

Rabbi Nathan Laufer

**RENDEZVOUS**  
**WITH**  
**GOD**

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**Revealing the Meaning**  
**of the**  
**Jewish Holidays**  
**and Their**  
**Mysterious Rituals**

Maggid Books

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## *Preface*

**C**hildren want to know from where they come. During the holidays, when our family gathers around the dining room table to celebrate, conversation sooner or later goes back to our past; sometimes our people's past, and sometimes our family's past. From time to time, the children will ask, and my wife and I will retell our little family's founding story: how we met (we were set up by her former boss while I was interviewing for a job); the tale of our first date together (in the midst of a passing snowstorm at the end of March); my first gift to her (a litho-print of Psalm 23 to console her for the untimely loss of her father); the night of our engagement (after reading the Book of Esther in synagogue on the moonlit night of Purim); the day and place of our wedding (on my grandfather's *yahrzeit* in a community close to where our children grew up); our honeymoon (in Jerusalem and Netanya); the first home that we established together (a parsonage in Belleville, New Jersey, where I held a weekend pulpit); and the first meal that I cooked for her (she was very impressed!). Every detail is important, as it makes real for the children our origins as a loving, protective family. Within those stories are buried the deepest secrets of our collective being, the foundations for why we were initially attracted to each other, why we committed ourselves to

each other, and why we chose to bring our children into the world and build a family together.

The human desire to know and understand the meaning of one's origins is a deep need not only of children but also of nations. Every nation has its founding story that is retold through its national holidays. In the United States, the holidays of Thanksgiving, Independence Day, Presidents' Day, and Veterans and Memorial Day are all days on which the American story is retold and commemorated. In the modern State of Israel, Yom HaShoa, Yom HaZikaron, Yom HaAtzma'ut, and Yom Yerushalayim are the days that retell the founding and history of the modern nation-state of Israel.<sup>1</sup>

The idea at the heart of this book is that for the Jewish people, the biblical holidays of Passover, Shavuot, Rosh HaShana, Yom Kippur, and Sukkot retell the founding stories of the relationship between God and the Jewish people in their honeymoon year together as a couple. Like the stories of our family's coming together, those stories contain within them the deepest secrets of our people's existence and our *raison d'être*, our collective purpose. These holidays are the central vehicle through which we make our people's narrative come alive and stay vibrant year after year.

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1. Each nation's holidays commemorate and give expression to a formative event in the life of the nation. To take two examples from each nation: In the United States, Thanksgiving recalls the Pilgrims' valiant voyage across the Atlantic Ocean to achieve religious liberty, and reenacts the meal of thanksgiving for having arrived and survived the first year in the "New World." July Fourth celebrates the victory in the War of Independence against the British (the fireworks celebrate the "bombs bursting in air" that accompanied the victory in 1776 no less than in 1812), and the achievement of political freedom. In Israel, Yom HaShoa commemorates the Holocaust of six million Jews from 1933 to 1945, through memorial ceremonies that include the lighting of six torches for the six million Jews who perished. Yom HaAtzma'ut, which marks the achievement of Israeli sovereignty and political independence in 1948, is celebrated through the national pastime of outdoor barbecues, the awarding of the Israel Prize for outstanding national achievements, and a song and dance extravaganza, among other things. In short, each holiday is inextricably linked to a historical event with deep roots in the nation's memory, which is then reenacted and celebrated or commemorated.

The holidays, then, comprise not merely a series of fragmented, ritual acts we perform by rote at different times of the year – blowing the shofar, building a sukka, waving the palm branch and citron, leading the Passover Seder, or staying up to study Torah all night. All of these activities are enjoyable and significant, but not, as I will argue, ends in themselves. Nor are the many biblical and liturgical texts that we read and recite as a matter of tradition during the festivals – the *Akeda* on Rosh HaShana, the Temple service on Yom Kippur, the Hallel on Sukkot, and the Haggada on Passover. The significance of all these rituals, readings, and liturgies lies in the foundational stories they retell in dramatic fashion about our relationship with God, about who we are as a people, and about our purpose in life and history. Each individual holiday encourages us to relive a part of the story – taking us back to a particular foundational moment in our birth, growth, and maturing as a nation. Together, the holidays reenact our people’s founding experience and reveal through ritual and liturgy our people’s special mission. Finally, they infuse collective meaning and joy into our individual, everyday existence throughout the year.

How each of the holidays does so is what this book will explore.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Although I have been privileged to fill a variety of leadership roles in my career, I think of myself primarily as an educator. One of my favorite texts, which has helped shape my educational approach generally and specifically in this book, is *Understanding by Design* by Grant Wiggins and Jay McTighe.<sup>2</sup> In the chapter entitled “The Six Facets of Understanding,” they write: “To understand is to...bind together seemingly disparate facts into a coherent, comprehensive, and illuminating account. We can predict heretofore unsought or unexamined results and we can illuminate strange or unexamined experiences.” In a later chapter, in a section entitled “Deep Understanding: Perceiving the Essence,” they write:

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2. Grant Wiggins and Jay McTighe, *Understanding by Design* (Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 1998), 46, 80–81, 100. I am indebted to a wonderful Jewish educator, my colleague Steven Kraus, for introducing me to this book.

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If we think ... in terms of explanation ... we ... ask ... : Is the explanation powerful? In other words, does it explain many heretofore unexplained facts? Does it predict heretofore unpredicted results? Does it enable us to see order where before there were only random or inexplicable phenomena? Good explanations are not just words and logic but insight into essentials. The best explanations involve inferences made from often limited evidence for fundamental principles or patterns. A good explanation ... takes us “beyond the information given”<sup>3</sup> and toward ideas that define and structure other ideas, even a whole discipline.

Finally, quoting John Dewey,<sup>4</sup> they write: “No experience is educative that does not tend both to knowledge of more facts, entertaining of more ideas, and to a better, more orderly arrangement of them.”

In this book, I have attempted to offer a comprehensive, coherent, and cohesive understanding of the biblical holidays, or to borrow Albert Einstein’s term in relation to the fundamental forces of the physical universe, a “unified field theory” of the Torah. I am indebted to Wiggins and McTighe for articulating in writing what I have long only been able to intuit about my life’s work which informed my educational objectives in writing this book.

In my personal biography, the genesis of this book began almost two decades ago. I had just turned forty and was acting as the High Holy Days rabbi of the Lake Shore Drive Synagogue in Chicago. A warm and welcoming, lay-led, Modern Orthodox synagogue throughout the year, Lake Shore Drive followed the custom of hiring a rabbi and cantor to lead their traditional High Holy Days services. From 1991 through 2004, acting upon the recommendation of my students and friends, Ray and Lori Lavin, whom I first met through the Wexner Heritage Foundation,<sup>5</sup>

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3. Jerome Bruner, *Beyond the Information Given* (New York: W.W. Norton and Co., 1973).

4. John Dewey, *Experience and Education* (New York: Macmillan/Collier, 1938).

5. The Wexner Heritage Foundation educated lay leaders in the North American Jewish community in the history, thought, traditions, and contemporary challenges of the Jewish people. I served in a leadership role at the Foundation for nearly two decades. Today the Wexner Heritage program continues as one of the significant leadership initiatives of The Wexner Foundation.

the synagogue's lay leadership invited me to be the rabbi leading their High Holy Days services. It was in that role, writing a High Holy Days sermon, that I first noticed the lacunae in our current understanding of the biblical holidays and began to develop the comprehensive educational theory for teaching them which forms the core of this volume. Later, in my teaching capacity at the Wexner Heritage Foundation, my "day job" at the time, I had the opportunity to further refine and pilot this theory among several of the Foundation's leadership groups. I am grateful to the congregants and leadership of Lake Shore Drive, and especially to Les and Abigail Wexner, for granting me the opportunity to serve them, to try out my initial ideas in the sanctuary and seminar room among my congregants and students, and to develop the basic thesis that informs this work.

This book would not have come into being without the support of my former employer, The Tikvah Fund,<sup>6</sup> and the generosity of its chairman, Mr. Roger Hertog, and executive director, Mr. Eric Cohen. They supported and encouraged me to spend my sabbatical year working through the implications of my original thesis and setting it out in this volume. Their dedication to the Jewish world and to the development of Jewish ideas has been a source of inspiration to me and thousands of others who have participated in their programs and benefited from their publications. I am grateful for their close association over the past seven years, for their wide-ranging vision, and for their strong backing of this project.

My editor, Ms. Elisheva Urbas, with whom I worked closely on my previous two books, has been my alter ego throughout the writing process of this book as well. She helped me structure the book and align its chapters so that I was able to say what I wished to express. I am very grateful, as well, to my thoughtful and meticulous content editor, Shira Koppel, who challenged my ideas throughout while greatly improving the flow of prose in this book. I salute my publisher, Matthew Miller, his outstanding editor-in-chief, Gila Fine, and their talented staff at Maggid Books – Tomi Mager, Nechama Unterman, and Tali Simon – for their

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6. The Tikvah Fund is a philanthropic foundation and ideas institution committed to supporting the intellectual, religious, and political leaders of the Jewish people and the Jewish state.

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professionalism in overseeing the publication of this volume; they have been a pleasure to work with. I want to thank my friend Tova Naiman, who graciously illustrated the “Seder Clock” found in the Passover chapter of this volume, as well as her professional colleagues, Zahava Bogner and Rivka Farkas, for illustrating the “Hidden Face of God” found in the chapter on “Sacred Space.”

As important as my professional colleagues have been, the legacy and support of my family are the ultimate reasons that I have been able to author this volume. Growing up, I was fortunate to be raised by parents – survivors of the Holocaust of European Jewry – who conveyed the richness of the Jewish holidays in our family practices. Every holiday had its mysterious rituals and its joyous songs. I loved practicing those rituals at home and in the little *shtiebel* in which we prayed; I reveled in singing the songs of my people with my parents around the family dining room table. Those memories of my youth will stay with me forever.

As the grandson of martyrs of the Holocaust, whose books and religious artifacts perished with them in the flames of Auschwitz, I always regretted not having anything substantial in writing from them that could address the questions about the meaning of God, Judaism, and Jewish peoplehood that often vexed me and that were the center of their respective lives. The three books that God has given me the privilege to author,<sup>7</sup> all based on the narrative of the Torah, are my best attempt to address the deepest meaning of our tradition, to complete, as it were, their unfinished lives and to leave a Jewish intellectual legacy for my children and their descendants.

My wife and life partner of thirty years, Sharon Laufer, has also been my biggest fan and supporter. She has given me a beautiful family and a base of emotional support that has enabled us to celebrate the holidays together with our children in the fullest, most joyful way. My debt of gratitude to her in creating a warm, welcoming Jewish home and in leading our Jewish lives together knows no bounds. *Ve’at alit al kulana*.

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7. The two previous books are: *Leading the Passover Journey: The Seder’s Meaning Revealed, The Haggadah’s Story Retold* and *The Genesis of Leadership: What the Bible Teaches Us about Vision, Values and Leading Change*. Both books were published by Jewish Lights, Woodstock, Vermont, 2005, 2006.



## *Preface*

My children, Becky, Michael, Leslie, and Matti Laufer, have brought incredible happiness and meaning into my life. It was through them, more than through anyone else, that I sensed God's EverPresent loving-kindness in the world. They taught me to see God's presence in the waving of the tree branches on a breezy day, in the beauty of the falling leaves of autumn and their reflowering in spring, and in the endless love of a parent to a child and a child to its parent. It is to each of them, their wonderful spouses, and their future descendants, that this book is lovingly dedicated.

Rabbi Nathan Laufer  
Efrat, Gush Etzion, Israel  
18 Adar II, 5776

## *Introduction*

# The Jewish People's Founding Story

**T**he story of the birth of the Jewish people as a free nation and of the first year of their relationship with God occupies much of the biblical books of Exodus and Leviticus. That first year was the foundational one for the Jewish people in biblical times and, as we shall see, for the Jewish experience of time ever since.

The narrative records seven revelations of God's presence to the entire people within that first year, from the moment that Jewish time began:<sup>1</sup>

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1. In chapter 12 of Exodus, God told Moses to inform the Jewish people of their pending liberation from Egyptian slavery at long last. God also informed Moses that the Jewish calendar, "Jewish time," as it were, would begin then, on the first day of the Hebrew month of Nisan: "This month shall be for you the head of the months, the first month for you of the months of the year." As God promised, fifteen days later the Exodus took place and the people were liberated. Less than one year after the Exodus, God accepted the sacrificial offerings of the people in the new Mishkan and consumed the first "meal" that the people offered God in His new "home" (Lev. 9).

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1. God's slaying of the Egyptian firstborns and the Jewish people's Exodus from Egypt (Ex. 12);
2. God's splitting of the Sea of Reeds to save the people and drown the Egyptian legions (Ex. 14, 15);
3. God's raining down the manna, literally "bread from heaven," when the people ran out of earthly food after thirty days in the desert (Ex. 16);
4. God's revelation of the Ten Commandments and the covenant at Mount Sinai (Ex. 19, 20, 24);
5. God's forgiving the Jewish people after they worshiped the Golden Calf and repented for their sins (Ex. 33);<sup>2</sup>
6. God's filling the Mishkan, the biblical Sanctuary, with the Divine Presence after the people completed its construction and furnishings (Ex. 40);
7. God's fire consuming the people's first sacrifices in the Mishkan, God's new home (Lev. 9).

These multiple revelations,<sup>3</sup> culminating in God's indwelling among the

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2. See especially Ex. 33:7–10. All of the people saw the pillar of cloud, recognized it as a divine revelation, rose in its honor, and prostrated themselves from a distance.
  3. When I say "multiple revelations," some people are puzzled. Most of us tend to think that God revealed Himself only once to the Jewish nation, in the theophany of the Ten Commandments at Mount Sinai. There are two reasons for this. The first is that in the Bible the theophany was the only one of God's revelations in which the people heard God's voice speaking to them. Through God's voice, the people heard the uttering of the Ten Commandments, which, like the rest of the Torah communicated to Moses alone, was given unique legal authority in traditional Jewish life. However, we err in conflating or reducing God's revelation to only God's voice. In the Bible, God demonstrated and communicated His intimate relationship to the Jewish people when He appeared and redeemed them at critical junctures, with or without words.

