-honored traditions on a whim is not something one does lightly .

I decided that, if I was going to lead my friends’ Pesach Seder, I would need to look at Haggadah with fresh eyes .

Celebrating Pesach in Bnei Brak

I started with a passage from the opening of the Haggadah, a rather innocent midrash, with a declarative air about it, which the Talmudic sages used in order to place the Haggadah within a broader historical-social context .

The passage I am referring to appears immediately after the two mandatory statements from the Bible: the statement that the eating of matzah commemorates the bread of affliction (*ha lachma anya*) that the People of Israel ate during the Exodus; and the children's Four Questions, meant to tell them about the Exodus (“[a]nd you shall tell your son”). Then comes a midrash, a rabbinic discussion about whether one should tell the story of the Exodus at nighttime :

“It is told of Rabbi Eliezer and Rabbi Yehoshua and Rabbi Elazar Ben Azariah, and Rabbi Akiva and Rabbi Tarfon who celebrated Pesach in Bnei Brak, spending the entire night telling the story of the Exodus from Egypt, until their disciples came and said: ‘Our masters, the time has come for the reading of the morning Shema prayer’”.

At first glance, this seems to be just a story of the foremost sages of the Mishnah who were so engrossed with the story of the Exodus from Egypt throughout the night that they did not notice that dawn had already broken. But here is what we read next, which comes from the *Masechet Brachot* of the Talmud:

“Said Rabbi Elazar Ben Azariah: ‘I am about seventy years old, and I could never succeed in proving that the story of the Exodus from Egypt should be told at night, until Ben Zoma explained it thus: ‘It is written “That you may remember your departure from Egypt all the days of your life. Days of your life signifies days only, but all the days of your life signify the nights as well.’ The sages say: ‘Days of your life signifies our present time; all the days of your life signifies the coming of the Messiah’”.

In its original context, the discussion has halakhic implications – whether the Shema prayer should be read at night. But it seems odd that we should then find it in the

Haggadah. Why even ask whether the story of the Exodus should be told on Seder night? Is there any better time to tell the story than Seder night?

Ben Zoma, incidentally, is a man with a name that has amused generations of Israeli schoolchildren because it sounds so close to the expression ben zona, which means “son of a whore.” I wanted to find out what was so special about Ben Zoma’s personality and why he – unlike the other sages, not an ordained Rabbi – had become an authority on the question of telling the story of the Exodus at nighttime. Why does the Nasi, the head of the sages, Rabbi Elazar Ben Azariah, accept his view, contrary to the majority opinion of the other sages ?

Into the Pardes

We’ll come back to Ben Zoma, but let’s leave the Haggadah for a few minutes and go through some deep Talmudic analysis and interpretation. It will help you on our journey if you understand that for the sages who created the Talmud darkness doesn’t only mean night. Darkness also means evil and destruction. Also, keep your eye on the way the concept of water is used.

One of the Talmud’s most famous aggadot is the story of four important protagonists in Talmudic literature who entered the pardes. The word pardes literally means orchard, but here it connotes a mystical realm, the realm of the divine .

This is the story, which has been the subject of countless commentaries:

Four sages entered the pardes. They were Ben Azzai, Ben Zoma, Acher and Rabbi Akiva. Rabbi Akiva said to them, "When you come to the place of pure marble stones, do not say, 'Water! Water!' for it is said, [and this is from Psalm 101] 'He who speaks untruths shall not stand before My eyes.'" The story continues: Ben Azzai gazed and died. Regarding him the verse states, 'Precious in the eyes of G-d is the death of His pious ones' (Psalms 116:15). Ben Zoma gazed and was harmed. Regarding him the verse states, 'Did you find honey? Eat as only much as you need, lest you be overfilled and vomit it' (Proverbs 25:16). Acher cut down the plantings. Rabbi Akiva entered in peace and left in peace (BT Hagigah 14b.)

