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This book would never have been written were it not for the New Israel Fund’s interest in publishing a series of eight Haggadah supplements I wrote, which represent a significant portion of the present volume.

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Memories of Passover Seders in my grandparents’ Manhattan apartment are among the most treasured of my childhood—the smells, tastes, and songs; the faces of friends seen only at Seders year after year; and the dramatic storybook illustrations of the vintage 1952 Haggadah we used, a copy of which sits open to the left of my computer screen as I write this now. The cover is unforgettable: a young wide-eyed boy with a kindly, white-bearded man—who may as well be Moses—gazing together toward the heavens over an open book. But for a child raised in the suburbs, spending two consecutive nights in a building with an elevator also made those nights different from all others.

In March of 1988 I traveled to Israel with Jonathan Jacoby, then executive director of the New Israel Fund, to investigate the implications of the first intifada. Following that disturbing visit, I composed a short reading for our family Seder. Each subsequent year I wrote something else. My family liked these and in 1994 the New Israel Fund, with which I had long been involved, published the first of what would become a series of eight Haggadah supplements that comprise about one-third of this book.

I’m neither a rabbi nor formally trained in any area of Jewish studies, so I approach this undertaking with a combination of excitement, trepidation, and chutzpah. My formal training was in clinical psychology, but I’ve pursued Jewish
learning in various formats over the years and have picked up things along the way. Passover has been on my mind for a long time. The holiday fascinates me. I’ve come to love the Haggadah for itself and because it provides such a perfect doorway into virtually every aspect of Jewish thought and experience. If this book transmits some of that love and fascination to you and your Seder participants, it will have succeeded.
THE GOAL OF THE SEDER AND OF THIS BOOK

For almost two thousand years, Jews have gathered with family and friends to celebrate the festival of Passover with a Seder-like meal featuring matzah, wine, and questions about the story of the Exodus from Egypt. Today we conduct Passover Seders in almost every country on earth and in scores of different languages. Among the common ingredients at all these Seders is a book recounting the Exodus saga. That book, the Passover Haggadah (which means “the telling”), might be “traditional,” “modern,” Ashkenazic, Sephardic, Yemenite, Conservative, Orthodox, Reconstructionist, Reform, Post-Denominational, Hasidic, Kabbalistic, New Age, Feminist, Gay, Environmental, Vegetarian, Civil Libertarian, and so on.

But behind the symbols, rituals, and countless Haggadot lies one aim: to help us draw inspiration from the ancient tale of our ancestors’ liberation from Egypt as we wage our own struggles against physical and spiritual oppression.

The Haggadah itself expresses this goal in a single sentence.

In every generation, each individual should feel as though he or she had gone out of Egypt.

This book will help you create that feeling at your Seder.
The sages who composed the oldest parts of the Haggadah realized that breathing life and meaning into Judaism’s central story required more than annually rereading the eternally fixed biblical account of the Exodus, regularly reciting liturgical evocations of the story, and diligently reading the Haggadah.

In fact, the sages conceived of a Seder with a radically different approach. The Mishnah, a law code or teaching manual compiled around 200 C.E., contains the first outline for a Seder-like ritual. The relevant section (Pesachim, chapter 10) includes just 435 Hebrew words, and a chunk of that involves differences among sages over details. Some of the oldest manuscripts of that chapter of the Mishnah are even shorter.

Sometimes the Mishnah gives us the precise words for the Seder, but more importantly it points to a general method. After illustrating the kinds of questions the Mishnah hopes children will be prompted to ask about the evening’s unusual proceedings, it adds, “And according to the understanding of the son his father teaches him. He begins with disgrace and ends with glory; and he expounds from My father was a wandering Aramean... (Deut. 26:5) until he finishes the whole section.”

The Mishnah’s instructions reflect two central principles. First, telling the story of the Exodus must be geared to the level of understanding of the younger generation—and I would broaden that to include the interests of adult participants as well. Remember, the Haggadah alludes to the Seder of five illustrious sages who discuss the Exodus all through the night. Children should participate in the Seder, but it’s also important for them to observe their parents and other adults seriously engaging the issues the story raises.

Second, the story is not to be read but to be told through the process of expounding, drasha—literally “drawing out meaning”—or making midrash on a passage in the Book of Deuteronomy. The alternative of simply reciting particular verses from the Book of Exodus highlights the uniqueness of the Mishnah’s approach. The story is to be made meaningful to those gathered around the table through an interactive, creative process. The Mishnah implies that no two Seders should be the same.

Rather than “slavishly” reading a prescribed text, the Mishnah encourages us to take liberties, using its example as a core and a guide. Back in the 1960s, Marshall McLuhan, the great critic of culture and the media, famously observed
that “the medium is the message.” In the liberty with which we elaborate on the Exodus, we taste freedom and celebrate it. We experience ourselves as free, independent creators, the very antithesis of our ancestors mired in the mind-numbing pits of slavery. In so doing, we renew the divine sparks within, which mark us each as images of God, the paradigmatic free creator.

