

THE ALCHEMIST'S HAGGADAH SELECTIONS FROM A COMMENTARY

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I. INTRODUCTION

I. THERE ARE MANY PASSOVERS

For some people, the Festival of Passover, especially its opening ceremony, the traditional Seder night, is a yearly celebration of family in which even distant and alienated relatives are welcomed and embraced in a pageant of familiar ritual and symbol. For others it is a primarily religious holiday, a solemn (and joyful) recollection of that historical event some 3000 years ago in which, with Divine help, the Jews left the slavery of Egypt and became a people with a clear sense of destiny and purpose. For yet others, the festival commemorates nationhood, the coming into being of the Jews as a people. Some Jews prefer to move away from the tribal and the ethnic emphasis of Passover, and see it as a universalistic political statement, an affirmation that tyranny will be overcome, in all places, and at all times. There is in fact a whole series of different Passovers; sometimes these seem to be related to each other, whereas on other occasions, even among people seated at the same Seder table, they can be experienced as mutually exclusive.

II. THE ALCHEMIST'S VIEW OF PASSOVER

The Alchemist's Haggadah partakes of each of the above visions of Passover, yet in its core it is different. Like many other Haggadot, the Alchemist's Haggadah presents and explains a traditional text and guides the reader through the rituals; furthermore, the festival it describes is one that relates to family and to community, to history and to formal religious practices, and certainly with political liberation. Nevertheless, as its name implies, the Alchemist's Haggadah is also something else: its vision of Passover is of a celebration of transmutation, the transmutation of nature, the transformation of spirit.

When the ancient alchemists sought to extract the noble from the base, to liberate that which is essentially pure from the slavery of dross and pollution, they knew that the first step was to free and to purify themselves. The traditional apprenticeship of an alchemist involved both training in the pathways of spiritual evolution and instruction in the physical properties of materials -- awareness of self and knowledge of

the world. The idea that a person who was still in bondage to his or her lower nature could change the world was preposterous. Whosoever desired to effect the transmutation of lead into tin, and of tin into silver, and of silver into gold, such a person must first awaken from spiritual slumber, must become pure.

The Alchemist's Haggadah is a guide for the aspiring latter-day alchemist. It does not teach the reader to purify rare metals, though it is informed by an awareness of the presence of the pollution of slavery in our midst, many kinds of slavery. But primarily it describes a Passover celebration in which the participants seek to reconstitute the very nature of their lives, to become, as it were, perfect vessels in the implementation of the Divine will. And though it talks of psychological transformation, this is seen not so much as personal fulfillment as the enactment of a great cosmic plan.

III. NAMES OF FESTIVAL

The Festival of Passover is known by four different Hebrew names, each of which reflects a different aspect of its nature.

1 PESACH, OR PASSOVER

The first, most common name, is Pesach, or Passover. It possesses two separate meanings. The first refers to the fact that, in the biblical account of the Exodus from Egypt, there is a description of the Angel of Death "passing over" (Pasakh) the homes of the Israelites on the night of the tenth plague. The second is that Pesakh is the name of the Festival sacrifice (the Pascal lamb).

2 HAG HA-AVIV, THE SPRING FESTIVAL

Pesach is the spring Festival par excellence. It is a time of hope and rebirth and renewal. But it is also a time of the anguish of rebirth, the pain of birthing and being born. When we eat the karpas, which at one level is a symbol of greenness, we dip it into salt water, a symbol of travail.

3 HAG HA-MATZOT, FESTIVAL OF UNLEAVENED BREAD

There are many things that can be said here. Matzah is ultimately the profoundest symbol of Pesach. It is humility, closeness to true self, and moving away from self importance and arrogance.

4 ZEMAN HERUTEINU, TIME OF OUR FREEDOM, OR LIBERATION

THE HAGGADAH

It is very important to distinguish between Liberation, which is the end of slavery, and Freedom, which is creative relationship with Other. This is a major theme of the Alchemist's Haggadah.

- A. Pilgrim Festivals
- B. Hametz and Matzah
- C. Intergenerational nature

The Seder night can become a truly intergenerational festivity and a special effort is made to involve actively children of all ages. The youngest are drawn into the more playful parts, such as the reciting of the Four Questions ("How Is This Night Different from All Other Nights?"); the story of the four children; the hunting for the Afikomen; and in the concluding songs. The engagement of the older children's attention and curiosity is a central feature of the Seder. It is in fact a precondition for the fulfillment of the basic commandment upon which Passover Festival is founded ("And on that day you shall tell your child ..."). We can't tell a story to someone who is not interested or attentive!