We see that each of the four friends comes to a different end. Ben Azzai died from looking at the Divine Presence, as it were. Ben Zoma also looked and was harmed, but what that harm was is a matter of rabbinic dispute. Acher cut down the plantings. (Acher, the Talmudic term for the sage Elisha Ben Abuyah, means "the other one.") Acher's "cutting down the plantings" in the orchard means that he became a heretic as a result of entering the *pardes*. Rabbi Akiva, came and went in peace. He also became the leading rabbinic figure of the era.

According to the usual interpretations, the four had set out on this journey in an attempt to understand the fate of the Jewish people in an age of destruction, a time when the Romans persecuted Jewish sages and killed many of them. However, I believe the true significance of this aggadah lies in its opening, Rabbi Akiba's warning: "When you come to the place of pure marble stones, do not say, 'Water! Water!' for it is said, 'He who speaks untruths shall not stand before My eyes.'" Bear with me a moment longer.

Let's come back to Ben Zoma and the question of what harm he suffered from looking at the Divine Presence. There is another story about the four companions who went into the *pardes*.

Rabbi Yehoshua Ben Hananiah that was standing on a ledge on the Temple Mount and Ben Zoma saw him, but did not stand up before him [in order to pay him respect]. [Rabbi Yehoshua] asked Ben Zoma, Where are you coming from and where are you headed, Ben Zoma? Ben zoma answered, I was looking between the upper and the lower waters, and there is only a bare three fingers' [breadth] between them, for it is said: 'And the spirit of God hovered over the face of the waters' – like a dove which hovers over her young without touching.' Rabbi Yehoshua told his disciples, 'Ben Zoma is still on the outside' (BT Hagigah 15a.)

What does this mean? Ben Hananiah meets his disciple, Ben Zoma, on the Temple Mount and Ben Zoma ignores him and doesn't pay his rabbi respect. Ben Hananiah asks Ben Zoma what he is up to, and Ben Zoma answers that he is gazing between "the lower waters" and "the upper waters." In the Creation story in the Book of Genesis, reading the biblical account literally, the upper waters are the sky, God's place of dwelling, and the lower waters are the mundane world, to which humans belong. Ben Zoma, who is on the Temple Mount – this is after the destruction of the Temple – is contemplating the gap between the celestial realms and the lower realms

of reality that were separated during the act of creation. Rabbi Yehoshua Ben Hananiah concludes that Ben Zoma is still “outside” of this world. He has not yet returned from the *pardes* .

This description of Ben Zoma enables us to understand what Rabbi Akiva means when he admonishes: “: ... do not say, 'Water! Water!'” He is warning his fellow travelers not to be tempted into seeing a distinction between the realm of the divine and the realm of humanity – the upper waters and the lower waters. e is saying that there cannot be a direct and unmediated connection between God, the creator of reality, and reality itself. He is telling them not to become confused by seeing what they do not need to see. However, and this is crucial, I believe Ben Zoma thinks otherwise and acts accordingly.

In my view, Ben Zoma believes that only if we accept the gap between the upper realm and the lower realm can we understand the inevitable rift between God and the world we live in, which is flooded with evil. Elisha Ben Abuyah became a heretic when he concluded that there are two separate divine authorities in heaven – a Benevolent God and a malevolent God. Ben Zoma is not a heretic. Suspending his judgment on the question of the connection between the sublime God and worldly reality, he remains trapped in the space between the two waters. How is the sublime God connected to that harsh, dark and sinister reality? Ben Zoma is not really sure that He is .

Aggadah and Haggadah

Using the connection between the Talmudic aggadah and the Haggadah of Pesach, I now had a new understanding of the symbolic meaning of the “night” in the discussion of the mishnaic sages. – I understood “night” to figuratively mean a time of great distress and suffering. Rabbi Elazar Ben Azariah opens by saying that he is already seventy years old. I think he is saying that throughout his ample life experience he has been witnessing suffering and destruction that were devoid of redemption or divine presence. Because of that, he fails to understand the reason for reading the story of the Exodus at nighttime, where night is understood figuratively. That is, he struggles to find reason in contemplating the meaning of freedom and historical redemption under impossible life circumstances. He questions how one can talk about liberty when one is under subjugation .