The second reason we tend to think that the theophany at Mount Sinai was the only revelation is because, for people who live in the twenty-first century, when God's presence seems almost entirely hidden, any revelation of God in history appears to be extraordinary. And it is. Even in the Bible, God's presence did not manifest itself regularly – certainly not in the presence of the entire Jewish body politic. Hence, our tendency is to want to minimize the number of times in our collective memory that we think God suddenly intervened in history and to limit it to Sinai. It is as if we say

people, were “peak experiences”<sup>4</sup> that redeemed the Jewish people in political, military, physical, and spiritual terms. Together, these experiences were nothing short of life-changing. They transformed the people from an inchoate rabble of former slaves to a proud nation with dignity and purpose. They also transformed the trajectory of history, from an unredeemed state where God was nowhere to be seen, to a redeemed state where God’s saving presence became visible and palpable.

The books of Exodus and Leviticus also include the commandments to keep the Jewish holidays and an extensive description of the building of the Mishkan. As we will see, both the holidays and the Mishkan are meant to retell, reenact, and embody God’s momentous multiple revelations.<sup>5</sup>

#### HOW THE HOLIDAYS TELL THE STORY

After the seventh and final revelation to the entire Jewish people in the Mishkan, God revealed to Moses a whole series of laws to keep the relationship between God and the people on track, and to further

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to ourselves, “One exception to the world as we know it we can live with, but more than that begins to border on the unbelievable.”

But comfortable or not, one revelation of God – at Mount Sinai – is not the story that the Bible conveys to its readers, and not what the Jewish people in the Bible desperately needed and personally witnessed. The Jews who left Egypt had been a nation in captivity for hundreds of years, much of it in oppressive slave labor. During that time, God’s presence and comforting companionship were horrifically, painfully absent. To rectify the perception of God’s absence, God felt it necessary to reveal His presence multiple times in the young nation’s life and in their evolving relationship in order to rebuild their trust and place the relationship on a solid footing. In that first year of the Jewish people’s freedom, God broke through the usual constraints of our historical experience, and the people witnessed seven extraordinary events which cumulatively added up to God’s presence returning to history and to dwelling with the Jewish people. Exactly what God had dreamed of in creating the world, to live with the human beings that He created in “His image and likeness,” came to fruition twenty-six generations later in the aftermath of the Exodus from Egypt.

4. I use this advisedly, as per Abraham Maslow’s coinage of the term. Abraham Maslow, *Religions, Values, and Peak Experiences* (Columbus, Ohio: Ohio State University Press, 1964).
5. See the chart at the end of this introduction: “Rendezvous with God: A Unifying Theory of the Torah.”

develop the relationship so that the Jewish people could live with God in the deepest sense, as a “couple.” These holiness laws – encapsulated in the command “You should be holy because I your God am holy (Lev. 19:2)” – include, among other instructions, the laws of Judaism’s “holy days,” known traditionally as the Chapter of the Holidays.<sup>6</sup>

Each seasonal, biblical holiday commemorates a specific event in the biblical narrative in which God’s presence became overtly manifest to the entire Jewish people in their first year as a free, collective community. The association of the biblical holidays with the events upon which they are based has always been understood in regard to the seven-day “bookend” biblical holidays – the pilgrimage festival of Passover, commemorating God’s liberation of the Jewish people from Egypt (Ex. 12:14), and the pilgrimage festival of Sukkot, commemorating the protective “enclosures” in which God caused the Jewish people to dwell in the desert (Lev. 23:43). For both holidays, the Bible is explicit about which events they commemorate and celebrate. I will go further and endeavor to explain how the details of both these holidays emerge from, and help us reexperience, the particular events they are designed to evoke. I will demonstrate how the rituals, customs, and liturgy of the holidays are direct, conscious expressions of the events which they commemorate.

Regarding the other biblical holidays – Shavuot, which follows the Omer offering and attendant counting of fifty days, and the autumn holidays of Rosh HaShana, Yom Kippur, and Shemini Atzeret – none are explicitly linked by the Bible to events in the Jewish people’s historical narrative. Different opinions in the rabbinic tradition have linked three of these holidays to biblical events – Shavuot to the Sinai revelation, Rosh HaShana to the creation of the world or of humanity, and Yom Kippur to God’s forgiveness for the Golden Calf. While largely agreeing with, and explaining more deeply, the third, I will offer a different explanation for the first two. Finally, as the observance of the Omer and the holiday of Shemini Atzeret are not linked to specific events by either the Bible or mainstream rabbinic tradition, I will offer novel explanations for both.

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6. “Holidays” is a conflation of the words “holy days.” Leviticus 23 is called the “Chapter of the Holidays.”

The order of the seven biblical holidays recorded in Leviticus 23 follows the precise order that the seven revelatory events occurred in the biblical narrative.<sup>7</sup> These seven events were the only ones in which God's presence appeared before the entire Jewish people in their first year of freedom. Like the Passover Seder, whose purposeful order tells in outline form the chronological story of the Book of Exodus,<sup>8</sup> the order of the cycle of biblical holidays over the course of the year tells the story of the key events in the Torah in chronological order from the twelfth chapter of the Book of Exodus through the ninth chapter of the Book of Leviticus. The order of these holidays is not incidental, as it represents the historical and religious process by which the Jewish people, in their first year of collective existence, became in biblical times, and annually strive to become, a sacred community living in relationship with God.

The Torah in Leviticus refers to the holidays as "*Mo'adei Hashem*," usually translated as "God's festivals." However, this term might better be translated as "Days of Meeting" or "Days of Rendezvousing with God."<sup>9</sup> The encounter with God's presence, the extraordinary meeting of God and the people, is what made the event; it is also granted to the festival, in whole or in part, its characterization by the Torah as one of the "*Mikra'ei Kodesh*," the "sacred days." In Judaism, God is the ultimate source of all things sacred, and the holidays are no exception to this rule.<sup>10</sup>

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7. "In three places are the holidays recorded. In Leviticus, because of their order; in Numbers, because of their sacrifices; and in Deuteronomy, because of the leap year (to assure that Passover takes place in the 'spring month')," *Sifrei* to Deut. 16:1, Finkelstein edition [Hebrew], 185. Since the order, but not the content, in all three biblical books is the same, the *Sifrei's* emphasis on the Leviticus text following the holidays' order suggests that they follow the order of the seven revelatory events, which they commemorate.
  8. See *Leading the Passover Journey*.
  9. With one exception relating to the plague of pestilence in Exodus 9:5, the prior use of the word "*moed*" in the Bible (seventy-three times as I count it) is in the context of the *Ohel Moed*, the Tent of Meeting in the Sanctuary, where Moses and the priesthood would encounter the Divine Presence. Others have translated the tent as the "Tent of Rendezvous" (see Everett Fox, in his biblical translation *The Five Books of Moses* [New York: Schocken Books, 1995], 413, citing Roland Devaux Fox on Exodus 27:21). Either definition is etymologically related to God's telling Moses that He would meet/rendezvous with him in the Tent of Meeting (Ex. 25:22).
  10. My teacher, Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, in his *Shiurim LeZekher Abba Mori, z"l*, vol. 1 [Hebrew] (Mossad HaRav Kook, 2002), 170–171, made a similar claim in explaining

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In each of the holidays, then, we reenact through liturgy, readings, and rituals the revelational event that the holiday commemorates: the Exodus from Egypt on the first day of Passover; the splitting of the sea on the seventh day of Passover; the falling of the manna in counting the Omer, culminating in the holiday of Shavuot; the acceptance of God's kingship at Mount Sinai on Rosh HaShana; God's forgiveness for the sin of the Golden Calf on Yom Kippur; and God's hovering presence and fiery passion on Sukkot and Shemini Atzeret. Cumulatively, each year, we relive the "honeymoon year" of our life as a nation in relationship with God.

Put in the terms of a typical young married couple, the seven rendezvous in the Bible constitute something akin to the courtship, engagement, wedding, honeymoon, forgiveness and reconciliation following marital discord, building/furnishing a new home, and sharing the first home-cooked meal. Those special, intimate moments of coming together that a couple recalls and relives provide the emotional energy to animate and invigorate the relationship throughout the marriage. So too, in the celebration of the holidays, the recollection and reliving of the people's moments of redemptive encounter with the Divine Presence have provided the emotional fuel to power the Jewish people's relationship with God for the many millennia since those events occurred. They instill in us a recurring gratitude for all that God did for our ancestors, and by extension for us, their spiritual descendants. In the midst of the

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the reasons for the rabbinic choice of the Torah readings on the holidays:

The holidays are sacred because lofty events occurred in them that are tied up with the revelation of God to "*Kenesset Yisrael*" [NL: the collective, eternal Jewish people] and His choosing us with love. In light of this reason, the sacredness of the holiday emanated from the miraculous and unique event that occurred then .... The holidays are called sacred because great and exalted things occurred on them such as the Exodus from Egypt, the Giving of the Torah and other similar events. The essence of the sacredness of the holidays is rooted in God's miracles and wonders that occurred on those days.

Rabbi Soloveitchik goes on to say: "We are therefore obligated to read not only the Torah portions that deal with the laws of the festivals and the holiday obligations but also the biblical narratives concerning the great events that occurred on them and which serve as the source of their sacredness and of the very reason they are called 'sacred days.'"

uncertainties and vicissitudes of life and history, the holidays provide an anchor of stability and trust in the ultimate meaning and purposefulness of our existence.

By enacting and decoding the holiday rituals and liturgies we reawaken our original experience of rendezvousing with God in our shared consciousness. Through the reexperiencing of these encounters with God, year after year, we are touched, for brief intensive bursts, by the ineffable source of the universe; we hear the address of the divine voice at Mount Sinai, we glimpse again the mysterious veiled face of God that was hidden beneath the coverings of the Mishkan, and we feel God's palpable presence dwelling among us.

### **THE STRUCTURE OF THIS BOOK**

This book will examine the seven instances of divine revelation – recorded in the books of Exodus and Leviticus – that the Jewish people experienced in their first year as a nation, and the ways those revelations are expressed in the holidays.

Chapters 1 through 5 will explore each of the five major biblical holidays. In each chapter, we will raise a series of questions about the holiday – questions that have troubled me for many years and for which I draw forth answers by returning to the narrative of the Jewish people's first year as a people. The most fundamental question that I will ask in each chapter is what dramatic event of divine revelation does the holiday commemorate and how do the rituals, liturgy, or biblical readings clue us in and give expression to that event. I will conclude each chapter by showing how the holiday's story has a carryover effect on the ethics, rituals, and liturgy of Judaism throughout the year.

Chapter 1 (“Leaving Egypt”) will explore the holiday of Passover. There are actually two sacred days during Passover on which no work is permitted, the first and seventh days, which commemorate two separate, but related, revelational events in the biblical narrative: the Exodus from Egypt (Ex. 12) and the splitting of the sea (Ex. 14 and 15). The five days in between (Ḥol HaMoed Pesah) correspond to the journey of the Jewish people from the borders of Egypt to the Sea of Reeds.

Chapter 2 (“Not by Bread Alone”) will explore the meaning of the Omer and Shavuot. Although we may not think of the Omer as



being integrally connected to a holiday, the Torah in Leviticus 23 apparently thinks otherwise, giving extensive treatment to the rituals of the Omer and connecting it, using several literary devices, to the sacred day of Shavuot.<sup>11</sup> Contrary to our current conventional understanding of Shavuot, I will argue that in the Bible, both the Omer and Shavuot correspond and give grateful expression to God's revelation of the manna in the wilderness, a story told in Exodus 16.

Chapter 3 ("Remembering the Forgotten Day") will investigate the holiday of Rosh HaShana. I will argue that this holiday gives expression, not primarily to the story of creation as is commonly thought, but first and foremost to the Jewish people's acceptance of the kingship, covenant, and coronation of God at Mount Sinai, embodied in the revelation of the Ten Commandments (Ex. 19 and 20).

Chapter 4 ("Return and Forgiveness") will explore the sacred day of Yom Kippur. I will show how most of the enigmatic rites and rituals of Yom Kippur give expression to the revelation of the Divine Presence as the Jewish people repented and God forgave them for the sin of the Golden Calf (Ex. 32–34).

Chapter 5 ("Living with God") examines Sukkot/Shemini Atzeret. Like Passover, this festival includes two sacred days – one on

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11. There are four literary devices used in the biblical text to link the two sections together:

- (i) Unlike all the other sacred days, there is no separate introduction to the sacred day of Shavuot other than the introduction to bringing the Omer, which precedes it.
- (ii) The offering of the Two Breads is introduced as being a "new grain offering" (Lev. 23:16) to distinguish it from the previous grain offering of the Omer which preceded it by only forty-nine days.
- (iii) The separation between the Omer portion and the Two Breads portion of Shavuot in the written Torah scroll is done via a "*parasha setuma*," a closed notation, which indicates that the two are meant to be read in conjunction with one another. (Note also that the sections about Rosh HaShana and Yom Kippur are also separated by only a closed notation, meaning that they are meant to be read in connection to one another. See the chapter on Rosh HaShana below.)
- (iv) The root word – ק-טז-ר (cutting) – is used precisely seven times in the two sections, making it what Buber and Cassuto identify as a "*leitwort*," a "key word" that is meant to signal a common theme, running from the beginning of the first section to the conclusion of the second section. This frames the Omer and Shavuot into one large whole.

the first and one on the eighth day. The two sacred days correspond and give expression to two separately narrated but related events: the revelations of the Divine Presence at the completion of the Sanctuary (Ex. 40) and on the day that the Sanctuary was inaugurated (Lev. 9). The seven days prior to the Eighth Day of Assembly parallel the seven days of preparation for the priests before they began their service in the Sanctuary, which we, “God’s kingdom of priests,” reenact through the rituals of Sukkot.

