

HOW MUCH OF THE SEDER IS SET IN STONE?
THE MISHNAH'S VISION OF THE PASSOVER SEDER
AND ITS LESSONS FOR TODAY

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The Mishnah's Seder: The Vital Balance between Ritual and Spontaneity

1. *Tosefta Piskha 10:6, 8* He who pronounces the Hallel Psalms [for others]—they come to him and read [along side of him], and he does not go to them... He who reads for his young sons or daughters has to respond with them at the very passage to which they respond... As to the Hallel, they leave nothing out of it, and they add nothing to it.

המקרא את ההלל הם הולכין אצלו וקוראין
והוא אין הולך אצלו. המקרא את בניו ובנותיו
קטנים צריך להיות עונה עמהן ...
הלל אין פוחתין ממנו ואין מוסיפין עליו.

2. *Tosefta Piskha 10:12* One must occupy oneself with the study of the laws of the Passover sacrifice all night... It once happened on the first night of Passover that Rabban Gamliel and the elders were reclining in the house of Boethus ben Zeno [a pious merchant] in Lod, and they were occupied with the laws of the Passover sacrifice the entire night until the cock crowed. Then each pushed aside his table, stretched, and went along to the house of study.

חייב אדם לעסוק בהלכות הפסח כל הלילה...
מעשה ברבן גמליאל וזקנים שהיו מסובין
בבית ביתוס בן זונין בלוד והיו עסוקין
בהלכות הפסח כל הלילה עד קרות הגבר
הגביהו מלפניהם ונועדו והלכו להן לבית המדרש...

3. *Mishnah Pesachim 10:4* [They] poured for him the second cup— and here the child asks, and if the child lacks understanding, his father instructs him. How is this night different from all [other] nights? For on all the [other] nights we dip once, this night twice. For on all the [other] nights we eat leavened and unleavened bread, this night we eat only unleavened. For on all the [other] nights we eat meat roasted, steamed, or cooked [in a liquid, boiled], this night only roasted. According to the child's understanding, his father instructs him. [He] starts with disgrace and ends with glory; and [he] expounds from, “My father was a wandering Aramean” [Deuteronomy 26:5], until he finishes the entire portion.

מזגו לו כוס שני, וכאן הִבֵּן שואל אָבִיו.
ואם אין דעת בְּבֶן, אָבִיו מְלַמְדוֹ, מֵה נִשְׁתַּנָּה
הַלִּילָה הַזֶּה מִכָּל הַלִּילוֹת, שֶׁבְּכָל הַלִּילוֹת אָנוּ
מְטַבִּילִין פֶּעַם אַחַת, הַלִּילָה הַזֶּה שְׁתֵּי פְעָמִים.
שֶׁבְּכָל הַלִּילוֹת אָנוּ אוֹכְלִין חֲמֵץ וּמִצָּה, הַלִּילָה
הַזֶּה כֻּלּוֹ מִצָּה. שֶׁבְּכָל הַלִּילוֹת אָנוּ אוֹכְלִין בֶּשֶׂר צָלִי,
שְׁלוּק, וּמִבְּשָׁל, הַלִּילָה הַזֶּה כֻּלּוֹ צָלִי. וּלְפִי דַעְתּוֹ
שֶׁל בֶּן, אָבִיו מְלַמְדוֹ. מִתְחִיל בְּגִנוּת וּמֵסִיִּם בְּשֶׁבַח,
וְדוֹרֵשׁ מֵאַרְמֵי אוֹבֵד אָבִי, עַד שִׁיגְמוֹר כָּל הַפְּרָשָׁה כְּלָה:

4. *Mishnah Pesachim 10:5* Rabban Gamaliel said, “Whoever did not say these three things on Passover did not fulfill his obligation: *Pesach* [the Passover offering], *matzah* [unleavened bread], and *merorim* [bitter herbs]...”

רַבֵּן גַּמְלִיאֵל הָיָה אוֹמֵר, כָּל שֶׁלֹּא אָמַר שְׁלֹשָׁה דְבָרִים
אֵלּוּ בַּפֶּסַח, לֹא יֵצֵא יָדָיו חוֹבְתוֹ, וְאֵלּוּ הֵן, פֶּסַח, מִצָּה, וּמְרוֹר...
...

