



YESHIVA UNIVERSITY

Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks-Herenstein Center
for Values and Leadership

Passover, Redemption and Religious Freedom

A HAGGADAH SUPPLEMENT

Quotes and Questions for Your Seder Table

Every other nation known to humankind has been united because its members lived in the same place, spoke the same language, were part of the same culture. Jews alone, dispersed across continents, speaking different languages and participating in different cultures, have been bound together by a narrative, the Pesach narrative, which they tell in the same way on the same night. More than the Haggadah is the story of a people, Jews are the people of a story. *The Story of Stories, The Jonathan Sacks Haggadah*, p.2

When do you feel most connected to global Jewry?

What have you done recently to create a just & compassionate society?

The Exodus is the inexhaustible source of inspiration to all those who long for freedom. It taught that right was sovereign over might; that freedom and justice must belong to all, not some; that, under God, all human beings are equal; and that over all earthly powers is the supreme power, the King of Kings, who hears the cry of the oppressed and who intervenes in history to liberate slaves. *The Chief Rabbi's Haggadah (Essays)*, p.65

The Mosaic books refer time and again to the Exodus and the imperative of memory: "You shall remember that you were slaves in Egypt." Yet never is this invoked as a reason for hatred, retaliation, or revenge. Always it appears as part of the logic of the just and compassionate society the Israelites are commanded to create: the alternative order, the antithesis of Egypt. *Covenant and Conversation: Deuteronomy*, p.202–203

Share a memory that made you feel the power of Jewish peoplehood.

How might politics of power explain world narratives today?

The Exodus narrative is not a simple story of good versus evil. It is a critique of the politics of power, empires, hierarchical societies and the division of populations into free human beings and slaves. *Covenant and Conversation: Exodus*, p.4

Sitting next to the wise child, the rebel is not fated to remain a rebel. Sitting next to the rebel, the wise child may share his wisdom rather than keep it to himself. The one who cannot ask will, in time, learn how. The simple child will learn complexity. The wise child will learn simplicity. Each draws strength from the others, as we all draw strength from belonging to a people. *Commentary on The Four Children, The Jonathan Sacks Haggadah*, p.18

When have you drawn strength or learned a valuable lesson from someone very different than you?

JOIN THIS CONVERSATION AT YOUR SEDER TABLE



**Biblical
Text:**
Shemot
14:21–23

And Moshe stretched out his hand over the sea; and God caused the sea to go back by a strong east wind all the night, and made the sea dry land, and the waters were divided. And Bnei Israel went into the midst of the sea upon the dry ground; and the waters were a wall unto them on their right, and on their left. And the Egyptians pursued, and went in after them into the midst of the sea...

ויט משה את־ידו עליהם וילך ה' את־הים ברוח
קדים עזה כלה־לילה וישם את־הים לתרבה ויבקעו
המים: ויבאו בני־ישראל בתוך הים ביבשה והמים
להם חומה מימין ומשמאלם: ויך־דפו מצרים ויבאו
אחריהם כל סוס פרעה רכבו ופרשיו אֶל־תוך הים:

What do you see in the artwork? How do you interpret the nature of redemption depicted in Tissot's work?

**R. Ibn Ezra, Commentary on
Shemot 14:16**

אמר השם למשה הרם את מסך
ובקע את הים טרם שיסעו. כי לא
אמר לו שיכה הים רק שיטה ידו
על הים במטה. כדרך ויט משה את
מטהו על השמים. וידענו כי המטה
לא בקע הים רק מרגע נטות משה ידו
על הים ויליך ה' את הים ברוח קדים
עזה או יבקעו המים. כי כן כתוב:

*God told Moses to lift up
his rod and divide the sea
before the children of Israel
went forward. The Lord did
not tell Moses to strike the
sea. He told him to stretch
out his hand toward the sea
in the manner of And Moses
stretched forth his rod toward
heaven (Ex. 9:23). We know
that the rod did not divide the
sea but that from the moment
that Moses stretched his hand
toward the sea God caused
the sea to go back by a strong
east wind and the waters then
split. For it is so written.*

**R. Jonathan Sacks,
"The Divided Sea:
Natural or Supernatural?,"
Covenant and
Conversation, Exodus,
p.104–106**

The emphasis here is on the supernatural dimension of what happened. Water, which normally flows, stood upright. The sea parted to expose dry land. The laws of nature were suspended. Something happened for which there can be no scientific explanation. However, if we listen carefully, we can also hear a different note. Here there is not a sudden change in the behavior of water, with no apparent cause. God brings a wind that, in the course of several hours, drives the waters back... Viewed from this perspective, the events that took place could be described as follows: The Israelites had arrived at the Reed Sea at a point at which it was shallow. Possibly there was a ridge in the sea bed, normally covered by water, but occasionally—when, for example, a fierce east wind blows—exposed... We have here two ways of seeing the same events: one natural, the other supernatural. The supernatural explanation—that the waters stood upright—is immensely powerful, and so it entered Jewish memory. But the natural explanation is no less compelling.