Chapter 6 (“The Sacred Space-Time Continuum”<sup>12</sup>) will explore how the furnishings and architecture of the Mishkan, to which the Bible devotes so much attention in the books of Exodus, Leviticus, and Numbers, embodied the same seven events of divine revelation as commemorated by the *Mo’adim*, the seven biblical sacred days. The sacred space of the Bible thus reinforces the sacred times of the holidays in retelling the story of the Jewish people’s first year, constituting a unified theory of the Torah.<sup>13</sup>

Chapter 7 (“The Purpose of Creating Heaven and Earth”) explains the traditional rituals and customs of Shabbat, the first biblical sacred day commanded in the chapter on the holidays in Leviticus 23. Shabbat brings together both the expression of sacred time commemorated by the biblical holidays<sup>14</sup> and sacred space embodied by the furnishings and the priestly service in the Mishkan.

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12. “Space-time” is a mathematical model which combined space and time into a single, interwoven idea called a “continuum.” Like the “unified field theory” noted in the preface, the “space-time continuum” is a term made famous by Albert Einstein as part of his theory of general relativity. The joining of space and time helped cosmologists understand how the physical universe works. I am using it here, modified by the term “sacred,” to suggest that in the Bible, sacred space and sacred time were interwoven. Together, they help us to understand and reenact our “spiritual universe,” our rendezvous with God.

13. See the chart concluding this chapter, “Rendezvous with God: A Unifying Theory,” p. xxxii.

14. More than that, it is the very source of the idea that time can be made sacred. The Jewish people imitate God who made the Shabbat sacred by declaring when the new moon would occur, thereby determining and sanctifying the days of the festivals. It is plausible that Shabbat is the first sacred day mentioned in Leviticus 23 because the

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Chapter 8 (“The Hiddenness of God”) addresses the celebration of the rabbinic festivals of Hanukka and Purim and the modern commemorations of Yom HaShoa, Yom HaZikaron, Yom HaAtzma’ut, and Yom Yerushalayim. In contrast to the biblical holidays, in which God’s presence was revealed to the entire Jewish people in the full light of day, these later commemorative days, in which God was hidden or even absent, represented a challenge to the rabbinic leaders of the Jewish people. The chapter will explain how the rabbinic sages and one modern rabbi have interpreted these commemorative days in light of the biblical holidays.

Chapter 9 (“God, Torah, and the Holidays”) will explain the take-home value of this understanding of the holidays as the yearly reliving of our rendezvous with God.

### **HOW THE HOLIDAYS AFFECT THE YEAR**

The holidays are not just celebrated annually and then forgotten for a full year. Rather, they penetrate the way we think, behave, and pray throughout the year.<sup>15</sup> They celebrate formidable events which have inspired a series of norms that guides the Jewish people, not only on the holidays, but all year long. These norms are of two kinds: ethical norms, in relation to other human beings created in God’s image, and ritual/liturgical norms, in relationship to God’s Self.

The biblical tradition established that the ethical cannot be separated from the ritual. One could not be part of a holy people if one blatantly disregarded the moral expectations of the Jewish tradition. How one treated other people, the images of God encountered in daily life, was as much a proof of one’s piety as how one related to God and observed the ritual commands.<sup>16</sup> This is why the Ten

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sacredness of the festivals is derivative of the sacredness of Shabbat and modeled in great part on its observance.

15. In Nahmanides’ gloss on the first positive command (i.e., the duty to believe in God) in Maimonides’ *Book of Commandments*, he concludes, “The belief in the existence of God which was made known to us through the signs, wonders, and revelations of the Divine Presence before our very eyes, is the main point and the root from which the commandments were born.”

16. In this regard, see *Leading the Passover Journey*, 74.

Commandments list God's ritual commands on one tablet and God's ethical commands on the other in a single, continuous narrative. This is also why chapter 19 in Leviticus (known by biblical scholars as the "Holiness Code") interweaves ritual and ethical commands in a seamless tapestry, as if to say: One cannot pull out the ethical threads from the ritual threads without unraveling the entire fabric of what constitutes the holy in Judaism.

But the ritual is no less important. My colleague, Professor Michael Chernick,<sup>17</sup> in a private conversation, once framed the importance of ritual this way: "Ritual is the ethics we owe God for having created us and for having done what He did for our people." The powerful symbolic rituals in which the Jewish people have engaged for literally thousands of years are tokens of appreciation to God for the gift of our peoplehood and tradition. As part of that tradition, the rabbis also devised liturgy to be recited throughout the year, which reminds us of the revelational events most intensely celebrated by the holidays.

Passover is a prime example of how the ethical, the ritual, and the liturgical penetrate Jewish life all year long. Judaism's ethical duty every day of the year is to show empathy toward the stranger and the impoverished. This imperative is the moral consequence of Passover, of our powerful annual experience of our estrangement and impoverishment in Egypt, and God's redemption through the miracles of the Exodus.

Similarly, the daily ritual command to bind our arms to God through the wearing of phylacteries and the weekly command to observe Shabbat are expressions of our reexperiencing of God's liberation "with a strong hand" from slavery in Egypt.<sup>18</sup> In addition, the daily Jewish liturgy includes prayers such as the Song of the Sea and the third paragraph of the *Shema*, which are meant to reinforce the centrality of the Exodus in the daily consciousness of the Jewish people.

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17. Professor of Talmud, Hebrew Union College, New York, and long-time instructor in the Wexner Heritage Foundation, which I led for many years.

18. Ex. 23:9 and 13:9. For fuller elaboration, see chapter 1, "Leaving Egypt."

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This reexperiencing of the foundational events of our people through the biblical holidays, and their impact on how we understand ourselves and act out our values during the rest of the year, is the greater religious purpose of their celebration, one to which we will devote attention in our discussion of each individual holy day.

### **A NOTE ON TRANSLATIONS**

The Jewish tradition refers to the Jewish people's rendezvous with God's presence as "*giluyei Shekhina*," literally, "revelations of the Divine Presence." The seven biblical revelations presuppose that God is always present in the world, but only very rarely allows that presence to become manifest to human perception, and even more rarely to become fully manifest before the entire nation.

God's ever-present existence is embodied in the name by which the Jewish people come to know God in the Bible, "*yud-heh-vav-heh*." Although pronounced by traditional Jews as "*Adonai*," which translates as "my Lord," it is actually a conflation of three words – *haya*, *hoveh*, *yiheyeh* – meaning God was, is, and will be. Parallel to the word "*HaMakom*" – meaning literally "the place," but usually translated in reference to God as the "Omnipresent" – "*yud-heh-vav-heh*" means that God is ever-present, that is, present in past, present, and future (see Ex. 3:13–15). What both appellations share is they are meant to convey reassurance and comfort. God was, is, and will be present even when, on the surface of human experience, that does not seem to be the case.

God therefore identifies Himself as "*yud-heh-vav-heh*" in promising to fulfill His vow to the patriarchs to redeem the Jewish people after hundreds of years of slavery in Egypt (Ex. 6:2–8). God's presence and uniqueness in the world is also one of the lessons that He is intent on teaching Pharaoh and the Egyptians through the events of the Exodus (E.g., Ex. 8:18, 9:14). As we will see in the course of this book, the Exodus is the foundational event upon which all of the Jewish holidays, and indeed upon which the very covenant with the Jewish people, is based. I will thus translate "*yud-heh-vav-heh*" as the "EverPresent" or, more frequently, as the "EverPresent God."

Although God is neither male nor female, literary convention refers to God in the male gender (“He” said, “His” will). Despite my misgivings with this practice, and trying to be gender-neutral whenever possible, I have nevertheless followed literary convention in this book.

The Bible is the story of the relationship between the Ever-Present God and the descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob/Israel – “Benei Yisrael.” In this volume, I have preferred the term “Jewish people” over the literal translation “Children of Israel” or “the Israelites,” sometimes used as an alternative. This is because of my understanding that all of the Jewish holidays are attempting to bridge the millennia between our ancestors’ stories and our own. During each holiday, we put ourselves, as it were, in our ancestors’ shoes and reenact, reexperience, and retell what our ancestors did three thousand years ago. To enable us to fully identify with our biblical ancestors, I have chosen to name them as Jews today think of themselves, as members of the Jewish people.

Finally, while I have relied primarily on the old<sup>19</sup> and new<sup>20</sup> translations of the Bible by the Jewish Publication Society of America, I have resorted to other translations – including my own – when they better fit the context of the chapter. Any errors in translation that result are, of course, entirely my own.

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19. *The Holy Scriptures According to the Masoretic Text* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1917).

20. *Tanakh: A New Translation of the Holy Scriptures According to the Traditional Hebrew Text* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1985).

## Rendezvous with God: A Unifying Theory

<i>Mikra</i> Sacred Story: Revelations of God	<i>Moed</i> Sacred Time: Holidays	<i>Mishkan</i> Sacred Space: Furnishings
Exodus from Egypt (Ex. 12)	Passover – first day	Copper Sacrificial Altar, sacrifices
Splitting of the sea (Ex. 14–15)	Passover – seventh day	Pitcher and Basin, singing of Levites
Falling of manna (Ex. 16)	Omer, Shavuot	Table with twelve display breads, jug of manna
Sinai revelation (Ex. 19–20)	Rosh HaShana	Ark, cherubs, Ten Commandments, Torah scroll (Holy of Holies)
Forgiveness for Golden Calf (Ex. 32–34)	Yom Kippur	Golden Altar of Incense, incense offering
Tabernacle construction and consecration (Ex. 35–40, Lev. 8)	Sukkot	Menora and olive oil, eternal candle, walls and curtains, Clouds of Glory
Inauguration of the Altar (Lev. 9)	Shemini Atzeret	Altar's eternal flame, priestly service

## Chapter One

# Passover: Leaving Egypt

**E**ach biblical holiday commemorates a specific event in which the collective Jewish people encountered God's saving presence. The Passover Haggada,<sup>1</sup> in recalling these moments of "great awe" (Deut. 26:8), references an additional verse that explicitly describes God's revelation to the nation:

"Great awe" alludes to the revelation of the Divine Presence, as it is written (Deut. 4:34): "Has God ever attempted to take unto Himself a nation from the midst of another nation by trials, miraculous signs, and wonders, by war and with a mighty hand and outstretched arm and by great awe, just as you saw the Lord your God do for you in Egypt, before your eyes?"

The events surrounding the redemption of the Exodus were witnessed firsthand by the entire Jewish people.<sup>2</sup> To mark God's miraculous

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1. In *Maggid*, the fifth item in the Passover Seder.

2. In the Haggada, Rabban Gamliel, in insisting that the eating of matza and the reason for eating it must be included in the Passover Seder, also makes this point: "Why do we eat matza? Because the dough of our ancestors did not have time to become



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appearance, a sacred day was established in the Jewish calendar, as it was for each event in the first year of the Jewish people's history in which God's presence was revealed. These days in which the people experienced God's presence were appropriately designated in Leviticus 23 as "*mo'adim*" or "days of meeting," that is, days of meeting between God and His people. The rituals and liturgy established for those sacred days were designed for future generations of Jews to remember, reexperience, dramatically reenact, and verbally retell those events that were experienced by the Jewish people's founding generation – the generation of the Exodus. The purpose of all of these rituals was to empower us once again to meet God in our own lives or, as the Haggada tells us, to enable us to see ourselves as if we personally were redeemed from Egypt.

### **PASSOVER IN THE BIBLE**

Passover is the first seasonal holiday listed in Leviticus 23, the chapter devoted to the biblical holidays:

These are God's festivals, sacred holidays, that you shall celebrate at their appropriate times. In the afternoon of the fourteenth day of the first month, you shall offer a Passover sacrifice to God. And on the fifteenth day of this month it is a festival of matzot to God, for seven days you shall eat matzot. The first day is a sacred holiday to you ... and the seventh day is a sacred holiday. (Lev. 23:4–8)

Passover is mentioned first because, from the Bible's perspective, the Jewish calendar does **not** begin when we might imagine – in the autumn month of Tishrei, when Rosh HaShana occurs. In fact, it begins in the springtime month of Nisan, when Passover falls: "This month [i.e., Nisan – the month of Passover] shall be the starting month for you, the first month for you in the months of the year" (Ex. 12:2). In Nisan, the Jews left Egypt, were freed from the burden of slavery as well as from the pagan calendar, and became masters of their own time and

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fermented before the King of kings, The Holy One, Blessed Be He, **revealed Himself to them and redeemed them.**"

fate. Therefore, the first **seasonal** holiday of the Jewish people, marking the Jewish people's birth as a nation, is Passover – not Rosh HaShana.

The Exodus from Egypt was such a formative and foundational experience of meeting God that **all** of the biblical holidays, even those that seem on the surface to have little to do with the Exodus (such as Rosh HaShana and Yom Kippur), are actually “in commemoration of the Exodus from Egypt.” They commemorate events that came after the Exodus and were predicated upon it. The narrative of the Exodus in the Passover Haggada not only tells the story of leaving Egypt, but retells, in abbreviated fashion, almost all of the major revelatory events that occurred in the Book of Exodus. The Exodus from Egypt is thus the orienting event for the biblical events that follow, as well as for all the holidays in the Bible.

Understanding Passover's central role in commemorating this first great moment of divine revelation will help us see how all the Passover traditions work together to shape our experience of the holiday – and also echo in the ethics and rituals observed yearlong, far beyond the week of Passover.

### **OBSERVING PASSOVER, RETELLING THE STORY**

Why do we celebrate Passover the way that we do? How does the observance of the holiday help us reexperience that meeting with the Divine? On Passover, asking fundamental questions is a core part of the holiday experience. The most outstanding example is the recitation of *Ma Nishtana*, the Four Questions, prior to the *Maggid* portion of the Seder. So essential are questions to the Passover experience that these Four Questions are asked aloud even by a person who conducts the Seder alone, with no interlocutors to address them to (Pesahim 116a). Many Passover questions are generated by the celebration itself, which begs us to examine the specific aspects of the holiday whose logic, on the surface, is unclear. For instance:

- Why are the three primary commandments associated with Passover – the removal of all *ḥametz*, the eating of matza, and the retelling of the story of the Exodus on the evening of Passover – so important to the Passover experience?