Ben Azariah finds the answers to his doubts in the homily of Ben Zoma, who, according to Talmudic legends, devoted his life to grasping the relation between God and reality. He accepts Ben Zoma's conclusion, precisely and only because it is Ben Zoma's conclusion and not that of another sage. Ben Zoma's opinion is adopted and settles the debate. Ben Azariah sees in Ben Zoma a man who has taken responsibility for his own thoughts and doubts, one who has not hidden his doubts and pretended they do not exist. (Indeed, according to the Talmud, these doubts kept tormenting him to the point where his friends prayed for his early death in order to put an end to his suffering, which occurred not long thereafter (.

This is not merely a debate about optimism versus pessimism. Ben Zoma's questions whether nighttime and darkness can be understood as the beginning point of renewal and redemption. Is this world under the heavy grip of evil? Is there nothing we can do other than wait for the Messianic era? Or is it possible to narrow the distance between God and life on earth, starting anew in spite of it all?

The majority of sages of the post-Second Temple era thought that all we can do is wait for divine redemption. Ben Zoma, however, thinks that night is part of the redemptive process; hence, liberty and redemption must be discussed from the dark of night into the light of day. He believes that one must find the light of the redemptive future even when one is in the deepest night of this world.

Ben Zoma's claim, as I came to understand it, was that redemption begins in the heart of darkness. To him, the somber atmosphere of Seder night was meant to demonstrate how this process of growth and regeneration already has begun in the most trying and dark moments. Sometimes we need to realize that we are actually in the deep of a dark "night," in order to start searching for our way out of it .

That is why Rabbi Elazar Ben Azariah waited for seventy years before finding justification in Ben Zoma's homily for telling the Exodus story at night. Rabbi Elazar Ben Azariah sees Ben Zoma as the mishnaic sage who has delved deeper than anyone else into the black holes of the enslavement, fear and darkness in human existence. Ben Zoma as a man never stops searching search for God even when there is devastation all around .

I suddenly realized that this little midrash in the Haggadah is the essential text of the Pesach Seder. Ben Zoma, as it turns out, is the main hero of the Haggadah by providing support for Rabbi Elazar Ben Azariah's decision to tell the Exodus from Egypt in times of crisis. Of all the sages, it is Ben Zoma that the Haggadah summons as an authority— God's relation to reality – because it is only he, with his understanding that night is the beginning of day, who could have concluded that the story of the Exodus should be told at night .

A New Understanding of the Haggadah

If we can read the entire Haggadah this way, then it is not necessarily about the memory of actual sufferings and torments but rather an attempt to intensify suffering and torment to the limit of their imagined possibilities. The process of coming into freedom requires an increase and intensification of shadowy, nocturnal memories, because only a journey into the innermost chambers of darkness will free and redeem us. Thus, Seder night is not an occasion for celebrating the memory of coming into freedom; it is a night on which I perform a ritual of release from the memory of slavery in order to allow me to come into freedom later on. The symbolic process embedded into the telling of “the Exodus from Egypt at night” must precede the day, and the more intensely I can experience that night, the greater will be the day's redeeming effect, the only true way to come into freedom .

The essence of the Seder night ritual, then, is not a celebration of liberty, but an attempt to propose a practice of liberty within a harsh reality that may be suffused with evil. It is a precise and meticulous night ritual devised to alter our perception of reality and to bring about *hamtakat ha-dinnim*, mitigation of punishment. Seder night is the night on which I am supposed to face all the demons, fears and evils that appeared in the course of history, including their unfulfilled potential. It is a night meant to fill the consciousness of those celebrating – to the limit of their ability to tolerate it – with memories of persecution and disasters and with feelings of malice, hatred and vengeance .

