



This Year - Throw Away Your Hagaddah

Among the myriad laws of Pesach there is a rule that I find it very hard to persuade my congregants to accept! It is not some minutia of kitchen preparation, or even the amount of matzah they should eat at the Seder. Surprisingly enough, it is the requirement that they understand the story of the Haggadah while they read it. It seems such a simple idea – instead of struggling through the text, just about managing to get through it in the original, read the story in a contemporary English translation. Actually, the idea of reading the story of the Exodus in the vernacular is particularly interesting to a British rabbi, as it recorded in the name of the rabbis of the mediaeval rabbi of London. Now I use the word ‘contemporary’ with care, as there are many translations that are so out-of-date and archaic, that they are no use at all. One I saw recommends searching for Chametz with ‘a wax randle in the gloaming’, which, apart from the obvious spelling mistake, leaves the reader with the impression that he is about to engage in some wacky Victorian pantomime. Others are so full of ‘thees’ and ‘thous’ that they require translation themselves.

Why is so difficult to get those who are not fluent in Hebrew to read the story in a translation? Why would anyone choose to labour uncomprehendingly over the original text, syllable by syllable, instead of enjoying the drama and charm of the age-old story in a language that they can understand? Responses to this question vary. Some say, ‘we have always done it like this.’ Others feel compelled to use the Haggadah they received as a Bar Mitzvah present in the 1930s. Still others assume that it must be better to read it in Hebrew, even if they don’t understand it. At some level, I suppose they are right – for those who have a good grasp of Hebrew, it is preferable to read the Haggadah in the original; after all, Hebrew is the language of God and of the Torah and expresses nuances and concepts that cannot be fully translated into English. But these are entirely lost on the non-Hebrew reader. In fact, reading an unintelligible story loses more than nuances, it loses everything else too.

In reality, I think that there is more to this problem than Haggadot and Hebrew. It cuts to the heart of our own self-perception and attitude towards Judaism. Incredible as it may sound, for many people, part of the Seder experience seems to be the mystique of not understanding! Some people are actually troubled by the prospect of understanding and enjoying the procedure. Since their earliest recollections are of incoherent mumbling, this is how things must remain for evermore. Any endeavour to disturb this state of affairs is met with resistance. ‘It was good enough for my grandfather, so why isn’t it good enough for you?’ Surely some attempt to think through the long-term consequences of this attitude is called for. For whatever reason, previous generations were happy to accept that Judaism called for martyrdom – whether it was sitting through an unintelligible Seder, or tolerating lengthy, unrewarding Shul services. Younger people are simply unwilling and unprepared to do so. Worse still, many of us still expect youngsters to participate in this way and become frustrated with them when they refuse. It is hardly surprising that a generation that is well educated, advantaged and surrounded by exciting life alternatives, is also uninterested in a meaningless experience. Let us be honest – why would anyone participate willingly in a meaningless experience?

But the most destructive aspect of this is feeling comfortable with the unintelligible model. It permits us get away without a challenge – without allowing the real message of Pesach, and indeed of Judaism, to have any impact upon us. Happy with the meaningless, we have convinced ourselves that the experience has nothing to offer, and fulfilled our expectations by rendering it impotent; as such, it need not disturb our lives in any way at all. We have turned the Seder, without a doubt the most powerful educational tool in Judaism’s armoury, into a gun loaded with blanks. We have inoculated ourselves against the most exciting inspiration to creating a vibrant Jewish future that exists. It suits us to extract the teeth of the Seder by keeping it incomprehensible, for in that way, we will require no self-examination, no reconsideration of the way we impart Judaism to our children and certainly no modification of our Jewish lives.



This problem pervades every area of Jewish life, but at the Seder, the contrast between the reality and the ideal is most evident. Seder night this year is a perfect opportunity to begin the revolution. It is time to fully exploit the magic of the Seder - the original all-singing, all-dancing, multi-media inspiration. It is time to recognise that young Jews need meaningful Jewish experiences if they are to play any part in the Jewish future. It is time to turn the Seder back into a real event, with genuine communication between parents and children, and consign the mumble-through-the-text and dash-to-the-meal of the past to the waste bin of failed Jewish experiments. Throw away that old Hagadah.

Old Haggadot must be treated with respect. Please ask a rabbi how to dispose of them properly.

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