However, there is also an insidious danger to which we must be alert: reducing the entire ceremony to a species of "pediatric Judaism," in which the adults relinquish their own Passovers and attempt to make the Seder an enjoyable and educational event exclusively for the benefit of the children. In fact, this doesn't work, because the *adult experience* ("what God did for me"), which is the essence of what we strive to transmit, is not communicated, and what the child ultimately perceives is more or less entertaining "children's religion." One way to avoid this pitfall is to make the service interesting to children, to stimulate their inquisitiveness, to encourage them to ask questions, and at the same time to acknowledge that much of it may be tedious to them, but nevertheless it is of great significance to the adults. No one should be forced to sit still through hours of boring discussions, and permission should be given to the children (and to others as well) to leave the table, move around and do what they desire, so long as this does not become disruptive.

II. PREPARATION

- A. SPRING CLEANING
- B. GETTING RID OF HAMETZ

III. LIGHTING CANDLES

IV. KIDDUSH

The Kiddush is the ceremonial opening of the Seder night festivities. The candle lighting was earlier, before the guests arrived, at a time that was fixed "externally," by the setting of the sun; but the timing of the Kiddush is "internal," that is, we start only when all are ready, when we are seated around the table, as a family, as a community, as a fellowship. When we recite the Kiddush, we call our company of pilgrims to attention, to end the bustling of preparations and to sit still, to enter into the first act of the drama of transformation.

Chosenness. The plain meaning of the Kiddush is easy to comprehend, but its content may be troublesome. Especially difficult for some people today, in a time when universalism is an almost axiomatic value, is the issue of the chosenness of the Jewish people, which is quite explicit in the language of the prayer: "Who has chosen us from all the nations and exalted us above all the languages." The concept may seem to be unnecessarily exclusive of other peoples, even as arrogant, and possibly as implying that Jews are superior to other people. It seems to focus so much attention on those characteristics in which Jews differ from others, and to ignore the great areas of our sameness, our likeness. And, of course, the theme of the Jews considering themselves to be the chosen people has often been picked up and exploited by anti-Semites, "Just who do they think they are?"

Nevertheless, the theme of Jewish differentness, of Jewish uniqueness, is absolutely central to our Festival, and face it we must. We are not allowed to forget it, and here, already at the very beginning of our Seder, we are thrust into it; however, we must learn to relate to it in the context of a very real tension. On the one hand, Passover is a specifically Jewish event. It is the retelling of our family story, recalling something that happened to our tribe, of how we broke away from slavery. On the

other hand, it is also a universal story of freedom, of significance to all peoples and all individuals. Passover is a divine promise to the world that slavery is not a natural state of being and cannot last forever. It is the prophetic voice that reassures and challenges and cajoles: oppression and exploitation and alienation of any kind are wrong and should not be accepted it as a permanent fact. We have to find our balance between these two voices, between Jewish particularism and universal hope. The technique of Passover is that we start at the specific and move on to the general. We must discover our own forms of slavery, and begin our own Exoduses, and only then assert and affirm our commonality and our fellowship and shared destiny with the rest of humankind.

Living with the tension between the particular and the universal is not of course a uniquely Jewish problem: one great Native American teacher said: "Of course our village is at the center of the world. But then, every village is at the center of the world."

Joy and Happiness. There is another phrase in the Kiddush that is simple in its plain meaning but which raises difficulties. It is the statement that Passover is a time of joy and happiness. This may seem to be artificial, to be mere wishful thinking. Can happiness be forced? Can joy be announced? Is there not a danger that we fake it, that behind a mask of singing and drinking and story telling we remain lonely slaves? In fact, the Kiddush is often a time of apprehension. Will this indeed be a happy and a joyous Seder? Will we really experience a liberation? Will we really get out of Egypt? Do we really want to leave our respective Egypts? The truth is that at this stage we don't know. We are not there yet. But there is something that we can do at this time: it is to yearn for joy and happiness. By yearning, by acknowledging our incompleteness, by admitting our uncertainty, by facing our fears, we may be making the first step to wholeness, to redemption, to freedom.

Wine

V. SHEHEHIYANU

The *Shehehiyanu* is an expression of gratitude for being alive and for being present at this moment. It is an affirmation of the basic goodness of life. In a way, it is saying, "Thank God it's now." It is wonderful to say this blessing in a group. Some people like to sing it, others to shout it.

VI. U-REHATZ

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We scrub with soap and water before we sit down at the table, so this act of pouring of water over our hands (first over the right hand two or three times, then over the left) has nothing to do with cleanliness or hygiene. It is rather a ritual of purification, of symbolically removing from us that which could impair us in our work, or distort our vision of the task that lies ahead. Our enemy here is self deception. Let each of us silently think of the self deception that we wish to overcome.