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- Why, when we retell the story, do we use as our sacred text the Passover Haggada, a secondary source composed by the rabbinic sages of the early Common Era – rather than the biblical Book of Exodus? Would it not have made more sense at the Seder to read from our primary source, the Bible itself?
- What is the significance of each item in the sequence of fifteen dramatic and unique Passover rituals that define the Seder? Is the total number of rituals, in some way, meaningful?

Let us begin with our preparations for the holiday to understand why *ḥametz* and matza are so pivotal to reexperiencing the Exodus.

### **ḤAMETZ AND MATZA ON PASSOVER**

As Jewish homemakers know, there is a biblical command to get rid of all of one's leavened products (*ḥametz*) prior to the onset of Passover. Indeed, the elimination of *ḥametz* in traditional households is perhaps the main and most onerous task in preparation for the holiday. The Bible instructs the Jewish people to eat flat, unleavened bread (matza) on Passover, instead of leavened bread, the staple that nourishes much of humanity until today.<sup>3</sup> The Passover Haggada offers two, seemingly contradictory, reasons for why we eat matza on Passover. The first reason, found immediately following *Yaḥatz*, is that matza is the bread of impoverishment (“*lahma anya*” from the word “*ani*,” a poor person) that our ancestors ate in Egypt. Later on, toward the end of *Maggid*, Rabban Gamliel, basing himself on a verse in the Book of Exodus, offers a different reason for eating matza:

Because the King of kings, The Holy One, Blessed Be He, revealed Himself and redeemed the Jewish people as it is written, “And they baked unleavened flatbread from the dough which they had brought out of Egypt, because it had no time to rise, since they were driven out of Egypt and could not delay; and they made no other provisions of food to carry with them (Ex. 12:39).”

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3. For a more thorough investigation of why we eliminate *ḥametz* prior to Passover and instead eat matza, see *Leading the Passover Journey*, 1–6, 40–41.

The disparity between the first reason, in which matza (what the Bible itself later calls “*leḥem oni*”) is associated with the impoverishment of the Jewish people in Egypt (Deut. 16:3), and the second reason, which understands matza as the bread of freedom (what the rabbinic tradition later calls “*leḥem deḥeruta*”), has to do with the moment in the Seder when each reason is provided. The “impoverishment” reason is offered immediately following *Yaḥatz* when, in the story traced by the Seder, the Jewish people are still enslaved in Egypt, after Pharaoh’s decree of infanticide. The “freedom” reason is offered toward the end of *Maggid*, when, in the Haggada’s verbal retelling of the story, the Jews are on their way out of Egypt. The same physical substance, matza, takes on two completely different meanings depending on when and how one relates to it in the course of telling the story – within the chains of bondage, or the exhilaration of freedom.

If matza, in the earlier iteration, while the Jews were still in Egypt, was “poor man’s bread,” then what was “rich man’s bread”? None other than *ḥametz*. *Ḥametz* was rich man’s bread in two ways. First, the ingredients, which included fermenting yeast, enriched it (unlike matza, which was made only of flour and water). Second, the time that it took for the dough to rise was a luxury that only the Jewish people’s wealthy Egyptian masters could afford.<sup>4</sup> The Jews, under the constant prodding of their taskmasters, were left with no time to breathe (Ex. 6:9), and could not afford the cost or the time of the yeast. The Jewish slaves had to make do with the tasteless, flat, pseudo-bread called matza.

It is precisely because *ḥametz* was associated with the Egyptians, who attained their wealth and their luxurious lifestyle by expropriating our ancestors’ slave labor, that the Bible prohibits not only eating *ḥametz* but also deriving any benefit from it during – or even following – the holiday. *Ḥametz* on Passover is taboo for the Jewish people because

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4. It is common knowledge that fermented bread was invented in ancient Egypt and was itself a form of currency. See, for instance, Jimmy Dunn in “Prices, Wages and Payments in Ancient Egypt”: <http://www.touregypt.net/featuresstories/prices.htm>.

the richness with which it is associated is what is called in tort law “the product of unclean hands.” In this case, it was the result of the ancient Egyptians’ abuse of our ancestors’ slave labor. This is why the tradition has us search for *ḥametz* before Passover and dispose of it – in fact, burn it – on the morning prior to the beginning of the holiday.<sup>5</sup> With the *ḥametz* destroyed, and matza spread out on the festival table, the Jewish people are then bidden to retell the Passover story at the evening Seder.

### **THE PASSOVER SEDER**

The Passover Seder reenacts the Jewish journey in the Book of Exodus, from its opening verses in chapter 1 until its closing verses in chapter 40. Rather than the Bible, which was authored centuries before the Common Era, the liturgical text that guides us through the Seder is the Passover Haggada, authored by the rabbis of the Common Era, since it is considerably shorter and more compact, packing greater punch with fewer words. Moses himself modeled the creative and more succinct retelling of the Passover story in the Book of Deuteronomy. There, speaking to the next generation of Jews, who had not themselves experienced the Exodus, he offers several powerful restatements of the Passover tale, which we incorporate into the *Maggid* section of the Haggada.<sup>6</sup>

Notwithstanding the creative retelling by the rabbis of the content of the Passover story, the rabbinic sages followed the Bible in using the three primary human senses to shape the form of their retelling – the visual, the verbal/audial, and the kinesthetic/active senses. For the generation that left Egypt, the visual telling of the Jewish story took the form of the Mishkan, that was placed in the center of the Jewish encampment in the desert and reminded the people of their

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5. The only other commandment aside from *ḥametz* on Passover that has a similar set of laws governing it is idolatry. *Ḥametz* on Passover is like idolatry all year long.

6. Including the Haggada’s opening line in response to the Four Questions, “We were slaves to Pharaoh in Egypt” (Deut. 6:20), and the centerpiece of *Maggid*, the exegesis of the pilgrims’ restating of the Passover journey (Deut. 26:5–8).

formative experiences;<sup>7</sup> the verbal/audial telling took place through the narrative in Exodus and Leviticus; and the active/dramatic telling occurred through the biblical holidays commanded to the Jewish people in chapter 23 of Leviticus. The Haggada too retells the biblical story using all three of the primary human senses, with the Seder plate constituting the visual, *Maggid*, the verbal/audial, and the fifteen dramatic action items at the Seder, the kinesthetic.

The Bible, then, and the Haggada in the times of the rabbinic sages, used all three mediums to tell and retell the story because different people rely on and are motivated by different modes of perception. For some, “seeing is believing.” For others, what one hears and repeats is what one remembers. For yet others, only by doing and acting out something is the underlying idea internalized. Both the Bible and the rabbis used all three mediums to assure that the message of the biblical story was effectively communicated.

#### THE SEDER PLATE – VISUAL RETELLING

As soon as one approaches the table on Passover, before one has even sat down, one is struck by the visual pageantry on the table, a pageantry that is meant to visually retell the Passover story. In the center of the table, aside from the three matzot that are usually covered, lies the Seder plate. The Seder plate is so called not merely because it is used to conduct the Passover Seder, but because, like the Seder itself, it too has an order, or “*seder*.” The order to the plate’s arrangement is crucial because it faithfully recreates, in visual form, the story that the plate retells.

There are myriad customs as to the arrangement of the Seder plate.<sup>8</sup> None of these is arbitrary. Rather, each custom represents a different visual interpretation of the crucial elements of the Seder and their role in telling the story of the Exodus. Since I understand the entire Seder to be a chronological representation of the Jewish people’s journey

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7. See the chapter on “The Sacred Space-Time Continuum” later in this volume.

8. See Gavriel Zinner, *Nitei Gavriel – Hilkhot Pesach, Hēlek Beit* (New York: Moriah Press, 1989), 322–323, 658–667, which presents eighteen different Seder plate arrangements.

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in the Book of Exodus, the arrangement of the Seder plate that I have developed mirrors this chronological progression.

The Seder plate is arranged in a circle, using the organizing principle of an analog clock telling time (see image on following page).

At one o'clock is the *karpas*, a vegetable, preferably green, like parsley, which symbolizes the prolific growth of the Jewish people in their early years in Egypt (corresponding to Ex. 1:7). At three o'clock is the *haroset*, which simulates mortar and symbolizes Pharaoh's stratagem to put the Jewish people through difficult physical work in order to stem their rate of growth (Ex. 1:11). At the five o'clock station is the *maror*, symbolizing the next step in Pharaoh's nefarious scheme – embittering and oppressing the Jewish people, not merely through hard work, but through harsh, oppressive bondage (Ex. 1:13, 14). At the seven o'clock station is the *hazeret* – a solid chunk of ungrated horseradish. Unlike the grated horseradish, this knobby, disfigured chunk is impossible to swallow. The *hazeret* embodies Pharaoh's ugly decree of infanticide to cast every newborn Jewish male into the Nile River, a royal order which the Jewish people could not withstand (Ex. 1:22).<sup>9</sup>

At the nine o'clock station is the *zero'a* – the roasted shank bone that symbolizes the Paschal sacrifice that the Jewish people courageously ate on the night of the Exodus (Ex. 12:3–11). The word *zero'a* also presages the “*zero'a netuya*” – God's outstretched arm that split the sea seven days after the Exodus.<sup>10</sup> At the eleven o'clock station is the *beitza* – a roasted egg, symbolizing the festival sacrifice that was brought in the Temple on Passover, and evoking the construction of the Mishkan, the precursor to the Temple, which concludes the Book of Exodus (Ex. 40:34–38). In the center of the plate, our family has the custom of placing a small bowl of salt water in which to dip the *karpas*, the vegetable eaten as the third item in the Seder, and then later to dip a hard-boiled egg before the multi-course meal known as “*Shullhan Orekh*” (the eleventh item in the Seder).

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9. Unlike Pharaoh's previous attempts to suppress their rate of growth, which the people somehow managed to overcome, the biblical text does not tell us that they continued to proliferate after the infanticide decree – cf. Ex. 1:22 to Ex. 1:12, 17, and 20.

10. See Ex. 14:16, 21, 26, 27.



The Seder Plate Clock

Like the matza, which symbolizes the bread of suffering and impoverishment in the early part of the Seder (“This is the bread of affliction that our ancestors ate in the land of Egypt”) and later symbolizes the bread of redemption when the Jewish people leave Egypt, the salt water too has a double meaning. At the beginning of the Passover saga – signified by two o’clock – it symbolizes the sweat of Jewish slaves toiling under the hot Egyptian sun; toward the latter part of the Passover saga – signified by ten o’clock – it symbolizes the liberating waters of the splitting sea, where the Jewish people were saved. The hands of the clock signal the two opposite sides of the story; the right hand points toward the side of developing suffering, while the left hand points toward developing redemption. What separates the two is the passage of time on the proverbial clock.



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Altogether, there are seven items on the Seder plate, symbolizing the seven days of Passover which the Seder meal inaugurates.<sup>11</sup>

Thus, the Seder plate that we see in front of us as we take our seats at the table already narrates the story of the Book of Exodus in chronological order, just as the *Maggid* section of the Haggada and the entire Seder will each tell the story of the Passover journey in its own unique, but overlapping way.

### **THE SEDER'S KINESTHETIC RETELLING**

In total, there are fifteen activities in the Passover Seder whose names are chanted or sung, in an almost universal custom, as a type of “Table of Contents” to the proceedings of the evening. A newcomer at a Passover Seder would justifiably wonder why the participants are singing the Table of Contents, instead of delving straight into the evening’s program itself. In fact, the fifteen Seder activities and our preliminary chanting of their names are related to several other “fifteens” connected to Passover:

- The holiday of Passover falls on the fifteenth day of the Jewish month of Nisan.
- The song “*Dayenu*,” found toward the end of the *Maggid* section of the Seder, also mentions fifteen events for which the participants praise God.
- In the Torah scroll, the central column of the Song of the Sea (sung by the Jewish people after the splitting of the Sea of Reeds) contains fifteen lines that form a sort of ascending ladder (Ex. 15:1–19).

All these fifteens,<sup>12</sup> and the interlacing of songs with most of them, are related to yet another fifteen, the name of God associated with the

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11. As we will see later in the book, the number seven is the symbol of the covenantal bond between God and the Jewish people and the organizing numeral of all the biblical holidays.

12. And several more fifteens as well, not directly related to Passover, but linked to encountering God’s presence:

- fifteen Psalms (120–134) that begin with the words, “A Song of Ascents” that were sung by the Levites on the steps leading up to the Temple in Jerusalem;

Exodus and found in the Song of the Sea. The name “*Yah*,” the most primal of God’s names, comprises the two Hebrew letters *yud* and *heh*, which in *gematria* – Hebrew numerology in which each letter has a numerical equivalent – equal fifteen.

All of the fifteens connected to Passover lead to the experience of, or an encounter with, the Divine Presence. It is not at all surprising that these fifteens are associated with song, because the propensity of the soul when having an experience with the Divine is to break out in song.

But beyond giving song-filled expression to being touched by God, the chanting of the Seder’s program also helps to remind the Seder participants of the order of the activities in their proper chronological sequence. After all, the entire purpose of the Seder in the Haggada is to take the Seder participants on a fifteen-step voyage that recreates God’s saving presence in the Book of Exodus and makes it their own.

*Maggid*, the fifth in the sequence of Seder activities, does a masterful job of verbally encapsulating the whole of the Exodus narrative, from the enslavement of the Jewish people until their redemption. Why then, we might ask, do we need the other fourteen activities in the Seder? Because just as the Seder plate is organized to retell the story of the Jewish people’s founding event visually, and the *Maggid* will retell the story verbally, so too the other fourteen steps of the Seder are equally important and powerful instruments to retell the Exodus story kinesthetically, through symbolic actions.

Each of the fifteen activities in the Seder has a unique and dramatic role in retelling the story of the Exodus journey:

### 1. *Kadesh*

#### **Recitation of the holiday Kiddush over the first of the four cups of wine**

The blessing over wine marks the day as sacred. Unlike the other Jewish holidays, in which a blessing is recited over only one cup of wine, on

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- fifteen words chanted in the priestly blessing;
  - fifteen words of praise in the “*Yishtabah*” prayer that is recited daily and concludes the “Verses of Praise” section of the morning prayers.