**R. Joseph Soloveitchik,
Emergence of Ethical
Man, p.187–188**

The word 'miracle' in Hebrew does not possess the connotation of the supernatural. It has never been placed on the transcendental level. "Miracle" [Heb., *peleh, nes*] describes only an outstanding event which causes amazement... As we read the story of the Exodus from Egypt, we are impressed by the distinct tendency of the Bible to relate the events in natural terms. The frogs came out of the river when the Nile rose; the wind brought the locusts and split the sea... The Bible never emphasizes the unnaturalness of the events; only its intensity and force are emphasized... The miracle does not destroy the objective scientific nexus in itself, it only combines natural dynamics and historical purposefulness. Had the plague of the firstborn, for instance, occurred a year before or after the Exodus, it would not have been termed "with a strong hand" (*be-yad hazakah*)... On the night of Passover He appeared as the God of the cosmos acting along historical patterns... Miracle is simply a natural event which causes a historical metamorphosis. Whenever history is transfigured under the impact of [natural] cosmic dynamics, we encounter a miracle.

Your Observation Here

French painter, James Jacques Joseph Tissot, 1836-1902, experienced a profound religious experience and became increasingly devout later in life. He began a series of religious paintings of the Christian Bible in 1885. After its acclaimed reception, he began to illustrate the Hebrew Bible and traveled to Palestine in 1896 to draw inspiration from landscapes where biblical stories were set. *The Waters are Divided*, one of his final paintings, captures the supreme miracle in the Exodus, the splitting of the sea.



James Tissot, “*The Waters are Divided*” (1902), The Jewish Museum, NYC

What do you perceive is going on in the minds of those in Tissot’s painting?

Dr. Nehama Leibowitz, “Lest the People Change their Mind,” *Studies in Shemot*, p.240–41

We are able to watch, for the first time, the reactions of the children of Israel suddenly redeemed from two centuries of persecution and slavery. What do we see? – timidity, skepticism, twisted thinking-- the residuum of hundreds of years of bondage and exile. But beside the pettiness and grumbling we also encounter greatness, intense faith and trust in God. Our Sages considered that their very act of leaving Egypt and following Moses reflected great credit on them... At first sight, the attitude adopted by our Sages seems rather puzzling. After all, did it really redound so much to Israel's credit that they were willing to be redeemed from persecution and slavery, from having their children cast into the river and led into a land flowing with milk and honey? Yet R. Eliezer was right. The children of Israel did, indeed, display great strength of character, in being able to throw off the effects of centuries of slavery, and arise, in their hundreds of thousands in response to the tidings of redemption.

Dr. Avivah Gottlieb Zornberg, “Songline Through the Wilderness,” *The Particulars of Rapture*, p.214–218

Perhaps the emphasis on silence as the people enter the Red Sea is a necessary part of the perception of the miracle. Listening to the sounds of the Israelite camp yields first prayers, then rebellious taunts, Moses' perhaps ambivalent tonalities, silence – and song. The predictable emotions of the song would presumably be triumph, gratitude, faith. And yet, as we have noticed, the people's response to the miracle centers on fear: “When Israel saw the great Hand which God had wielded against the Egyptians, they feared God...” The nephew of the Netziv, R. Barukh ha-Levi Epstein [argues] the Talmud is urging praise and thanksgiving while one is in the midst of the narrative. Before the tension is resolved, before one has emerged from the undetermined, ominous passage—that is the time for gratitude and song. The implication of this reading is that the people sang while they were crossing, not after emerging, as most readers assume... The reality that the Song comes to express is fraught with tension: massacre, overwhelming physical suffering, on the one hand, and the joy of God's salvation on the other.

Your Comment Here

בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה ה' אֱ-לֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם שֶׁלֹּא
חָסַר בְּעוֹלָמוֹ כְּלוּם וּבָרָא בּוֹ בְּרִיּוֹת טוֹבוֹת
וְאֵילָנוֹת טוֹבוֹת לְהֵנֹת בָּהֶם בְּנֵי אָדָם.

**Blessed are You, Lord our God,
King of the universe, Who has
withheld nothing from His world,
but has created in it beautiful
creatures and trees for human
beings to enjoy.**

Pesach is called the holiday of spring. The bracha for trees is recited once a year during the month of Nisan, when we thank God for the earth's renewal. R. Samson Raphael Hirsch reminds us of our personal renewal, "When spring comes and nature bestirs itself outside our doors, there is a stirring in us too, a stirring among us, a stirring around us. Then the springtime comes to us, then our homes and dwellings come to life."

Dr. Erica Brown, *Seder Talk: The Conversational Haggada*, vii

*A different wind is blowing. Skies grow tall,
Bright distances unfold in limpid space.
Spring treads the hills, and in the village square,
The earth at dawn exhales a misty warmth,
And budding shoots appear upon wet trees.
A different wind is blowing through the world.
Chaim Nachman Bialik, "Footsteps of Spring,"
(Trans. Ruth Nevo)*



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