I believe that the Haggadah should be viewed as a means through which the people coming together to celebrate Seder night are required to intensify their negative feelings in order to help free themselves from those very same feelings .

In the course of Seder night fear is intensified by reading, among other passages, the midrashic claim that Lavan the Aramean had sought to destroy Jacob's family, a claim that has no grounding in the biblical text. In addition, anger and vengeance are amplified. The Ten Plagues that God inflicted on the Egyptians are not enough; we are supposed to imagine that there were fifty, two hundred, and even five hundred plagues. All of my suppressed instincts of revenge are suddenly exposed and refined by the following prayer: "Unleash your wrath on the nations who have not known you ..." Such a wish may seem unacceptable, but it is important nonetheless. After dozens of Israelis sitting around a Seder table were killed in a suicide terrorist attack, even the most liberal Israelis could not deny the feelings of revenge rising within .

Perhaps, that is why order is so important on Seder night. Precision and rigor can overcome confusion and disorientation. There is a need for anchors to restrain the participants in this ceremony of "mitigation of punishment." And this is precisely why on this night, which brings to the surface so much malice, cruelty and vengeance, one must be so careful; there are accurate instructions of what to say, when to say it, and when to stop saying it. This is also why Seder night is never to be held by a solitary person, but only in a group.

Pesach, those traditions explain, is actually made up of two Hebrew words – 'peh sakh' – talking mouth, the verbal processing of our darkest fears and passions. The purpose of immersing our mind with harsh memories and feelings of vengeance is not to encourage their actualization. On the contrary, it is to employ the well-ordered mental process of Seder night in order to be released from their paralyzing grip.

"In every generation one must see himself as though he came out of Egypt himself." The obligation is not only to remember the things that did happen, but also the things that didn't happen, that could have happened, that can still happen. The purpose of this conversation is to express and drain out all of the dark feelings, to the last drop, in order to be able to let them go and come into freedom. In the process, we are expected to be our own mitigators of our punishment. That is, we are not turning a blind eye to the evil, death and misfortune in this world, which are symbolized quite explicitly in the piyyut, Had Gadya. We are making an open and clear statement on the origin of much of that evil. Not all of it is coming from the outside; some of it, maybe most of it, is coming from our subconscious, which is filled with imagined fears and vengeful urges that sometimes take control over our thoughts. After all, many of our reactions as a Jewish community, a Jewish people and a State of Israel, are not necessarily connected with the here and now; they are a response to our past afflictions or to our imagined fears of future afflictions, from whose grip we have such difficulty releasing ourselves .

So, after we recite the prayer, “[u]nleash your wrath on the nations,” rather appropriately, the house door is opened wide, as if to say: only once we have let out the fears and feelings of vengeance, and only then, can we become a free people. We are no longer held captive by evil. Exodus assumes a new meaning: liberty from feelings, perceptions and ideologies that have been keeping us captive in every generation, ultimately threatening to destroy us. The act of recollection that Seder night triggers is a highly sophisticated ritual of remembrance: remembering in order to be able to forget. We not only tell of the Exodus; we also participate in the Exodus !

Conclusion

So, in conclusion, what I have described to you is a process of coming into freedom through the study of the use of words. (Of course, the similarities to much of psychotherapy should be obvious.) For me, as I observed early in my remarks, both study and freedom are core values. I was born in my own Egypt, a haredi culture that sentenced itself to remain shut out from the world, with endless prohibitions on thought, speech, body, social life and professional life, and art. My journey toward freedom began as a teenager when I left my parents’ home, the language and culture in which I was raised. That journey has never ceased, because, as I hope I have convinced you, for all of us, both as Jews as well as human beings, exodus never ends.

With that I will stop. I will be pleased to attempt to answer your questions either about my remarks this evening or about the book. Thank you for your close attention.