## *Rendezvous with God*

Passover night we recite blessings over four cups of wine. Why four? The rabbis linked the four cups to the four terms of redemption, which God instructs Moses to convey to the Jewish people:

Therefore say to the Jewish people: “I am the EverPresent God. **I will bring you out** from under the burdens of the Egyptians, and **I will save you** from their servitude, and **I will redeem you** with an outstretched arm and with great judgments, and **I will take you** to be My people and I will be your God, and you shall know that I am the EverPresent, your God, who brought you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians (Ex. 6:6–7).”

Despite the numerical parallelism between the four cups and the four promises of redemption, the rabbinic insight begs the question of what these cups of wine have to do with the process of redemption. The answer lies in the fact that the four cups of wine serve to subdivide the Haggada text and the Passover story of redemption into four parts. Each cup of wine takes the participants to a different moment in the journey of redemption, to a different rendezvous of God with the people. The four cups serve as “stage directions” in performing the Passover saga on the night of the Exodus. Each of these four cups of wine, by intermittently loosening up our state of consciousness, enables us to enter the “time machine” at each point and imagine the four different moments in the Passover journey.<sup>13</sup> Thus, the Seder participants can imagine and reexperience the different points of redemption that the Jewish people experienced in the story of the Exodus; they are transported in their minds to the key moments in the biblical narrative in which God’s saving presence made itself manifest to the Jewish people. As God rendezvoused with our ancestors, we rendezvous with God.

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13. Within the recitation of the Kiddush, the word for time, “*zeman*,” is found three times: “the time of our freedom.... He who sanctifies the Jewish people and the times [of meeting] ... who has brought us to **this time**.” In my interpretation, the latter words transport us to the time that the Jewish people entered Egypt, the place where we ultimately encountered God’s saving presence.

The first cup, corresponding to the first term of redemption in Exodus 6, “I will bring you out from under the burdens of Egypt,” takes the participants of the Seder from the beginning of the Passover story when Jacob and his descendants arrive in Egypt (verse 1 of Exodus), through their period of enslavement, and through the first nine of the ten plagues that God brings upon the Egyptians (Ex. 1–11). The plagues, which the Egyptians experienced and the Jewish people witnessed, lightened the burdens of the Jewish slaves as they progressively freed them from their oppressive conditions. For example, their “work in the fields” (Ex. 1:13–14)<sup>14</sup> could no longer be foisted upon them by their Egyptian overseers because the fields were destroyed, first by the plague of hail and then by the plague of locusts, which consumed whatever vegetation had remained standing (see Ex. 10:15).

The second cup of wine, corresponding to the second verse of redemption, “I will save you from your servitude,” brings the participants to the night of the Exodus, when God brought the tenth plague and freed the Jewish people from ever serving the Egyptians again.

The third cup, corresponding to the verse, “I will redeem you with an outstretched arm and with great judgments,” carries the participants to the point in time, seven days after the exit of the Jewish people from Egypt, when they stood at the shores of the Sea of Reeds. There the people witnessed the legions of their enemy, who were on a mission of vengeance to massacre or reenslave them, drown before their very eyes, while they emerged unscathed on the other side. Moses, God’s servant, acting as God’s “outstretched arm,” was instructed to stretch out his arm over the sea. With his staff – God’s scepter – in hand, he was first to split the sea and lead the Jewish people through the dry seabed; he was then to reconstitute it to drown the Egyptian army in punishment, bringing “great judgments” on the Egyptians for their many sins, including the drowning of the newborn Jewish males.<sup>15</sup>

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14. Thousands of years before the enslavement of African-Americans in North America, the Jewish people were the slave laborers who worked the fields under the searing Egyptian sun.

15. This is apparently how Yitro understood the drowning of the Egyptians in Ex. 18:11: “Because the very thing that they intended to do came upon them.”

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Finally, the fourth cup of wine, corresponding to the fourth expression of redemption, “I will take you to be My people and I will be your God,” brings the Seder participants, six weeks or so after the splitting of the sea, to the foot of Mount Sinai, where God took the Jewish people in a covenantal act to be His people and where God’s presence came to rest in the Mishkan that the people built.

### **2. *URhatz***

#### **The ritual laving of hands without reciting the usual blessing**

Just as the wine of *Kadesh* prepares the Seder participants’ minds to reexperience the events of the Exodus and God’s saving presence manifested there, the ritual washing of the hands symbolically prepares their bodies to do the same.<sup>16</sup> In the Bible, whenever there was an expectation of encountering the Divine Presence, the people had to wash their bodies in anticipation. Therefore, in Exodus 19, Moses instructed the people to immerse themselves in a pool of water to prepare for the revelation of God’s presence at Mount Sinai.<sup>17</sup> Similarly, the priests, before they could enter the holy section of the Sanctuary close to where God’s presence dwelled, had to wash their hands and feet (Ex. 30:17–21). So too, do the participants of the Seder, who have now through the *Kadesh* journeyed in their minds’ imagination back to Egypt, wash their hands without a blessing in anticipation of the revelations of the Divine Presence to the Jewish people that will occur in the course of the Seder.

We do not recite a blessing, which would require *kavana* – the mind’s focused concentration – because in *URhatz* it is our bodies, not our minds, that we are preparing for redemption. By designating a separate item in the Seder to symbolize the preparation of our bodies, we convey the fact that the Exodus was first and foremost a liberation of

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16. Of the fifteen steps in the Seder, only *URhatz* begins with the Hebrew letter *vav*, meaning “and.” This indicates that *Kadesh* and *URhatz* are linked to one another, both serving to prepare the Seder participants – mind and body – for undertaking the Passover journey through the Book of Exodus.

17. This is what is meant by the people “sanctifying” themselves and washing their clothes in Ex. 19:10, 14.

the Jewish body-politic from the physical/political bondage of Egypt. Our spiritual liberation came later in the story. Regardless, together *Kadesh* and *URḥatz* serve as the introduction to the story, which begins with *Karpas*.

### 3. *Karpas*

**The eating of a vegetable dipped in salt water or *ḥarosef* and reciting the appropriate blessing for “creating the fruit of the earth”**

When the Jewish people first came down to Egypt they experienced it as if it were the long-lost Garden of Eden. Back in the Garden, God had blessed human beings with the words, “Be fruitful, multiply, and fill the earth” (Gen. 1:28). In Egypt, as related in the Bible, the Jews “were fruitful, and swarmed, and multiplied and became very, very strong and the land was filled with them” (Ex. 1:7) in fulfillment of God’s primordial blessings. Their very prodigious growth alarmed Pharaoh and gave him the pretext to launch a policy of oppression against them lest they continue to grow and join his enemies in overthrowing the regime (Ex. 1:10). The oppression took the form of slave labor in construction and fieldwork under the burning Egyptian sun (Ex. 1:13–14).

To symbolize the fertility and growth of the Jewish people in Egypt, we take a vegetable that grows in the earth, preferably green in color to symbolize its vitality. Ashkenazi Jews then dip it into salt water, representing the sweat-drenched bodies of our ancestors. Sephardi Jews dip the vegetable in *ḥarosef*, symbolizing the construction mortar in which the bodies of the Jewish people were caked while building Pharaoh’s garrison cities (Ex. 1:11).

We know from the Haggada that *karpas* is intended to represent the Jewish people’s growth and fertility. The author/editor chooses to explain the word “*varav*,” “and [they became] many,” in *Maggid* with a verse from Ezekiel: “Many, like the plants in the field, I have made you” (Ezek. 16:7). Therefore, we take a vegetable from the field, which symbolizes fertility and growth, and dip it in salt water or *ḥarosef*, which symbolizes the slavery which the very growth of the Jewish

nation precipitated.<sup>18</sup> In this same vein, some medieval rabbinic sages deconstructed the word “*karpas*” into two constituent words – “*samekh perakh*” – meaning sixty (the numerical value given to the Hebrew letter *samekh*) and oppressive. According to the Midrash, the *samekh* symbolizes the robust growth of the Jewish people from seventy to 600,000 males in only a few hundred years, by virtue of miraculous births of sextuplets. “Oppressive” because, as the Bible tells us in two consecutive verses (Ex. 1:13–14), the slave labor was oppressive. Thus, *Karpas* mirrors the first fourteen verses of the Book of Exodus and sets the context for the story that follows.

#### 4. *Yahatz*

##### **Breaking the middle of the three matzot, wrapping and hiding the larger broken segment for the *afikoman***

In the biblical story, Pharaoh’s tactic of slave labor fails to stem the prodigious growth of the Jewish people. Increasingly frustrated and desperate, Pharaoh tries to persuade the Jewish midwives to strangle the boys when they are born; to his great consternation, the midwives do not cooperate and the people continue their unabated growth. Ultimately, he commands all of his people simply to throw all of the male Jewish babies into the Nile. Unlike his previous efforts, this brutal decree appears to break the spirit and stem the growth of the people.<sup>19</sup>

In one, apparently exceptional, instance, a Levite man marries the daughter of Levi and they have an infant son. The birth mother hides the baby for three months and then, nestling him in a straw basket that she weaves and waterproofs especially for the purpose, places her child adrift on the Nile, while the infant’s older sister looks after him. The daughter of Pharaoh discovers him crying and is persuaded by his sister to hire the infant’s biological mother as wet-nurse, thus returning the infant to his parents for the early years of his upbringing. After being

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18. If it seems repulsive to consume something symbolically drenched in sweat or caked in mud, that is as it should be, for the enslavement of people against their will is indeed repulsive.

19. See footnote 9, p. 8 above.

weaned, he is brought to Pharaoh's daughter who adopts him and names him Moses (Ex. 2:1–10).

At the Passover Seder, we reenact the story of Moses' birth and rescue with *Yaḥatz*. First, we break the middle matza. Why do we do this? In biblical times, the Jewish people comprised three castes: Israelites, Levites, and priests. The three matzot, each representing one of the castes, collectively represent the Jewish people. The breaking of the middle matza in half, first and fundamentally represents the breaking of the collective spirit of the Jewish people by Pharaoh's decree of infanticide. The middle matza, representing the tribe of Levi, is broken because the Bible goes out of its way to inform us that both parents of Moses came from that tribe.

We take the larger broken fragment of matza, representing Moses, the son of his Levite parents and the most important actor in the biblical drama. Then we wrap it and hide it as Moses was enwrapped as an infant and hidden. The smaller segment of matza, representing Miriam and Aaron, Moses' siblings, from whom he was separated, is returned in between the two remaining complete matzot – as they remained in Egypt among their enslaved brethren. Just as Moses' sister looked on with concern to see what would happen to him floating on the Nile, the children sitting at the Seder carefully observe where the matza is hidden so that they can “steal it back.” They then negotiate for its return to the parent who hid it in the first place, just as Miriam did for her mother.

How do we know that this is the correct interpretation of *Yaḥatz*? Because the point later on in the Seder, when the hidden matza is taken out and eaten, is called “*Tzafun*” – literally, “the hidden one.” The root word TZ-F-N, denoting hiding, is precisely the word used (twice) when Moses' mother hid him as an infant, an unusual usage to denote hiding that is found nowhere else explicitly in the five books of the Torah (Ex. 2:2–3).

Moses' birth and subsequent maturing into a caring and courageous young man (Ex. 2:11–22) set the stage for the next point in the biblical drama and the Passover Seder: God's remembering His promise to Abraham to rescue his descendants from captivity and to punish their oppressors – both of which will take place in the course of the Seder's fifth activity, *Maggid*.



## 5. *Maggid*

### The Haggada's retelling of the Exodus

The word "*Maggid*," literally "telling," corresponds to the word "Haggada," the book in which the Seder is embedded. This fifth step in the Seder plays a central role in verbally retelling the story of the Exodus and fulfilling the command of, "And you should tell your child on that day" (Ex. 13:8).

The section of *Maggid* seems, at first glance, anything but ordered and structured. The text moves around from the biblical tale of the Exodus to rabbinic stories and interpretations of those biblical stories in what appears to be a helter-skelter, hodge-podge manner. Upon more careful inspection though, it turns out that *Maggid* is highly structured and, in its retelling, advances the biblical story just as we might expect it to. The constituent parts of *Maggid* follow the precise order of the biblical verse from which we learn the duty to tell the story of the Exodus in the first place: "And you should tell your child on that day saying: 'Because of this [or: this is because of what], the EverPresent God did for me when I left Egypt'" (Ex. 13:8).<sup>20</sup>

The *Maggid* section is arranged in six subsections following the precise order of this verse. The six constituent parts are: Telling, to your child, on that day, saying "Because of this," did for me, when I left Egypt.

The "telling" section begins with the paragraph, "We were slaves in Egypt," continues with the tale of the five sages in Benei Berak, and concludes with the final words of R. Elazar b. Azaria's paragraph ("all the days of your life to include the Messianic era"). This section informs us

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20. I first came across the deciphering of the general order of *Maggid* in a brilliant introductory essay by Rav Naftali Maskil LeAison (1829–97) to the English translation of the Malbim Haggada (New York: Targum Press, Feldheim Publishers, 1993), V–XXVI. Although my analysis, like his, follows the order of Exodus 13:8, it parses the verse differently in two instances: separating the words "and you should tell" from "to your child," since the Haggada treats each as a distinct topic, and combining the words "saying" with "because of this" since that entire subsection of *Maggid* deals with the causes of the enslavement and redemption. For an insightful, more recent treatment of this verse to explain *Maggid*, see Menachem Leibtag, "Understanding *Maggid*" (Yeshivat Gush Etzion, Tanakh Study Center Archives, <http://www.tanach.org/special/magidq.txt>).

what we are supposed to tell, why we tell it, who does the telling, and what is the optimal length for telling the Exodus story.

The section “to your child” follows, telling us that all members of the Jewish people and of future generations are to be engaged with the story of the Exodus, from the wise, to the wicked, to the simple, and even to the one who has not yet learned enough to question. This section begins with the words, “Blessed is the Omnipresent, blessed is He,” and continues with the four children, concluding with the paragraph of “the child who does not know how to ask.”