VII. KARPAS

Passover is a spring Festival, and the parsley that we eat at this point is symbolic of the winter's end. Spring is a time of promise, of rebirth, of greenery and greening. It is a time of breaking out from the darkness of winter to the light of the world. It is also a time of pain and danger. Not every sprouting plant will burgeon, not every bud will blossom, not every dream of freedom will see the light of day. For this reason we dip our green vegetables in salt, in tears.

Spring is a time of accelerated growth and great energy. Plants are thrusting upwards toward the light and the warmth. Animals are being born. Young people are falling in love. One of the characteristics of such a period is that in it we are far more aware of the urgency of change than we are cognizant of its consequences. When we fall in love we cannot be aware of the complexities of family relationships in later years (if we try to, we won't have much fun, indeed, we might not even continue!). When we plan our liberation from slavery there is no way in which we can understand all the implications of freedom. Passover is not necessarily a time of great insight, of seeing the bigger picture of our lives. That comes later. Our task now is urgent and short term: To recognize our Egypts, and to get out!

VIII. YAHATZ

We divide the middle matzah and put it aside for the end of the meal, where it becomes the afikomen, the final portion of food, which symbolizes wholeness and completion. We hide this piece of matzah, but even as we do it we know that according to folk-lore tradition one of the children present will "steal" it from us and hide it. We will lose it! So too in our lives, we possess something very precious that a childish part of us may imperil or destroy. What have we already lost? What are we going to lose?

in shortened form in *Conservative Judaism*.

IX. MAGGID

We now begin the major narrative section of the Haggadah, called the Maggid. Like many good stories, this tale will be interrupted with digressions, discussions, songs and comments. The point of the narrative, however, is not just to provide us with an educational history lesson, though this is important. The Maggid is both the traditional text and also our interaction with it. Its deeper purpose is actually to liberate us; it enables us to discover and to own the true story of our lives, both inwardly, as individuals, and outwardly, as a people.

Before we can own the true story of our lives, however, we have to learn to recognize and eradicate the false stories we have been living by. These are the stories that we cling to in order not to face the truth about ourselves. These are the stories that perpetuate slavery, that make injustice and alienation appear to be the natural, inevitable state of existence. This confrontation with the lies of our lives is the task of the idol breaker within us (for our false stories are indeed idols), of the slave liberator among us. As a group we must fortify each other with courage in order to embark on this task.

This is a good time to talk about the false stories of our lives.

IX. HA LAHMA ANYA

This is the bread of poverty that our ancestors ate in the Land of Egypt. All who are physically hungry, let them come and eat! All who are spiritually needy, let them join our celebration! This year we are here, next year we will be in the Land of Israel. This year we are slaves, next year we will be free!

This passage is chanted in Aramaic, the popular language of the Jews in Eretz Yisroel two thousand years ago.

The Bread of Poverty. The symbolic significance of matzah is ambiguous and changing. Is it the bread of slavery, or the bread of liberty? In this passage it appears to be neither, but the bread of transition, the bread we must eat in order to leave slavery. And so here matzah is described as the bread of poverty, for poverty is a prior condition to leaving slavery. We are called upon to accept some form of voluntary poverty. If we have too many possessions, too many attachments, we will be unable or unwilling to leave them behind, and will remain in Egypt. If we are too comfortable in our outer existences or

in our inner lives, we may choose to ignore the challenge of transformation. A measure of discomfort is sometimes necessary to move us into change.

The invitation is to two distinct groups: the physically hungry, and the spiritually needy. The first are the politically oppressed and the economically underprivileged and the socially disempowered; the second are the spiritually impoverished, those who lack the inner means or resources to claim their freedom. Now it is obvious that a private Seder is not an appropriate setting for the redistribution of wealth or the divestment of power, or even to embark upon spiritual literacy campaigns. How then are we to avoid letting this invitation become nothing more than an empty formula, or plain hypocrisy? It is good to talk about this. Some people like to make a pledge to work on one of these issues when the festival is over.

Note that our invitation to the physically hungry is not to participate in a banquet, but, rather, to share with us in eating the bread of poverty.

This year we are slaves, next year in Jerusalem. We don't know what next year's Jerusalem will look like, or even where it is -- but we do know that we want to be there. And perhaps the "there" is to be more present where we are now.

X. MAH NISHTANAH

The Four Questions are asked by the youngest person present who can read or memorize them.