Over the centuries, the Seder continued to evolve, but in an ironic direction. The passion for creative elaboration persisted; the Haggadah grew and grew. The text of the traditional Ashkenazic Haggadah now runs more than 5,500 Hebrew words, and that’s without a single word of commentary.

Today’s “traditional” Haggadah preserves elaborations and additions that evolved over more than a thousand years.

You can read that “everyone who elaborates on the story of the Exodus deserves praise.”

You can read about Rabbis who did just that as they discussed the Exodus all through the night.

You can read a complete midrashic exposition on My father was a wandering Aramean mostly composed in the late third century.

You can read how Rabbi Akiva managed to cleverly recalculate the number of plagues from 10 to 50 in Egypt and 250 at the Red Sea.

You can read about how others freely and creatively played with the Exodus story and made it come alive for them. For them, but not necessarily for us!

For most of us, simply reading the Haggadah no longer helps us feel as if we had been redeemed from Egypt. Instead, the experience of reading more than few pages of the Haggadah often makes us feel as if we are oppressed, saddled with an ancient, confusing text that never quite tells the story we expect to hear. Further complicating the matter, the Haggadah lauds a God who saved the Israelites but whose strong hand and outstretched arm seems so very distant from the world as many of us experience it.

Don’t get me wrong. I love the Haggadah. But I probably wouldn’t if I opened it just for Seders once or twice a year.

The positive feedback I’ve received from people who have used the texts, tales, and activities that I’ve put together in Haggadah supplements over the past ten years have convinced me that the Haggadah can serve as the basis for great Seders that can give you a taste of leaving Egypt.
At its core, the Passover Seder embodies a dialogue that began millennia ago and continues to this very day. The dialogue reflects the encounter between the Jewish people and our founding story, sacred texts, evolving ritual practice, changing political circumstances, and a shifting cultural milieu. You can get a hint of that dialogue if you consider three things: the Seder developed as a response to the destruction of the Second Temple in 70 C.E.; it found much of its form in the Greek symposium; and it evolved over an extended period when Jews were exiled from the land of Israel, sometimes living under circumstances in which oppression was very real.

For the Haggadah, reliving the Exodus is not about remembering an event long ago, but about participating in a conversation that aims to shore up our hope and strength for the struggle to make tomorrow brighter than today.

With some background, virtually every passage in the Haggadah provides a springboard for activities and discussions that can help you bring that conversation to life.
HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

Unless you have a special interest in the Haggadah or the Exodus story, this is probably not a book you’ll want to read from beginning to end. I would suggest looking through it three or four weeks before Passover. Just after Purim would be a good time. Choose one or maybe two chapters to read leisurely. That will help you get in the Passover spirit and give you some ideas you may want to take up during your Seder.

As you’ll see, each chapter begins with a passage from the Haggadah, and the chapters are arranged in the order in which those passages appear in the Haggadah. Generally you’ll find material you can bring into the Seder when you reach the passage in the Haggadah with which a particular chapter begins. But keep in mind that most chapters also contain material that would be better used at other points during the evening. For example, chapter 16, “Reliving the Exodus: The Story of the Last Night in Egypt,” includes a package of activities to do before the Seder begins. Similarly, chapter 13, “Women of the Exodus: Redeemed by Their Righteousness,” includes the ritual of Miriam’s Cup, elements of which occur toward the beginning and end of the Seder.

Over the years, my family has used some of the material in this book to help set the mood for our Seders. We invite people to arrive about an hour and a half before we plan to sit down at the table. We gather in the living room for about an hour before the Seder begins for an activity or conversation like those suggested in this book.

Alternatively, you might consider beginning your Seder on the early side (depending on your observance of Jewish law), making Kiddush, washing hands,
and then dipping parsley (karpas, Greek for “hors d’oeuvre”). Then you might serve more substantial dips. These will take the edge off your participants’ appetites and create a good atmosphere for discussion.

We’ve also sometimes divided into small groups, moving into opposite ends of the living room and an adjacent library for small group discussions. Later, during the Seder, each group gets a chance to share briefly the highlights of its conversation with the entire group. (If you plan to do this, ask someone in advance to be the group’s “reporter.”) You’ll be surprised how engaging these conversations can become.

If you plan to lead a discussion based on a particular passage from the Haggadah or another selection from this book, it is important to make a copy for each of your participants. That really helps keep things focused.

Another reason for dividing into small groups is that you can devote one group to activities that are particularly suitable for children. For example, “The Last Night in Egypt” includes a version of the Passover story for reading aloud to children (it’s fine for adults, too). On the other hand, you’d be surprised how well even five- and six-year-olds can participate in most of the other activities along with adults, especially in small groups.