The section corresponding to the words “on that day” informs us precisely what day and what time of the day we are to tell the Exodus story, and is encapsulated in the paragraph which begins: “Perhaps from the first day of the month.”<sup>21</sup>

The section explaining the words “saying, ‘Because of this’” represents the longest subsection, by far, of *Maggid* as it has to explain how and why the Jewish people were both enslaved and redeemed (“Because of this...”). This section begins with the paragraph, “In the beginning our ancestors were idol worshipers,” and extends for several pages, all the way through Rabban Gamliel’s prescription of why we eat *maror* at the Seder.

The words “did for me” in the biblical verse are given expression in the paragraph, “In every generation a person should see him/herself as if he/she were taken out of Egypt.”

Finally, the section of “when I left Egypt” is encapsulated in the first two paragraphs of the traditional Hallel, beginning with “*Halleluya*,” “Praised be God,” and concluding with the paragraph, “When Israel left Egypt.”

The *Maggid* section, then, which seemed to be disorganized on the surface, turns out to be highly organized. The underlying order is a brilliant metaphor for the Jewish people’s experience in

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21. Notice how the verse, “You should tell your child on that day” (Ex. 13:8) is used by the Haggada as a proof text in this paragraph in response to the wicked child as well as to the child who does not know how to ask. Toward the end of *Maggid* the Haggada will again use this verse as the proof text for the paragraph beginning, “In every generation.” The editor of *Maggid* clearly had this verse in mind in structuring the retelling of the Exodus narrative.

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Egypt and throughout history: While historical events often seem haphazard and incomprehensible, they are actually purposeful and meaningful. Behind the curtain of Jewish history stands structured divine intention recognized only from a distance and with the benefit of hindsight.<sup>22</sup>

In addition, there are two dramatic moments in *Maggid* that correspond to the key moments which unfold in the biblical tale: first, when we raise our cups in a toast, praising God for His promise of redemption to our ancestor Abraham at the Covenant between the Pieces,<sup>23</sup> and second, when we dip our fingers into our wine for each of the ten plagues. These two actions correspond to the two pivotal moments in the Exodus story. The first is God's memory of His covenantal promise and decision to act – after Moses' growth and exile from Egypt – at the end of chapter 2 in the Book of Exodus.<sup>24</sup> The second is the execution of the plagues, the tenth of which ultimately persuades Pharaoh to release the Jewish people from Egypt (Ex. 7–12).

The Seder participants recite *Maggid*, the redemption narrative, which leads up to the reenactment of the final meal in Egypt. At that point in the Seder, the participants drink the second cup of wine commemorating God's second promise to the Jewish people to "save them from the servitude of Egypt." Indeed, as the people in Egypt sat down to eat what was, perhaps, one of the most filling meals of their entire sojourn in Egypt, their servitude to the Egyptians came to a long-awaited end.

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22. "And when My Presence passes, I will place you in the cleft of the rock, and will cover you until I pass. You will see Me from behind, but you will not see My face" (Ex. 33:22–23).

23. Gen. 15:13–14: "You should know that your descendants will be strangers in a foreign land where they will be enslaved and oppressed for four hundred years. However, the nation that enslaves them I will judge and afterward they [Abraham's descendants] will leave with great wealth."

24. Ex. 2:24–25: "God heard the cries of the Children of Israel and God remembered his covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob; and God saw the Children of Israel and God knew."

## **6. Rahtza**

**The ritual laving of hands before eating “bread,” followed by the recitation of the appropriate blessing**

In the biblical story, the Jews were commanded to plan for their departure from Egypt by setting aside a lamb and preparing one last, barbecue dinner on their final night in Egypt (Ex. 12:3–11). During the Passover Seder, the participants now reenact this last meal. But first, in preparation for the meal, they wash their hands, this time with a blessing, in order to eat the matzot that God commanded the Jews to eat on that final night in Egypt.

## **7/8. Motzi Matza**

**Eating a portion of matza, reciting beforehand the usual blessing over bread and the special blessing over matza**

The Bible records that the Jewish people were commanded to eat, as their final meal in Egypt, the Paschal sacrifice with matzot and bitter herbs (Ex. 12:8). Since matzot are mentioned first, the participants begin by reciting two blessings over them. The first is for bread – because while matza does not look like a loaf of bread, it was the only bread that our ancestors could afford in Egypt and had time to prepare as they left Egypt<sup>25</sup> – and the second blessing is “over the eating of matza,” which was specifically commanded by God to be eaten that evening. Having recited both blessings, they eat a substantial portion of this unleavened bread.

## **9/10. Maror/Korekh**

**Eating a portion of bitter herbs (romaine lettuce and/or ground horseradish) dipped in haroset, after reciting the special blessing**

Following the eating of the matzot, the participants eat the bitter herbs mentioned in the biblical command. Since the command was in the plural (bitter herbs), they are consumed in two forms: first, dipped in *haroset* – as the bitterness of Egypt was associated with the servitude

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25. See the section on *hametz* and matza, above.

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signified by the *haroset*/mortar<sup>26</sup> – and then in sandwich form with matza (the “Hillel Sandwich”), since the verse implies the herbs were to be eaten with the matzot.<sup>27</sup>

### **11. *Shulhan Orekh***

#### **Partaking of a festive meal, including at least two cooked dishes**

In the biblical story, the Jewish people were instructed to eat the roasted lamb that they had designated as the Passover sacrifice. This was the first, and paradigmatic sacrifice, for all future sacrifices in the biblical Sanctuary and Temple.<sup>28</sup> In later Temple times, Jews also ate parts of the festival offering, a second sacrifice that they brought to the Temple, at the Seder meal. Since we have had neither animal sacrifices nor the Temple in Jerusalem for close to two thousand years, by tradition, the participants take part in a sumptuous feast that is to contain at least two cooked foods, one for each of the sacrifices that was eaten.<sup>29</sup> This accounts for some people’s custom to eat a hard-boiled egg at this point in the meal, a cooked food, representing the festival sacrifice, in addition to whatever is served as the regular main course, standing in for the Paschal sacrifice.

### **12. *Tzafun***

#### **Eating the matza of the *afikoman*, previously hidden away during *Yahatz***

In the biblical story, it was only on the night of Passover that Moses was able to fulfill the mission for which he was commissioned by God at the burning bush: “Now go, and I will send you to Pharaoh and take out My people, the Jewish people, from Egypt” (Ex. 3:10). Thus, at this

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26. Ex. 1:14: “And they embittered their lives with mortar and brick.”

27. Ex. 12:8: “Eat the meat during the night roasted over fire. Eat it with matza and bitter herbs.”

28. In *Sefer Korbanot* (Book of Sacrifices) in Maimonides’ compendium of Jewish Law, the *Mishneh Torah*, the Laws of the Passover Sacrifice are the first that are codified. See also the chapter later in this book on “Sacred Space” and particularly the interpretation of the meaning of the Sacrificial Altar in the outer courtyard of the biblical Sanctuary.

29. According to Rav Yosef’s interpretation of the Mishna, found in Pesaḥim 114b.

point in the Seder, the *afikoman*, the matza that was wrapped up and hidden during *Yahatz* (the fourth step in the Seder), is now unwrapped and consumed by the Seder participants, representatives of the beneficiaries of Moses' mission as he was about to lead them out of Egypt.<sup>30</sup>

### 13. *Barekh*

#### Reciting the traditional Grace After Meals

In the biblical story, Pharaoh comes running to Moses after the plague of the firstborns, urging him to lead his people out. Then, almost as an afterthought, Pharaoh adds, "And you (plural) should bless me too" (Ex. 12:32). The biblical narrative implies that the Jews were blessing, singing the praises, not of Pharaoh of course, but of their God, who had brought the tenth plague and finally liberated them from Egyptian bondage. Thus, the Seder participants reenact their blessing by reciting the Grace After Meals in which God is praised in the first and second paragraphs "for the sumptuous meal we have just eaten ... and for taking us out of the land of Egypt, the house of bondage."

After reciting the Grace, the blessing over the third cup of wine is recited, setting the stage for the next key chapter of redemption in the Book of Exodus: God's promise to "redeem the people with an outstretched arm and with great judgments," that is, with the splitting of the sea (Ex. 6:6).

### 14. *Hallel*

#### Reciting psalms of praise

In the biblical story, after he released the Jewish people from captivity, Pharaoh had second thoughts about his decision and decided to pursue them with his cavalry and chariots, drawing near to them as they were encamped at the Sea of Reeds. The people were terrified at the approach of Pharaoh's army. Moses, in turn, prayed to God for the

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30. As the Haggada states emphatically in the chapter after the recitation of the Four Questions: Had The Holy One, Blessed Be He, not taken our ancestors out of Egypt, then we, and our children, and all of our descendants would still be enslaved to Pharaoh in Egypt.

people's deliverance. The prayer of "Pour Out Your Wrath," which is recited immediately following the third cup of wine, is meant to reflect Moses' prayer at the shore of the sea.<sup>31</sup> God then instructed Moses to stretch out his arm with his staff in hand (symbolizing God's royal scepter), and split the sea so that the people could escape Pharaoh by fleeing on dry land to the other side. When Pharaoh's legions followed, God instructed Moses to stretch out his arm again to bring back the waters, thus drowning the Egyptian army. In response to these miraculous events witnessed by the entire nation, the people, led by Moses, broke out in a song of praise that is called the "Song of the Sea" (Ex. 15).

To reenact that song of praise at the Passover Seder, the participants also break out in singing psalms of praise known as the Hallel. Apparently understanding that the role of the Hallel is to be a stand-in for the Song of the Sea, the Talmud states that the first Hallel was sung by the people after the splitting of the sea (Pesahim 117a). The Haggada then adds other songs of praise, instantiations of Hallel (Ps. 136 and the *Nishmat* prayer, usually recited on the Sabbath and holidays during the morning service), each of which gives prominence to the deliverance from the Egyptians at the Sea of Reeds. At the conclusion of these prayers of praise, the blessing over the fourth cup of wine is recited, setting the stage for God's fulfillment of the fourth promise of redemption: "And I will take them to be My people and I will be their God" (Ex. 6:7).

### 15. *Nirtza*

#### **Concluding the Seder with a prayer that God accept our reenactment of the Exodus and redeem the Jewish people once again**

The word "*Nirtza*," the final step in the fifteen-part Seder, means "acceptance." In the biblical story, already at the burning bush, when Moses was first commissioned to lead the people out of Egypt, God told him to bring the people to the very mountain on which God revealed Himself to Moses: "And this will be the sign that I sent you: When you take the people out of Egypt you [collectively] will worship Me on this mountain"

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31. See *Leading the Passover Journey*, 138–141, to understand how the wording of this prayer reflects Moses' prayer at the sea.

(Ex. 3:12). This was to be the moment when God formally accepted the people as His nation, and the people accepted upon themselves the kingship of God. And so it was. God offered the people the covenant (Ex. 19:3–6), the people accepted (Ex. 19:7, 8; 24:7), and they were supposed to live happily ever after as “husband and wife” in covenantal bliss.

Except that forty days later, the people, believing that Moses, God’s emissary, had abandoned them, created and worshiped the Golden Calf, a stunning betrayal of their loyalty to God and their covenantal commitment (Ex. 32:7, 8). As happened with Noah and his family, God was prepared to start human history all over again, this time beginning with Moses’ progeny, but Moses would have none of it (Ex. 32:9, 10, 31, 32). He argued with God until God relented and forgave the people, after they displayed true remorse (Ex. 33:6–10).

To test their sincerity, God commanded the people to build a home in which His presence could dwell in their very midst. The people were overjoyed at being given a second chance, and with great enthusiasm built the Mishkan to house God’s presence. In the last five verses of the Book of Exodus, God’s presence indeed revealed itself and filled the Mishkan that the people built. At this moment, there was *Nirtza* – God’s acceptance of the people, imperfect though they were, and the people’s true acceptance of God, despite their earlier indiscretions. This was the moment of spiritual redemption for the people because, conscious of their deficiencies, they were nevertheless made to feel worthy by God’s presence coming to dwell among them. Hence, the Seder ends with *Nirtza*, reenacting that redemptive moment when God’s presence came to dwell among the Jewish people and to accompany them on all their future journeys (Ex. 40:34–38; see Appendix 2 for an outline of the Seder’s fifteen steps of redemption).

#### **WHERE IS MOSES IN THE HAGGADA?**

Moses plays a central role throughout the biblical story that the Passover Seder and the Haggada reenact. It is therefore rather strange that in the Haggada’s narrative of the story, Moses’ name appears only once,<sup>32</sup> and

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32. In the Ashkenazic Haggada; in the Sephardic version Moses’ name does not appear even that one time.



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that it is only in an obscure, secondary role, as a proof text for another point that the Haggada is making.<sup>33</sup> Why is Moses virtually invisible in the Haggada?

To understand why Moses is hidden in the Haggada's retelling of the Exodus story, why he is *tzafun*, we have to turn to two events in the Book of Exodus. First, when the people, after leaving Egypt, journey in the desert and run out of food, they come running to Moses and Aaron to complain. Strikingly, the people ask them accusingly why **they** took the people out of Egypt if they were fated to perish thirty days later of starvation in the desert. Moses parries their complaints by assuring them that God would provide food for them and rebukes them, insisting that their complaints be directed against God (Ex. 16:3, 7, 8), "for who are we that you lodge your complaints against us" (Ex. 16:7).

Apparently, Moses understood that there was some confusion among the people about who actually took them out of Egypt. Later on, in the events that led up to the Golden Calf, the people said to Aaron, "Make us a god that will lead us, for this man, Moses, who took us out of Egypt, we do not know what has become of him" (Ex. 32:1). Apparently, here too, in even starker form, the people seem to believe that Moses is the divine being who took them out of Egypt.

