

Redemption, Then and Now



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PESAḤ HAGGADA

WITH ESSAYS AND COMMENTARY

BY

RABBI BENJAMIN BLECH

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Pesah Haggada with Essays and Commentary by Rabbi Benjamin Blech

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Note to the Reader

For the full Haggada text, with translation and commentary, turn to the other end of this volume.

Preface

The Haggada is overwhelmingly the most printed book in the history of Jewish book publishing. And why, you may ask, is this book different from any of the other countless and extremely important holy works in our tradition? Many people have tried to identify the answer. Let me add mine – as well as the reason why, after more than half a century as a congregational rabbi and rebbe, teacher of thousands of students at Yeshiva University, I chose to add yet another volume to the hundreds available for your Passover table.

My love affair with the Haggada began when I was a child of three. What a remarkable feeling to suddenly become the center of attention at a religious ceremony! As the youngest of those present, I was prepared to be the star of the evening. I was told that without my role, asking four questions, nothing could proceed. My father, a rabbi, needed me! My family and all those seated round the table rejoiced at my participation because, as I later came to understand, through me they felt secure in the survival of our people. Past merged with future. Ancient history was transformed into divinely promised destiny. Our home became the synagogue. Our family and friends became contemporary versions of the twelve tribes joined by kinship, common faith, and mutual hopes and dreams.

And so I absorbed some of Judaism's most important lessons:

- Memory is the gift of the Jews to the world.
- Family is the glue for our national identity.
- Miracles are God's constant reminders of His ongoing concern and involvement.
- Gratitude makes sense of our past and creates a vision for tomorrow.
- Asking questions is key to discovering life's answers.
- And children are our most valuable national treasures – treasures who need to be inspired, to be educated, and perhaps most of all, to be loved.

On Passover night the Jewish nation was born. How fitting that in every generation, Passover and its rituals, the Seder and the Haggada, represent the ideal means to ensure continued rebirth. I became a man at my bar mitzva at the age of thirteen. I became a Jew at my first Seder at the age of three. And to this day the Seder reaffirms my commitment, my joy at being a Jew, and my ongoing gratefulness for Judaism's wisdom and teachings, which not only ennoble but also sanctify my life.

God has blessed me over the years, as a rabbi, to share with many people innovative insights into the Passover holiday as well as the Haggada text. For the longest time, I was urged to make these ideas accessible to a wider audience. The task took over a decade. What is particularly unique about the approach I have taken is the link between the story of old and the miracles of our time, between the promises of the prophets and sages of old, and the incredible fulfillment of contemporary events. The result, I hope, will engender much conversation, discussion, and exchange of ideas, as well as inspiration.

In the spirit of Passover, I dedicate this book to my family – to my wife, my children, my grandchildren, and my great-grandchildren, as well as those who will eventually follow. May they remain true to our faith and continue to celebrate our miraculous survival, as well as our ultimate messianic Redemption.

The Five Most Important Things About Passover

W

hat is it about the Jews that makes us so special? Scholars have long wondered why Jews who number less than one-quarter of 1 percent of the world – as Milton Himmelfarb memorably put it, “The total population of the Jewish people is less than a statistical error in the annual birth rate of the Chinese people” – have had such a profound influence on almost every field of human endeavor.

What accounts for the remarkable fact that more than any other minority, ethnic, or cultural group, Jews have been recipients of the Nobel Prize, with almost one-fifth of all Nobel laureates being Jewish? How do we explain our success, our disproportionate contributions to civilization, and even our survival? Perhaps it all goes back to the very beginning of the birth of our people and the Passover holiday.

To my mind, in the context of this beautiful festival we imbibed five major concepts that became our mantras for how to lead successful and productive lives. They are the five most important things to know about Passover – and then to incorporate into every day of the rest of the year. Because we have absorbed them into our national psyche for the thousands of years since the Exodus, we have been privileged to fulfill in great measure our prophetically mandated role to become a

“light to the nations.” They are our greatest contributions to the world. They are the Passover ideas that have shaped us from the time we left Egypt to the present day. They can be summarized in five words. They are memory, optimism, faith, family, and responsibility.

THE IMPORTANCE OF MEMORY

The Irish Catholic writer Thomas Cahill was so overwhelmed by how the Jewish people literally transformed the world that he authored what proved to become an international bestseller, *The Gifts of the Jews*. One of the major gifts he credits to Jewish genius is the invention of the idea of history. “Remember that you were strangers in the land of Egypt.” “Remember that the Lord took you out of the bondage of slavery.” “Remember” is a biblical mandate that had never seemed important to anyone else before the Jewish people came on the scene. It was the Passover story that initiated a commitment to memory.

Henry Ford was famous for his belief that “history is bunk.” The Ford Motor Company is also famous for producing the Edsel. And both were probably equally stupid blunders. History is the only way we can learn from the past. History allows us to grow by standing on the shoulders of giants. Make a mistake once, and you are human. Never learn from what happened before, and you are brainless. That is why it is so important to heed the famous words of George Santayana that “those who do not learn from the past are condemned to repeat it.”

We know how horrible it can be to live without a personal memory of preceding events. For an individual, we have a name for it that fills us with terror: Alzheimer’s. It is a disease we fear perhaps even more than death because it leaves us living corpses. Strangely enough, we do not have a similar word for the condition that describes ignorance of our collective past. Knowing what came before is almost as important in a historic sense as it is in a personal one. Only by being aware of our past as a people can our lives become filled with purpose and meaning. Memory links our past to our future. It turns history into destiny. Learning to treasure it was the first step in our climb up the ladder of greatness.