5. The Passover Haggadah ...Even if we all were wise, and perceptive, experienced, and versed in Torah, we are commanded to tell about the Exodus from Egypt. And all who elaborate on telling of the Exodus from Egypt deserve praise. It happened that Rabbis Eliezer, Joshua, Elazar ben Azaryah, Akiva and Tarfon were reclining in B'nei B'rak. They were telling of the Exodus all through the night until their students came and said to them: “Rabbis, it is time for saying the morning Sh'ma.”

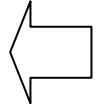
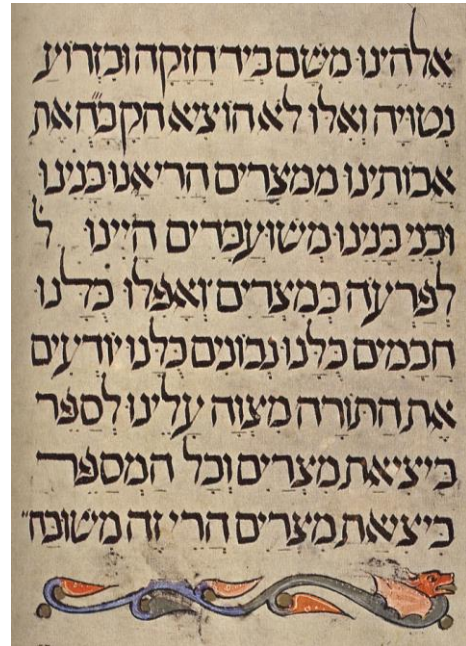
...וְאֵפִילוּ כֻלּוֹ חֲכָמִים, נְבוֹנִים, כְּלָנוּ זְקֵנִים, כְּלָנוּ יוֹדְעִים אֶת־הַתּוֹרָה, מִצָּנָה עָלֵינוּ
לְסַפֵּר בִּיצִיאַת מִצְרַיִם. וְכָל הַמְרַבֵּה לְסַפֵּר בִּיצִיאַת מִצְרַיִם, הָרִי זֶה מְשֻׁבַּח:
מַעֲשֵׂה בְרַבִּי אֱלִיעֶזֶר, וְרַבִּי יְהוֹשֻׁעַ, וְרַבִּי אֶלְעָזָר בֶּן־עֲזַרְיָה, וְרַבִּי עֲקִיבָא,
וְרַבִּי טַרְפוֹן, שֶׁהָיוּ מְסֻבִּין בְּבֵנֵי־בְרַק, וְהָיוּ מְסַפְּרִים בִּיצִיאַת מִצְרַיִם, כָּל־אוֹתוֹ
הַלִּילָה, עַד שֶׁבָּאוּ תַלְמִידֵיהֶם וְאָמְרוּ לָהֶם: רְבוֹתֵינוּ, הִגִּיעַ זְמַן קְרִיאַת שְׁמַע, שֶׁל שַׁחֲרִית:

What is the Origin of the Haggadah's Injunction to Elaborate on Telling the Story of the Exodus?

1... כל המספר ביציאת מצרים הרי זה משבח:

1. All who tell of the Exodus from Egypt deserve praise.

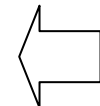
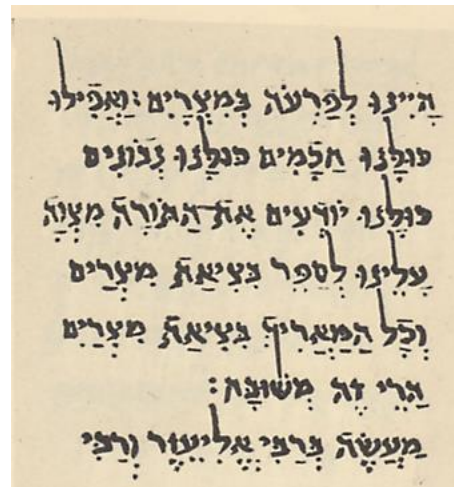
This *nusach* is from the Siddur of Rav Amram, Gaon of Sura, from 858 to 871, and in medieval illuminated Haggadot. The illustration to the right is from the Sarajevo Haggadah, created in Spain in the fourteenth century.