We have much to learn from children's questioning: directness, simple curiosity, and an uncluttered, unencumbered mind. Part of our work this evening will be to rediscover within ourselves this child-like faculty, to refine our questioning. Questioning is at the very core of the Passover ritual; questioning is the key with which we can unlatch the gates of our various Egypts. It does this by revealing to us, stage by stage, the true story of redemption from slavery, of who we really are. Questioning can lead us from ignorance of our enslaved situation to consciousness and fulfillment of our noble or royal nature.

But there are also questions of a different kind, those that serve to perpetuate our captivity, and we must learn to detect them and eliminate them. These latter questions are often traps that lock us into narrow egocentric roles, and at the same time distort our vision of the world and

of our place within it. They strengthen the power of delusion and self deception: like the "show-and-tell" ones that show how smart we are; or the self righteous ones that show what good people we are; or those posed by what William Blake called the "idiot questioner" we all have within us, the questions that scuttle meaningful discussion by inserting seductive but irrelevant agendas. We must learn to free ourselves of these modes of questioning, to uproot these questions, by listening to our voices as we ask them, and with gentle help from our companions. Sometimes, when we hear our own voices talking, we may pause for a moment and ask, "Where did that question come from?" This is a risky process, but then so is getting out of Egypt.

I. AVADIM HAYYINU

We were slaves to Pharaoh in Egypt and the Holy One brought us out from there with a powerful hand and an extended arm. And if the Holy One had not brought our ancestors out from Egypt, then we, our children, and our children's children would have remained to Pharaoh in Egypt. Therefore, even if we are all wise, all learned, all elders, all knowledgeable in Torah, we would still have to tell the story of the Exodus. And the more story you tell, the better.

This is not an answer to the Four Questions. Did we get something wrong? Are we being ignored?

Egypt. In Hebrew, Mitzrayyim, Egypt is the place in which the Children of Israel were enslaved and from which they escaped in the Exodus. One traditional explanation of the word Mitzrayyim is that it means "narrow places," or "constricted places." As such, its significance extends far beyond the historical and geographical coordinates of ancient Egypt. It represents, rather, archetypal bondage, oppression, or constriction. So Mitzrayyim can refer to a political, an economic, a social, and emotional, or even a spiritual situation. It can describe the fate of a Jew and a nonJew, of a community or of an individual. Any place of oppression is an Egypt. Any diminution of human dignity is a Mitzrayyim. Any loss of group or personal identity an Egypt. A state of existence in which one is alienated or exiled from one's true self is a Mitzrayyim.

But Mitzrayyim is not only the place of oppression, of exile. It is also the crucible in which we become aware of our degradation and are refined and purified. It is a place of inner work. Only in Mitzrayyim can we truly become Israel. Apparently, it is a necessary phase in our evolution.

Pharaoh. Who is Pharaoh that we were/are enslaved to him, and the Divine one took/takes us out from his control? Pharaoh is the central power of Egypt, the organizing force that maintains and protects the state of slavery. Pharaoh may work by terrorizing us or by seducing us. In a cruel, tyrannical regime, Pharaoh exercises the physical instruments of oppression. In more benign forms of exile, Pharaoh deceives us into thinking that we are free, that we already live the best of all possible existences. The inner Pharaoh we each of us carry around with us works in many ways: from battering us with a sense of lack of worth, to offering escape from our reality in day dreams and illusion.

But the central teaching of Passover is that Pharaoh is not invincible. He needs stability and he is terrified of truth. Pharaoh can only exercise his control as long as we believe that we are powerless, and this is true if we are Soviet Jews, underpaid unorganized workers, exploited peasants, disenfranchised women, victims of others or victims of our own habits. The moment thoughts of freedom begin to stir with us, Pharaoh is terrified -- indeed, this is when he becomes most vicious in his oppression. The police use dogs and tear gas against demonstrators, not against people who obediently go to work. And this is also true for the forces of inner oppression: who does not feel, together with excitement, some fear and anguish at the thought of radical change? Pharaoh seeks to prevent us from becoming aware of the fact that we are enslaved, from thinking about liberty. Passover reminds us of the Divine promise: slavery will not last forever!

Some disturbing questions for us both as individuals and as a people: Can I become a Pharaoh for someone else? Have we Jews become Pharaoh for other people? If the answers are "yes," what should we do?

Even if we are all wise... The point being made here is that what is to be transmitted is not information. Even if the wise men know all the facts, they still have to recite them, they still have to tell it as a story, their own story. Even if someone has written a 700-page doctoral dissertation on the Exodus story, and knows every detail by heart, she still has to tell the story

What is being transmitted here is not information. Even if all the wise men know all the facts they have to recite them, to say them, because by telling the story, we own the story. One of the forms of slavery we break away from is the false stories that we have within us, and which we cling to.