We then begin the Seder itself, which for our family does include a fair amount of reading from the Haggadah, interspersed with brief questions and occasional discussions.

How long you want your Seder to run and how much you read from the Haggadah will determine how much time you have to bring additional activities into the Seder.

I’ve found that once people are seated at the table it’s easier to read things and to take a few comments that may evolve into short conversations, rather than to plan on numerous extended discussions. Those conversations are best held before the Seder.

Your Seder will also work better if you involve others in leading parts of it. If you do this and want them to work with the material in this book, be sure to make them a copy and send it to them in advance! When copying material from this book for your Seder, please be careful to cite Creating Lively Passover Seders. For public uses, please be respectful of copyrights and the requirement for permission (see page ii). To find a list of the permissions required for reprinting previously published materials included in this volume refer to page 372.
As anyone who has led a Seder knows, the Passover gathering generates a range of expectations, joys, and sometimes a few disappointments. Year after year, you hear the grumbling whispers: “When do we eat?” “How long is this going to last?” “It’s getting late!” Some come to the Seder hungry for spiritual sustenance, and others are simply famished for a dinner that seems as if it will never arrive. Some find great meaning in the holiday. For others it seems paradigmatic of that rather sad nine-word version of Jewish history: “They tried to kill us. We won. Let’s eat.” Some would never miss a Seder. Others come because they would be embarrassed not to. For some, it’s all about being with family. For others, that’s just the beginning.

Many arrive at the Seder vaguely expecting to hear the great tale of the Jewish people’s struggle for freedom. Year after year they leave with a gnawing sense of disappointment. The Haggadah comes close to telling the story, but it does so in a way that creates confusion, if not frustration.

Instead of a heroic battle for liberation, the Haggadah recounts an all-powerful God’s triumph over an evil, but comparatively impotent, Pharaoh. There’s barely even a word about Moses!

Although the activities in this book can help overcome some of these challenges, it’s also important to understand the underlying dynamics that contribute
to them. Even if a problem cannot be entirely solved, often just having a better grasp of what causes the difficulty changes the way you experience it.

To one degree or another, the difficulties of creating an “ideal Seder,” in which all participants actually feel as though they have gone out of Egypt, recapitulate the original Exodus.

We know that many of those slaves who physically left Egypt remained there psychologically. Taking the slaves out of Egypt turned out to be easier than taking Egypt out of the slaves. No sooner did the slaves leave than they yearned to return. The leader of the Seder gets to taste Moses’ frustration. His unruly followers were a lot better at lamenting the good old days in Egypt than at celebrating their newfound freedom. The grumbling at the Seder comes straight from the story of the Exodus! Three days after crossing the Red Sea, the Israelites start complaining about the quality of the water. A while later, they whine about being starved for the “fleshpots” of Egypt.

What makes it so hard to stay focused on celebrating the fact that we are free? In part because we take freedom for granted. But maybe on a deeper level we really don’t feel free. So we find it hard to wholeheartedly celebrate a condition that still eludes us.

The Hebrew word for Egypt, Mitzrayim, can also be read maytzarim, “narrow straits.” To the extent that all of us feel stuck in our own narrow, familiar places—our own private Egypts—we all resist the Seder. We want to leave, but we’re afraid. Of course, this is exactly why the festival is so important.

The Haggadah tells it like it is: “Now we are slaves.” We all need to confront the enslaved parts of ourselves with hope that “next year we will be free.”

An element of tension at the Seder seems to pit those who want to make this night “different from all other nights” against those who want it to remain an ordinary night—an evening that ends “on time” and includes all the regular topics of conversation. This is only part of the picture. The rest is that each of us feels both poles of ambivalence—wanting to make the night different from all others, wanting to become free, and at the same time not wanting to leave our own Egypts. This helps explain why making a “successful” Seder is not such a simple matter.

There’s another angle we need to consider. Seder literally means “order.” In fact, many begin the Seder by chanting a rhymed mnemonic list of the Seder’s fifteen traditional elements. Here the tension lies between the urge for freedom
in the sense of total absence of limits versus freedom that comes from acting within the bounds of an externally imposed structure. The chaos that sometimes invades the Seder represents the newly freed slave’s yearning for unbridled liberty. Anyone who saw the news footage of the looting in Iraqi cities immediately following the fall of Saddam Hussein’s regime in the spring of 2003 witnessed an example of the chaos of sudden freedom without order.

It is as if the Seder represents Torah and we are not really sure that we want to accept it. We’d rather enjoy anarchy than constraints upon our personal freedom. If Sinai is the ultimate destination of the Exodus, each of us along the way is tempted by our own golden calves, by our own false gods.

