



The Stories We Tell Ourselves

”וְאִפְּלוּ כָּלֵנוּ חֲכָמִים, כָּלֵנוּ גִבּוֹרִים, כָּלֵנוּ זָקֵנִים, כָּלֵנוּ יוֹדְעִים אֶת הַתּוֹרָה, מִצֹּרֶךְ עָלֵינוּ לְסַפֵּר בְּצִיּוֹת מְצֻבִּים, וְכָל הַמְּדַבֵּר בְּסוֹף בִּצְיַת מִצְרַיִם, הֵרֵךְ הוּא מְשֻׁבָּח.”

“And even if we were all intelligent, astute, distinguished elders and knowledgeable of the Torah, it is [still] incumbent upon us to tell the story of the Exodus from Egypt. And anyone who expounds upon the story at great length, is praiseworthy indeed.”

The Passover Haggadah

Everyone loves a good story.

Stories have a way of allowing the storyteller to become, for a moment, the master theatrical character, weaving the information through his or her fingers in wondrous rapture.

The Passover Haggadah, compiled and completed most probably around the third or fourth century CE, is a remarkable work of both scholarly and literary genius.

Its format of the Four Questions, followed by a comprehensive discussion of the Exodus from Egypt, has remained almost identical since that time.

Much of the Rabbinic literature of the last 1,800 years has been written in a very formal and structured way, so why is there so much emphasis placed on telling the “story of the Exodus” and not just reading out the relevant chapters from the Book of Exodus.

In fact, what is even more puzzling is the fact that the basis for the Pesach story in the Haggadah is from Deuteronomy, where the story is told in flashback form, and not even the original “as it happens” version from Exodus? Why is this?

The answer, I believe, lies in the reasons for reading the Haggadah, and for Seder Night itself.

As the purpose of Seder Night is to retell the story of the Exodus, what better way to do so than to use the first example of the RE-TELLING of the story – the version in Deuteronomy?

Our job as Jews in whatever generation we find ourselves, whether in Mediaeval Spain or 21st century Britain, is to ensure that we transmit the stories and traditions of our People to the next generation.

Maimonides (b. 1138, Cordoba, Spain; d. 1204, Fustat, Egypt) says emphatically in his great Halachic work the *Mishneh Torah*, in the Laws of Chametz and Matza 7:8, that “In every generation, every Jew needs to view himself as if he personally went through the Exodus from Egypt.”

This is not a request to “read” the story. It must be “re-enacted”.

The Rabbis in their wisdom realised that the only way to ensure that this vital element of our national narrative would be effectively passed from parent to child, was to dramatize the event, and make it into a performance, unparalleled anywhere in the Jewish experience.

It is only when we internalise the story of Pesach, and become those very people who left Egypt, will we truly experience the beauty and majesty of one of the greatest forms of both formal and informal education – the storyteller’s art.

For two nights only, we are the heroes of the Pesach miracle, and the wonderful and magical story of



how we went from slavery to freedom and from darkness to light, becomes the inspiration for a lifetime of questions and a wealth of fascinating answers.

Pick up the Haggadah this year, make the story come alive for yourselves and your families and take your place in almost two millennia of re-enactments of history's most glorious consequence – the birth, Divinely-guided, miraculous and ongoing survival and phenomenal resilience that is the Jewish People.

A Happy and Kosher Pesach to you all.

Rabbi Daniel Epstein

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