For this reason, the participants of the Seder, who imagine themselves on the night of Passover as having been themselves liberated from Egypt,<sup>34</sup> leave Moses out of the story. His role in the Exodus is minimized so that God's role is maximized in the retelling. This is also why Elijah makes an unexpected appearance in the story prior to the prayer "Pour Out Your Wrath" (the placeholder for Moses' prayer to God at the sea). Elijah is invoked to represent Moses in disguise. Elijah was the angry prophet of God who, like Moses, had a revelation at Mount Horeb/Sinai and who faced down the idolaters of his generation (I Kings 18–19). Just as Moses had to wear a mask after he came down from Mount

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33. In the proof text cited by R. Yose HaGelili in the *Maggid* section for how many plagues occurred at the sea, citing the verse: "And they believed in God **and in His servant Moses**" (Ex. 14:31).

34. As the Haggada says toward the end of *Maggid*: "In every generation, each person is to see himself as if he left Egypt."

Sinai with the second set of tablets containing the Ten Commandments, so that the people would not be blinded by his radiant presence (Ex. 34:29–35), in the Haggada he must also be “masked,” hidden, disguised as Elijah, so that his radiant visage does not blind the Seder participants to God’s presence.

The point and purpose of Passover, the first of the year’s biblical holidays, and its reliving of the biblical events that it commemorates, is to firmly anchor the people’s relationship with God. It is to remember God’s redemption of the Jewish people when no human being, not even as great a “miracle worker” as Moses,<sup>35</sup> could or would rescue them. As the author of the Haggada states at the beginning of *Maggid*: “If The Holy One, Blessed Be He, had not taken us out of Egypt, then we, and our children, and our children’s children would still be enslaved to Pharaoh in Egypt.” Moses is made virtually invisible to instill in us today an attitude of gratitude to God for His redemption. We rendezvous with God, as God rendezvoused with our ancestors. That attitude of indebtedness finds expression in our people’s loyalty to God and God’s Torah whose story and reenactment have sustained our people for thousands of years. We are only Jews today because of those saving events of three millennia ago and because of the Torah’s story of those events, which has been passed down to us from generation to generation.

#### AND WHERE IS THE LAND OF ISRAEL?

In the biblical narrative, the promise made to Abraham was not merely that God would redeem his descendants from captivity and punish their oppressors, but that God would return Abraham’s descendants to the Land of Israel (Gen. 15:13–21). Indeed, consistent with that promise and God’s memory of it, there was a fifth promise of redemption that God made to Moses, found in the Book of Exodus immediately following the first four promises of redemption mentioned previously: “**And I will bring you** to the land which I swore to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob that I would give it – and I will give it to them as an inheritance in perpetuity – I, the EverPresent God” (Ex. 6:8).

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35. See the epitaph to Moses in Deut. 34:11–12.

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Despite this fifth biblical promise, in the retelling of the story of Passover in the Haggada and as part of the Seder, this promise is left out.<sup>36</sup> The author of the Haggada, living after the destruction of the Second Temple and the exile of most of the Jewish people from the Land of Israel, could not include this promise, which was unfulfilled for them and for roughly nineteen centuries of Jews afterward. There was only a hint to the fifth promise in the Cup of Elijah that sat at the center of the Seder table. That cup – named after the prophet who not only resembled Moses but who, according to the later prophet Malachi, was also to herald the future redemption of the Jewish people and their return to their ancestral land (Mal. 3:23–24) – was traditionally not drunk at the Seder because its promise had not been fulfilled for so many centuries of Jewish life.

Perhaps now that nearly half of the world's Jews have returned over the past century to reinhabit their ancestral homeland, this cup may – perhaps should – be drunk at the Seder.<sup>37</sup> The most appropriate time to do so might be at the very end of the Seder before singing “Next Year in Jerusalem,” in recognition and gratitude for God's fulfilling the promise to Abraham in our parents', and in our, generation. Coming, as it does, after the participants have already drunk four cups of wine and may be edging toward intoxication, the fifth cup of Elijah could be shared among all the Seder participants. This “taste of redemption” would convey the reality that although a substantial portion of the Jewish people has returned to the Promised Land, a substantial portion has not, nor is the biblical dream of a rebuilt Temple in Jerusalem yet a reality. So the redemption which we have been privileged to witness and experience is not complete.

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36. It is also left out of the core of *Maggid*, the paragraph of “*Arami oved avi*” – the pilgrim's declaration recited as he brings the first fruits to Jerusalem, upon which the Haggada weaves an elaborate midrash (as per the instructions of Mishna Pesahim 10:4). In the Haggada, the pilgrims' formulation is truncated and does not include the verse, “And He brought me to this place, and He gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey” (Deut. 26:9).

37. Maimonides rules that a fifth cup may be drunk; however, he suggests doing so prior to reciting Psalm 136, “the Great Hallel” (*Mishneh Torah*, Laws of *Ḥametz* and Matza 8:10).

This sharing of the cup of Elijah would also point to a cautionary tale from the prologue to the story of the Exodus: a lack of fraternal solidarity, between Joseph and his brothers, is what led to the enslavement of the Jewish people in the first place. Therefore, only by sharing this cup of redemption in communal solidarity will the Land of Israel under Jewish sovereignty remain an “inheritance in perpetuity” as God promised.<sup>38</sup>

### THE TIMELESS ETHICAL VALUES OF THE EXODUS

In addition to recalling and reliving the Exodus on Passover night, ethical norms emerged from the narrative through which the Jewish people imitated God’s redemptive actions in the Exodus year-round. And this model of *imitatio Dei* developed in the Jewish tradition for all the Jewish holidays so that the people’s relationship to God as human beings created in God’s image, or of spouse to spouse (“I will take them to be My people and I will be their God” [Ex 6:7]), would be plain for all to see.

These dynamics resemble those of intimate human relationships. As two people come together to become a “we” instead of two separate “I’s,” they share their most intimate selves with each other and begin to act more and more like a single unit. After many years of a successful marriage, people sometimes begin to resemble each other physically, unconsciously mimicking each other’s language, facial expressions, and even gait. More importantly, in their dealings with both their own children and with the outside world, they unite in a common front on issues of principle and deep-seated values. So too, the “marital” relationship between God and the Jewish people shaped the ethics of the latter to closely resemble the ethical actions of the divine partner.

The Jewish tradition legislated a slew of ethical values and actions that emulated God’s redemptive acts when He took the Jewish people out of slavery, estrangement, and impoverishment. The first such value is the mitzva of *pidyon shevuyim*, the ransoming/freeing of endangered Jews from slavery or captivity, about which Maimonides

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38. “And I will give it to them as an inheritance in perpetuity, I the EverPresent God” (Ex. 6:8). See also the brief discussion of the modern holiday of Yom Yerushalayim (Jerusalem Day) in chapter 8 of this volume entitled, “The Hiddenness of God.”

says, “There is no greater commandment.”<sup>39</sup> The Book of Leviticus mandates that Jews should redeem their relatives who have been forced to sell themselves into slavery to a non-Jew, connecting that command to God’s actions at the Exodus: “For it is to Me that the Jewish people are servants, they are My servants whom I freed from the Land of Egypt, I am the Lord your God” (Lev. 25:55).<sup>40</sup> Leviticus, in effect, has God saying: As I redeemed you when you were held in captivity as slaves in Egypt, you should redeem each other when you are enslaved or held captive.<sup>41</sup>

Second, in Exodus, God instructs Moses to command the Jewish people to request from the Egyptians gold, silver, and fine clothes before they leave Egypt (a token payback, presumably, for the hundreds of years of free slave labor that accrued to the Egyptians). Hence, they leave Egypt with the spoils that God had promised Abraham hundreds of years earlier in the Covenant between the Pieces when God first informed him of his descendants’ enslavement and liberation.<sup>42</sup> Just as the Jewish people were freed from slavery in Egypt, endowed with some of their former masters’ wealth, the Torah mandated both that Jewish servants be freed from their Jewish masters after six years and that, upon their release, they be endowed with a material dowry upon

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39. Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah*, Laws of Gifts to the Poor 8:10.

40. Although the primary obligation still falls on the relatives, Maimonides later extends the obligation to all Jews (not only relatives) to free a fellow Jew who has sold himself into slavery to a non-Jew. Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah*, Laws of Slaves 2:7.

41. This reinforces the point that God made in the first of the Ten Commandments. In the opening speech God identifies Himself to the Jewish people, not as the Creator of the world, but as the one “who has freed them from the Land of Egypt from the house of bondage.” God’s very identity by which He makes Himself known to the Jewish people is as the one who freed them from captivity and slavery. In *imitatio Dei*, the Jewish people are therefore commanded to do the same. See also Shabbat 133b; *Sifrei* on Deut. 10:12; Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah*, Laws of Ethics 1:6 and *Guide for the Perplexed* 1:54.

42. Gen. 15:13–14. This promise was itself a reward for Abraham’s refusing to sully his rescue of Lot from captivity by accepting the booty of his military victory. God therefore promises that Abraham’s descendants will benefit from the wealth that Abraham refused to take for himself. In both of these cases, Abraham’s actions in Genesis can be seen as the precursor to God’s actions in Exodus, which the Jewish people are commanded to emulate in subsequent books of the Torah.

which to rebuild their lives.<sup>43</sup> In addition, Jewish masters are enjoined by the Torah to treat their Jewish servants as hired laborers and not to work them “oppressively” – the very word used to describe the slave labor of the Jews in Egypt.<sup>44</sup> The Exodus taught the Jewish people to be the opposite of their Egyptian oppressors.

Third, in addition to being held as slaves in Egyptian captivity, the Jews in Egypt experienced the suffering and travail of being strangers in a foreign country. Therefore, the Torah commands the Jewish people to be constantly vigilant and solicitous of the legal rights and the economic and emotional needs of the stranger and other vulnerable populations such as orphans and widows.<sup>45</sup> In fact, more ethical commandments are explicitly connected by the biblical text to the experience of slavery and the subsequent Exodus from Egypt than to any other biblical event, including the oft-quoted revelation at Sinai. Time after time, the Bible commands us to remember the events of the Exodus that expressed God’s compassion for the Jewish people, and to behave compassionately and morally as a result.

It should be noted that the command to “remember” the past in order to identify and empathize with those downtrodden in the present is not, as might be thought, directed to the individual to recall an event that he or she personally experienced. Rather it is directed at the individual and the nation as a whole, to recall the event experienced collectively by their Jewish ancestors, and motivated by that vicarious memory to act empathetically and ethically. In other words, most uses of the term “remember” in the Bible refer to remembering our ancestors’ story about which we were told, and creatively reimagining those events as our own memories. “Creative imagination” sparked by the biblical narrative is at the heart of the Jewish religious enterprise.<sup>46</sup>

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43. Ex. 21:2; Deut. 15:15.

44. Cf. Lev. 25:39–43 to Ex. 1:13–14.

45. See, for instance, Lev. 19:33–36; Deut. 10:19; 24:17–22.

46. This is why the main text of the section of *Maggid*, which was recited each year by the pilgrim bringing his first fruits to the Jerusalem Temple, starts from the imaginative first person singular – “My father was a fugitive from Aram” (making the patriarch Abraham or Jacob in effect his own father) – moves to the first person plural – “and God took us out of Egypt ... and brought us to this land” (making the Exodus and the

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It could not be otherwise for a religion that posits an invisible God, whose presence became manifest to the Jewish people millennia ago and has not since been publicly, overtly witnessed. By retelling the saga of our ancestors' experiences and journeys from generation to generation, these events and God's redemptive presence in these events come alive. Imagined and remembered in this creative fashion, they become real – so real, that as the Haggada says in *Maggid*, “In every generation, each person is to see himself as if he left Egypt.” It is this memory that is the basis for the people's identity, ethical values, and religious ritual.

### **REMEMBERING THE EXODUS YEAR-ROUND: RITUALS AND LITURGY**

The redemptive events in the Bible for which we celebrate the biblical holidays are so pivotal and foundational in the Jewish story that they shape not only our ethics but also our rituals year-round. There are three major rituals in Jewish life that emerge from the Exodus and overflow to the rest of the Jewish year: the life-cycle ceremony of *pidyon haben* (the redemption of the firstborn son), the daily donning of *tefillin* (phylacteries), and the weekly celebration of Shabbat.

Since God saved the firstborn males of the Jewish people when He slew the Egyptian firstborns on the night of the Exodus, all firstborn males – human and animal – are considered to belong to God (Ex. 13:1, 11–15). As God redeemed them, we “redeem” our firstborn male children from God, by giving God's representative, the priest, a symbolic monetary sum of five silver coins. This symbolic life-cycle event is representative of all other firsts in the natural world that the Torah mandates we offer God, from the first grains (Lev. 23:10, 17), to the first bit of dough that we knead when we bake bread (Num. 15:17–21), to the first fruits of the land that we bring from the holiday of Shavuot through

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original settlement of the land something of which he was a part as a member of the collective Jewish people), and then back to the real first person singular: And now I have brought these first fruits of the land that God has given to me.” By internalizing the story of the Jewish people's past into his own identity, the pilgrim internalized the lessons of previous generations and made them his own, year in and year out.

the holiday of Sukkot (Deut. 26:1–11). By offering these “firsts” to God, we acknowledge that all of our fecundity and growth are ultimately the result of God’s loving-kindness and beneficence.

While the redemption of the firstborn is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity, the wearing of phylacteries, *tefillin*, is a daily one. The biblical command to wind the *tefillin* around one’s arms and hands and place them upon the top of one’s forehead is traditionally directed to Jewish males on weekdays. The rituals of redeeming the firstborn and of wearing phylacteries are commanded together, immediately following the account of the slaying of the Egyptian firstborn males and the Exodus from Egypt. Both are explicitly linked to God’s redeeming the Jewish people from Egypt “with a strong hand” (Ex. 13:9, 10, 16). God took the people out of Egypt with a strong hand and therefore Jews bind the *tefillin* on the muscle of their arms and around their hand. In so doing, they symbolically bind their own energies and direct their hearts and minds to God.<sup>47</sup>

There is a knot on both the hand and head *tefillin* symbolizing that the Jewish people are inextricably knotted together with God in covenant. This covenantal relationship is reinforced by the number of times – seven – that the arm *tefillin* are wound around the forearm. The number seven symbolizes the Jewish covenant with God (reflected, for example, in the observance of the Sabbath on the seventh day of each week – Ex. 31:16–17). The arm *tefillin* are also wound tightly around the hand forming and imprinting on one’s skin the letters *shin*, *dalet*, and *yud* – to form the word “*Shaddai*,” one of God’s names.<sup>48</sup> This specific name of God is mentioned in the story of the Exodus as the name by which God revealed Himself to the patriarchs of the Jewish people.<sup>49</sup> The

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47. The black box of the *tefillin* wrapped around the arm, containing the four places in the Torah that the commandment of *tefillin* is iterated, is placed facing the heart. The placement symbolizes the keeping of the covenant with all of one’s heart (Deut. 6:4–9).