THE IMPORTANCE OF OPTIMISM

To study the Passover story in depth is to recognize that the most difficult task Moses had to perform was not to get the Jews out of Egypt, but to get Egypt out of the Jews. They had become so habituated to their status as slaves, they lost all hope that they could ever improve their lot. Without hope they would have been lost.

The true miracle of Passover and its relevance for the ages is the message that no difficulty is insurmountable. A tyrant like Pharaoh could be overthrown. A nation as powerful as Egypt could be defeated. Slaves could become free men. The oppressed could break the shackles of their captivity. Anything is possible – if only we dare to dream the impossible dream.

In the story of America's Great Seal, a particularly relevant chapter is the imagery suggested by Benjamin Franklin in August 1776. He chose the dramatic scene described in Exodus, where people confronted a tyrant in order to gain their freedom:

Pharaoh sitting in an open Chariot, a Crown on his head and a Sword in his hand, passing through the divided Waters of the Red Sea in Pursuit of the Israelites: Rays from a Pillar of Fire in the Cloud, expressive of the Divine Presence and Command, beaming on Moses who stands on the shore and extending his hand over the Sea causes it to overwhelm Pharaoh.

The motto he suggested, words based on the Passover story, inspired George Washington and the founding fathers of the American colonies to rebel against their British oppressors: "Rebellion to Tyrants is Obedience to God."

It was the biblical record of the Exodus that enabled the spirit of optimism to prevail for the followers of Martin Luther King in their quest for equal rights, because they were stirred by the vision of Moses leading his people to the Promised Land. It was the hope engendered by recalling how God redeemed our ancestors that allowed Jews even when incarcerated in Auschwitz to furtively celebrate the Festival of Freedom and believe in the possibility of their own liberation.

The founders of modern-day Israel said they were guided by the philosophy that “the very difficult, we do right away, and the impossible takes just a little bit longer.” That optimistic spirit, based on our own miraculous history, is the second great gift we have given to mankind and defines our identity.

THE IMPORTANCE OF FAITH

A pessimist, it has been said, is someone who has no invisible means of support. Jewish optimism is rooted in a contrary notion, a firmly held belief that we are blessed with support from above by a caring God. And that faith in a personal God gives us faith in ourselves, in our future, and in our ability to help change the world. The God of Sinai did not say, “I am the Lord your God who created the heavens and the earth.” Instead, He announced, “I am the Lord your God who took you out of the land of Egypt, the house of bondage” (Ex. 20:2; Deut. 5:6). The God of Creation could theoretically have forsaken the world once He completed His task. The God of the Exodus made clear He chooses to be constantly involved in our history and has a commitment to our survival.

Thomas Cahill credits the Jews not only for monotheism but for this additional groundbreaking idea of a divine being with whom we share a personal relationship. This, he points out, is key to Western civilization’s concept of personal accountability, conscience, and culpability for ourselves and the rest of the world. For the God of the Passover story, history is not happenstance. It follows a divine master plan. It has a predestined order. The word “order” in Hebrew is *sefer* – and that is why the major ritual of Passover is identified by that name. Coincidence is not a Jewish concept. Coincidence is just God’s way of choosing to remain anonymous. Faith gives us the certainty that whatever our present-day problems, history moves in the direction of the final messianic Redemption. That is what has always motivated us to believe in progress and to participate in *tikkun olam*, efforts to improve the world.

THE IMPORTANCE OF FAMILY

Passover taught us yet another major truth: the way to perfect the world is to begin with our own families. God built His nation by commanding not a collective gathering of hundreds of thousands in a public square

but by asking Jews to turn their homes into places of family worship at a Seder devoted primarily to answering the questions of children. It seems all too obvious. Children are our future. They are the ones who most require our attention. The home is where we first form our identities and discover our values.

More even than in the synagogue, it is in our homes that we sow the seeds of the future and ensure our continuity. No wonder then that commentators point out the very first letter of the Torah is a *beit*, the letter whose meaning is house. All of the Torah follows only after we understand the primacy of family. The world may mock Jewish parents for their overprotectiveness and their child-centered way of life – but they are the ones chiefly responsible for the extraordinary achievements of their progeny. At the Seder table, the children are encouraged to be the stars, and their questions are treated with respect. And that is the first step to developing Jewish genius.

THE IMPORTANCE OF RESPONSIBILITY

One serious question begs to be asked as we celebrate our divine deliverance from the slavery of Egypt. We thank God for getting us out, but why did God allow us to become victims of such terrible mistreatment in the first place? A remarkable answer becomes evident in numerous Torah texts. We were slaves in Egypt – and so we have to have empathy for the downtrodden in every generation. We were slaves in Egypt – and so we have to be concerned with the rights of the strangers, the homeless, and the impoverished. We experienced oppression – and so we must understand more than anyone else the pain of the oppressed. The tragedy of our encounter with injustice was in no small measure meant to prepare us to serve throughout all future generations as spokesmen for those with whose pain we can personally identify. The purpose of our suffering was to turn us into a people committed to righting the wrongs of the world, to becoming partners with God in making the world worthy of final Redemption.

We begin the Seder by inviting the hungry and the homeless to join with us. We conclude the Seder by opening the door for Elijah. It is our acceptance of responsibility to others that is the key to hastening the arrival of the Messiah. From earliest childhood, every Jew identifies

with these five powerful ideas that are at the heart of Passover and its message. And precisely because memory, optimism, faith, family, and responsibility have become such vital characteristics of our people, we have been able to achieve far beyond what anyone might have considered possible.