2... כל המאריך לספר ביציאת מצרים הרי זה משבח:

2. All who lengthen the telling of the Exodus from Egypt deserve praise.

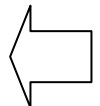
This *nusach* is found in a Gaonic Haggadah sometimes attributed to Natronai Gaon (Gaon of Sura from 853-858), in the Mishneh Torah of Maimonides (1135-1204) and in Haggadot that follow the Yemenite text. The illustration to the right is from a mid-eighteenth century Haggadah created in the Jewish colony of Kai-Feng Fu, China.



3... כל המרבה לספר ביציאת מצרים הרי זה משבח:

3. All who elaborate on telling of the Exodus from Egypt deserve praise.

Now the standard in Ashkenazic and Sephardic Haggadot. The illustration to the right comes from the Constantinople Haggadah which dates from between 1515 and 1533. Likely the first appearance in the text of a Haggadah of the now current formulation. (From Alexander Scheiber, "New Pages from the First Printed, Illustrated Haggadah," *Studies in Bibliography and Booklore*, Volume 7, 1965, p. 31).



David Ben Joseph Avudarham,
Sefer Avudarham (1340):

This is the correct version of the text, “All who elaborate on telling of the Exodus from Egypt deserve praise!” ‘*v’kol hamarbeh l’saper b’yitziat mitzrayim, harai zeh meshubach.*’ The correct version is not, ‘*v’kol hamesaper b’yitziat mitzrayim...*’ because when we are commanded to do something, we don’t say, ‘one deserves praise,’ since one is obligated to do what one is commanded to do. But the version ‘*v’kol hamarbeh...*’ makes sense. We are commanded to tell of the Exodus and even if one speaks of this minimally one fulfills one’s obligation, and all who elaborate on telling the story of the Exodus from Egypt deserve praise! The proof of this comes from the story about Rabbi Eliezer and his companions who were the greatest sages of their generation and even they tell the story of the Exodus all through the night.

Why did Avudarham prefer *kol hamarbeh* vs. *kol hama’arich*?

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Intra-textual Resonance: From the Haggadah’s midrash on *My father was a wandering Aramean*:

1. *Few in numbers*, as it is written: *With seventy souls your ancestors went down to Egypt, and now the Lord your God has made you as numerous as the stars in the sky* (Deut. 10:22). *There he became a nation* means that they became a distinct people in Egypt. *Great and very populous*, as it is written: *The children of Israel were fruitful and increased greatly; they multiplied and became mighty, and the land was full of them* (Ex. 1:7).

1. בַּמְתִּי מְעַט. כִּמָּה שֶׁנֶּאֱמַר: בְּשִׁבְעִים נַפְשׁ, יָרְדוּ אֲבוֹתֶיךָ מִצְרַיִם. וְעַתָּה, שְׂמֹךְ יי אֱלֹהֶיךָ, כְּכּוֹכְבֵי הַשָּׁמַיִם לְרַב. וַיְהִי שֵׁם לְגוֹי. מְלִמְד שֶׁהָיוּ יִשְׂרָאֵל מְצִינִים שָׁם: גְּדוֹל עָצוּם, כִּמָּה שֶׁנֶּאֱמַר: וּבְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל, פָּרוּ וַיִּשְׂרְצוּ, וַיִּרְבּוּ וַיַּעֲצֻמוּ, בְּמֵאֵד מְאֵד, וַתִּמְלֵא הָאָרֶץ אֹתָם:

2. *And very populous*, as it is written: *I made you as populous as the plants of the field; you grew up and wore choice adornments; your breasts were firm and your hair grew long; yet, you were bare and naked* (Ezekiel 16:7).

2. וַרַב. כִּמָּה שֶׁנֶּאֱמַר: רַבְבָּה כְּצִמְחַת הַשָּׂדֶה נִתְתִּיךָ, וַתִּרְבֵּי, וַתִּגְדְּלִי, וַתִּבְאֵי בְעַדֵי עַדִּים: שְׂדֵים נִכְנּוּ, וְשַׁעֲרֶךָ צִמְחָה, וְאַתְּ עָרִם וְעֵרִיָּה:

Inter-textual Resonance: The Passover Haggadah: All who elaborate on telling the story of the Exodus from Egypt are to be praised.