Another challenge involves the dissonance between the comfort of celebrating liberation and the distance, if not alienation, from God the Liberator as depicted in the Haggadah. The truth is that the God of Jewish liturgy (at least of most liturgy) poses a serious obstacle for many Jews today. Without tools to reframe the concept of God, that dissonance often leads to disappointment and frustration with prayer and ritual. For many, the God of the Haggadah has become the elephant, as it were, at the Seder—present in virtually every passage, but ignored by everyone. Neglecting this “disconnect” can seriously undermine the Seder’s potential.

Finally, remember the Haggadah’s four children. Each has a seat at the table. That makes the Seder’s diversity something of a microcosm of the Jewish world. Working to create a space in which all can feel comfortable during the Seder gives us a taste of what life in today’s pluralistic Jewish world is sometimes like and of the unfinished work that lies ahead for the Jewish people when it comes to living with our differences.

As a Seder leader, the more you’re aware of these issues, the better you can handle them with grace and sensitivity.

Finally, Seder leaders should realize that having two Seders—with the possibility of two kinds of Seders with different participants—can be a real opportunity! Our second Seder is smaller than the first and often more experimental.

A NOTE ON RABBINIC LITERATURE, THE HAGGADAH, AND TRANSLATIONS

This book includes a good number of passages from rabbinic literature. Dating of rabbinic literature, often an issue of scholarly debate, follows the Introduction to the
This vast body of literature has much to teach us, but not necessarily about the “facts” of Jewish history or the actual biographies of the sages who appear in its texts. The material was virtually always compiled by redactors over long periods of time, often hundreds of years after the events described. The deeds and even particular teachings of rabbinic figures all reflect the complex motivations of redactors who sometimes sought to elevate a particular idea by putting it in the mouth of a beloved or highly respected sage. These are the texts our tradition has handed down. Like the Bible, they represent a treasure of wisdom about how to live our lives; they are not meant to be history books. The question is not whether events occurred literally as these texts describe them, but what deeper lessons our tradition wants us to learn from a particular story.

All this applies to the Haggadah with the added complication that it has evolved over a longer period of time and exists in more versions than possibly any other Jewish text. The Haggadah, of course, includes many verses from the Bible. But the core of the Haggadah’s treatment of them as well as its nonbiblical material derive first from the Mishnah and secondarily from the Jerusalem and Babylonian Talmuds as well as various midrashim.

Our oldest Haggadot are manuscripts written in Israel that were found in the Cairo Geniza. They date from between the tenth and eleventh centuries and differ recognizably from contemporary Haggadot. They include three, rather than four, questions, for example, and lack the midrashic elaboration of Deuteronomy 26:5–8. Fourteenth century “copies” of Haggadot attributed to ninth century Geonim—leaders of the great centers of learning in what is now central Iraq—are relatively similar to those of today with the exception that they lack the rituals associated with Elijah and the familiar Seder songs, which were added in the Middle Ages. Beyond this, it is difficult to be more precise about the sources and dates of some of the Haggadah’s nonbiblical passages. Take for example: “In every generation, each individual should feel as though he or she had gone out of Egypt.” This passage appears in today’s “standard” Mishnah but not in earlier manuscripts from the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. Some of the “standard” Mishnah’s language about the night of Passover may actually reflect the influence of the textual traditions found in early Haggadot. References to the Mishnah’s
treatment of the night of Passover (Pesachim, chapter 10) are based on the text of the Kaufmann manuscript, thought to be relatively free of these influences. It was published in facsimile by George Lewis Beers in 1929 (Haag, M. Nijhoff). A translation of this appears in Appendix I.

I’ve used the Ashkenazic text of the Haggadah, variations of which are likely used by a majority of American Jews. My “standard” Hebrew version of this text is found in the The Passover Haggadah (Schocken Books, 1984), edited by Nahum N. Glatzer with commentaries based on the studies of E. D. Goldschmidt, one of the great Haggadah scholars of the last century. This text, or very similar versions of it, is widely used. It appears, for instance, in the Maxwell House Haggadah, the Silverman Haggadah (Media Judaica, 1979), and the many Haggadot published by Artscroll/Mesorah Publications. Translations of this basic text are based on various Haggadot.

In most cases, I’ve used the Second (1999) Jewish Publication Society’s translation of the Bible. When the Talmud, for example, quotes a biblical passage, I’ve generally retained the translation contained in that passage, because in such cases, the translation of a Talmudic passage and the rendering of biblical verse are often closely related. Unless otherwise noted, quotations from the Mishnah, Talmud, Midrash Rabbah, and Zohar are from the Soncino translation, Davka CD-ROM version. In an attempt to preserve the flavor of these works spanning thousands of years of Jewish history, their original language has been maintained whenever possible, including instances of “masculine God language.”