The second box of *tefillin*, worn on the head, is placed in between and above the eyes.

48. Often translated as “Almighty.” This name of God is usually correlated in the Bible with God’s blessings of fecundity and fruitfulness – one of the two blessings, along with the land, that God bestowed upon the patriarchs, and that fueled the prolific growth of the twelve tribes to become a veritable nation in Egypt.

49. Ex. 6:3; Gen. 17:1, 28:3, 35:11.



imprint of God's name on the hand each morning may be why the Torah calls the hand *tefillin* an "ot" (Deut. 6:8, 11:18), which literally means a "letter" but has come to mean more loosely, a "sign" of the people's distinct relationship with God.

In addition to tightly binding one's arms and strength to God Almighty in covenant, there is, if you will, royal symbolism to donning the head *tefillin*. The head *tefillin*, secured by a leather strap, is reminiscent of the crown worn by the Pharaoh of the Exodus, Rameses II, as evidenced by the extraordinary remains found at the Temple of Abu Simbel.<sup>50</sup> The difference, of course, is that instead of having a golden serpent at its apex, which in Egyptian lore was the symbol of the Pharaohs,<sup>51</sup> the "crown" of the head *tefillin* is a box containing four biblical chapters and adorned by the two *shin* letters on the outside – a three-stemmed *shin* on one side and a four-stemmed *shin* on the other.<sup>52</sup>

The head *tefillin*/crown symbolizes the royal status of the Jewish people as God's covenanted people: "a kingdom of priests and a holy people" (Ex. 19:6). Like the High Priest in the biblical Sanctuary, who wore a headband around his forehead the entire time that he ministered, imprinted in gold with the words "Holy to God" (Ex. 28:36), all Jewish males traditionally wear a headband during morning prayers with the first letter of God's name *Shaddai* embossed on both the left and right sides. This is why the head *tefillin* are referred to in the rabbinic tradition as embodying the verse: "For the peoples of the earth will see that God's name is placed upon you and they will be in awe of you" (Deut. 28:10).<sup>53</sup>

Despite their royal symbolism, which might lead wearers to a sense of self-aggrandizement, one might view the *tefillin* in quite the

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50. See the photo of the twin statues of Rameses II in *The Archaeological Haggada* (Adama Books, 1992), 25.

51. See Ezek. 29:3, in which Pharaoh is referred to as the "the large serpent."

52. Aside from the seven stems, whose number again symbolizes the Jewish covenant with God, the two *shin* letters are reminiscent of the male and female cherubs with their wings spread that sat above the Holy Ark, of which the *tefillin* are supposed to remind us, I believe, in miniature. The two *shin* letters are so designed that the three-stemmed *shin* and the four-stemmed *shin* could embrace and intertwine as could the male and female cherubs, symbolizing God and the Jewish people, above the Ark in the Holy of Holies (see Yoma 54a).

53. Berakhot 6a on the verse from Deut. 28:10.

opposite way, as a compensatory mechanism, which God graciously gave the Jewish people to build up their self-esteem. Hundreds of years as slaves under the brutal oppression of Pharaoh left the Jewish people with a deeply embedded negative self-image. The recurring anxiety and frequent whining of the generation that left Egypt give ample testimony to their fragile self-concept. Crowning them through the wearing of *tefillin* was designed to help redress that downtrodden sense of self and make all Jews feel as if they came from a proud lineage and were now part of the royal household of the King of kings.

Although thousands of years have passed since the Exodus from Egypt, the persecutions of the Jewish people in every generation<sup>54</sup> and the absence of God's overt and palpable presence through most of Jewish history have made it continuously challenging for the Jewish people to remain steadfast in their identity and in their positive sense of themselves as God's beloved people. The *tefillin* today, no less than three thousand years ago, still serve their original function of binding each individual Jew to God and giving each person a positive self-concept of being cherished by God.

The third major ritual associated with the Exodus that overflows into the whole year is the weekly observance and celebration of Shabbat, which also recalls our enslavement and redemption from Egypt. Like the *tefillin* and the mark of circumcision,<sup>55</sup> Shabbat in the Bible is called an "*ot*," a symbol of the covenant between God and the Jewish people. In the second iteration of the Ten Commandments, the Jews are bidden to give their servants rest on Shabbat because of their "memory" of having been slaves in Egypt and then freed by God from bondage (Deut. 5:14–15). As we will see in chapter 7, Shabbat picks up this idea of remembering our redemption from slavery and makes it one of the two pillars on which we base that day of rest and relationship, every week of the year.

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54. The Haggada tells us in *Maggid*, as we raise the toast to God: "In every generation, there are those who have risen up against us to annihilate us. But The Holy One, Blessed Be He, has saved us from their hands."

55. Although the circumcision ceremony and commandment goes back to Abraham (Gen. 17:9–14), the Torah attaches it to the story of the Exodus by making it a prerequisite for eating the Paschal sacrifice (Ex. 12:43–50).

Liturgically, we therefore recall the Exodus in the recitation of Kiddush on Friday nights as part of our observance of Shabbat. As the Torah commands,<sup>56</sup> the Exodus is also remembered every single day through the recitation of the closest thing Judaism has to a creed – the *Shema* – recited daily both in the mornings and evenings.<sup>57</sup> We recall the Exodus in the closing verse of the third and final section of the *Shema*, making it the final thought with which we leave its recitation, thereby highlighting its importance.<sup>58</sup>

“Front-loading” the memory of the Exodus through the Kiddush recited weekly at the beginning of the first Shabbat meal and “back-loading” it as the concluding verse of the *Shema* recited twice daily is the way we assign the Exodus its special place in Jewish memory and liturgy.

**THE SEVENTH PASSOVER DAY:  
REMEMBERING THE SPLITTING OF THE SEA**

Although the splitting of the sea was recalled at the Seder on the first night of Passover, the Torah gave the event its own sacred day of commemoration. Here’s why. After the Jews left Egypt, they journeyed into the desert and the ancient Egyptians pursued them. The Egyptian intent was either to reenslave them or to annihilate them. Seven days later, as recorded in chapters 14 and 15 of Exodus, as the Egyptian army was about to overtake the defenseless Jewish masses, God split the Sea of Reeds, saved the Jewish people, and drowned the Egyptian legions before their very eyes. In so doing, God’s redemptive presence again became patently manifest to the entire Jewish people. In other words, the second revelation of the Divine Presence before the people took place at the sea:

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56. “In order that you shall remember the day that you left Egypt all the days of your life” (Deut. 16:3).

57. Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah*, Laws of Reciting the *Shema* 1:1.

58. *Ibid.*, 1:3. The relevant passage recited is: “I am the EverPresent, your God, who took you out of the land of Egypt to be your God, I am the EverPresent, your God” (Num. 15:41). The question of whether this section of the *Shema* should be recited at night is the subject of the discussion in the Haggada near the beginning of *Maggid* between R. Elazar b. Azaria and the rabbinic sages.

Thus the EverPresent God saved Israel that day from the hand of the Egyptians; and Israel saw the Egyptians dead upon the seashore. And Israel saw the great hand that the EverPresent God wrought against Egypt and the people were awed by the EverPresent God and believed in the EverPresent God and in His servant Moses. (Ex. 14:30–31)

On that day, in an emotional response to their deliverance, Moses and the Jewish people sang the Song of the Sea. Although the Bible does not specify that the splitting of the sea took place on the seventh day following the Exodus, it brilliantly suggests it with the parallel language and plot line to the story of Israel/Jacob, the Jewish people's patriarchal ancestor and archetype, fleeing from servitude to Laban and being rescued by God. There (Gen. 31), the Bible tells us that Laban overtook Jacob and his camp on the **seventh** day following his flight. The Jewish tradition therefore concludes that the Egyptians overtook the Israelites – compelling God to save them by splitting the sea – on the seventh day after the Jews left Egypt.

That miraculous, redemptive event at the sea, witnessed by all the people, is why the seventh day of Passover is a sacred holiday and why, liturgically, the Song of the Sea is included in the liturgy for the day as part of the Torah portion read in synagogue. It is also part of the reason why, throughout Passover, during the morning prayers, we sing parts of Hallel, which were first sung, according to the rabbis, after the splitting of the sea.<sup>59</sup> Recollecting and celebrating the rescue at the sea on the seventh day of Passover fulfills Moses' charge to the Jewish people in the Book of Deuteronomy:

You shall surely remember what the EverPresent, your God, did to Pharaoh and all the Egyptians: the wondrous acts that you saw with your own eyes, the signs and the miracles, the mighty hand, and the outstretched arm by which the EverPresent, your God, liberated you. Thus will the EverPresent God do to all the peoples you now fear. (Deut. 7:18–19)

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59. Pesahim 117a. See also the Hallel section of the Seder, above.

As pointed out earlier, the “mighty hand and outstretched arm” is a reference to the miracles at the sea.<sup>60</sup> If the purpose of the Exodus from Egypt was to free the Jewish people from slavery, the purpose for the splitting of the sea was to free them from fear and anxiety, both of the Egyptian armies and the Canaanite armies, whom they anticipated soon facing.<sup>61</sup> Thus, the revelation of God’s presence to the Jewish people at the sea was certainly worthy of being remembered and retold for future generations on its own special day, the seventh day of Passover.

To mark the conclusion of this final day of Passover, the custom of holding a *seuda shel Mashiah*, a festive meal anticipating the arrival of the Messiah, which originated in hasidic circles in the nineteenth century, has gained wider currency in recent years among both traditional and non-traditional Jews. The basis for the custom is that the redemption of the Jewish people from Egypt and at the Sea of Reeds, for which we celebrate Passover, presages the final redemption of the Jewish people in the Messianic Age. This festive concluding meal of Passover which bookends the Seder meal of the holiday’s opening night, is often celebrated communally and incorporates many of the Seder’s elements, including singing songs, telling stories of redemption, eating matza, and drinking (four cups of!) wine. It has become a meaningful way for the community to bid farewell to this foundational holiday, which celebrates the memory of, and hope for, redemption.

### **INTERNALIZING GOD’S REVELATION AT THE SEA**

The miraculous events at the sea found ethical expression in the Torah’s mandate that the Jewish people imitate God – who rescued them from being reenslaved by their former Egyptian taskmasters – by offering safe sanctuary to runaway slaves in both their individual homes and in their communities (Deut. 23:16–17). This law ran against the nearly universal rule in the ancient Near East under which escaped slaves had to be returned to their masters, usually under penalty of death, and bounty

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60. See above, my explanation for the third cup, and *Leading the Passover Journey*, 136–137, for why God’s outstretched arm refers to the splitting of the sea.

61. Therefore, part of the song is devoted to the fear instilled in the Canaanites because of the miracles of the sea. Ex. 15:14–17.

hunters were rewarded for these slaves' return.<sup>62</sup> Again, we see here the power of *imitatio Dei* in the Bible: God came to the defense of fleeing slaves and expected the same of the people created in God's image, who carried God's name into the world. Indeed today, the Jewish state provides asylum to individual refugees who flee to Israel out of genuine danger to life and limb, while Diaspora Jewry, through their financial contributions, helps support the costs of resettlement for these refugees within Israel or in another safe country.

The events at the sea were so powerful that they also dramatically impacted Jewish liturgy for all time. The Song of the Sea and the verses describing the events leading up to it are recited not only on the seventh day of Passover but every single day in the morning prayers as part of the Verses of Song (*Pesukei DeZimra*) which precede the call to prayer (*Barekhu*). The belief in a God who is capable of rescue and redemption, and to whom we offer our silent devotional prayer each day, is rooted in the retelling of the rescue at the sea. That retelling is therefore also alluded to daily in both the morning and evening blessings of the *Shema* which precede the *Amida* (*Shemoneh Esreh*) and conclude with "Blessed are You God, the Redeemer of Israel."<sup>63</sup> Belief in God's redemptive power as evidenced by the events at the sea is a *sine qua non* for praying for God's deliverance and redemption today.

Finally, existentially, commemorating the seventh duty of Passover as sacred because of the Jewish people's rescue at the sea embodies the challenge for Jews and for all human beings to live "free from fear." Human beings who are constantly anxious about their ability to survive are, in a sense, enslaved. To be truly free of that pervasive anxiety that is part and parcel of the human condition, one needs some sort of deep, internal assurance that one's basic survival needs will be met – that in

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62. See Laws of Hammurabi §§16–20; Hittite Laws §§22–24; and Marc Brettler and Adele Berlin, eds., *The Jewish Study Bible* (Oxford University Press, 2004), 419. See also the impassioned argument of Rabbi Shai Held in his online commentary on *Parashat Ki Tetzeh* (2014), "Why Runaway Slaves Are Like God": <http://myemail.constantcontact.com/Parashat-Ki-Teitzei---Rabbi-Shai-Held.html?soid=1101789466973&aid=eBLt85D6x5M>.

63. For this reason, in Jewish tradition there may not be an interruption between the recitation of this blessing and the commencement of the *Amida*.

## *Rendezvous with God*

some way God, who our tradition teaches us is EverPresent, will provide. By rescuing our ancestors from the mighty legions of Egypt, God provided testimony to that truth.

After several weeks in the desert, however, a new challenge emerged: running out of food and potential starvation. Would the people continue to trust in God's ability to provide for an entire nation in the midst of a barren wilderness? This led to the next revelation of God's presence to the people in the story of the manna, the focus of chapter 2.