וְכָל הַמְרַבֵּה לְסַפֵּר בִּיצִיאַת מִצְרַיִם, הָרִי זֶה מְשֻׁבָּח:

A. Mishnah Sanhedrin 5:2: All [judges] who engage in a more elaborate cross-examination [of a witness in a capital case] are to be praised. It is told of Ben Zakkai that he cross-examined [a witness] about stalks of figs.

כָּל הַמְרַבֵּה בְּבִדְיוֹת, הָרִי זֶה מְשֻׁבָּח. מַעֲשֵׂה וּבְדֵק בֶּן זַכַּי בְּעֵקֶצֵי תַּאֲנִים.

B. Jerusalem Talmud Moed Katan 18b: “All who make elaborate mourning rituals [e.g. fully rending all the outer garments one wears, completely refraining from work during shiva] for their father or mother are to be praised.”

שְׂכַל הַמְרַבֵּה בַעֲסַק עַל אָבִיו וְעַל אִמּוֹ הָרִי זֶה מְשֻׁבָּח.

A Tale of Two Images The Great Seal of the United States of America



(Right) After declaring independence on July 4, 1776, the Continental Congress charged Thomas Jefferson, John Adams, and Benjamin Franklin with recommending a design for the new nation's seal. For the reverse of the Great Seal they agreed on a scene from the Exodus – Moses' arm outstretched over the Red Sea, the Israelites crossing through the parted waters protected by a divine pillar of fire, and Pharaoh's drowning army. They also chose the motto which Jefferson believed was associated with one of the regicides during the English Civil Wars. Their recommendation was tabled.

(Left) As the Revolutionary War drew to a close, in 1782, a new committee endorsed a different image associated with Egypt, the pyramid. The image now appears on the one-dollar bill. According to the artist who designed the seal, the "pyramid signifies strength and duration." Both Latin inscriptions paraphrase verses by the Roman poet Virgil: *Annuit Coeptis*, "He (God) has favored our undertakings;" *Novus Ordo Seclorum*, "A new order of the ages (is born)." The "all seeing eye" represents the eye of providence.

- What are the principal values that underlie these two images?
- Which do you prefer and why?
- What do you make of the fact that one image uses English, the other Latin?

The Last Night in Egypt: Knocking in the Night

The midrash describes what happened on the night of the last plague, the slaying of the Egyptian first born. Egyptian mothers have taken their first born children to the homes of Israelites and beg the Israelites to take their children in so they will escape death. Divide your Seder guests into three groups. Ask one group to play the Egyptian mothers, pleading for the lives of their children. The other two groups are Israelites. One group argues for taking in the Egyptian children. The other group opposes this. In the end, what have your guests decided to do?

When you've finished, read the following tenth century midrash (Exodus Rabbah 18:2):

When Moses said: "I will smite all the firstborn" (Ex. 12:12), some of the Egyptians were afraid and some not; those who were afraid brought their firstborn to an Israelite and said: "Do please allow him to pass with you this night." When midnight struck, God smote all the firstborn; as for those who took asylum in the houses of the Israelites, God passed between the Israelites and the Egyptians, depriving the latter of life while leaving the Israelites alive.

A Passover Puzzle: The Fruits of Israel versus Egypt

Since Passover is the festival par excellence of symbolic foods, here's a perfect puzzle for the Seder.

The Bible associates certain fruits and vegetables with Egypt and others with Israel. During their wanderings in the desert "the Israelites wept and said... 'We remember the fish that we used to eat free in Egypt, the cucumbers, the melons, the leeks, the onions, and the garlic'" (Numbers 11:4-5). When the spies returned from the Promised Land they brought grapes, pomegranates, and figs (Numbers 13:23).

How many reasons can you think of to explain why, cucumbers, melons, leeks, onions, and garlic are associated with Egypt while grapes, pomegranates, and figs are connected with Israel?