

The Multiple Narratives in the Haggadah

What Story Are We Trying to Tell?

Rabbi Elie Kaunfer



*Rabbi Elie Kaunfer is President and CEO of the Hadar Institute. He is the author of *Empowered Judaism*, published by Jewish Lights in 2010. A graduate of Harvard College, he completed his doctorate in liturgy at the Jewish Theological Seminary, where he was also ordained.*

The Haggadah is meant to be a story, literally a “telling.” But what story are we trying to tell?

Rather than one coherent narrative, the Haggadah is a collection of multiple attempts to tell a story with a particular narrative arc. The guideline for this story is found in Mishnah Pesahim 10:4, and charges us with telling a story that begins with degradation (*genut*) and ends with praise (*shevah*).

The Mishnah gives us the arc, but it doesn’t specify which story we should tell. The Talmud, on Pesahim 116a-b, offers two alternatives for the story of the Haggadah. Rav argues that the story is about a journey from idolatry to our faithfulness to God. The second approach, attributed to either Shmuel or Rava (depending on the manuscript), offers an alternative version of the same arc, claiming that we are telling the

story of our journey from slavery to freedom.

I believe there are at least two other hidden versions of this move from degradation to praise in the Haggadah. The first comes in the opening of the Haggadah. We read:

הָאֵל לַחֲמָא עֲנִיא דְאִכְלוּ אֲבֵהֲתַנָּא
בְּאַרְעָא דְמִצְרַיִם.

כָּל דְּכַפִּין יִיתִי וְיִכַּל כָּל דְּצָרִיךְ
יִיתִי וְיִפְסַח.

הַשְּׁתָּא הָכָא, לְשֹׁנָה הַבָּאָה בְּאַרְעָא
דִּישְׂרָאֵל.

הַשְּׁתָּא עֲבָדִי, לְשֹׁנָה הַבָּאָה בְּנִי
חֹרִין.

This is the bread of poverty/affliction which our ancestors ate in the land of Egypt. Let all who are hungry come and eat. Let all who are needy come and celebrate Pesah. Now we are here; next year

in the land of Israel.
Now we are slaves, next
year—free.

After the invitation for all to come and eat, we see another story of degradation to praise (although not explicitly identified as such). The familiar arc is expressed first with regard to Land: as a move from here (diaspora) to Israel. Then the arc is expressed again as a move from slavery to freedom. This contrasts with the disagreement in the Talmud in two ways. First, it is not presented as a disagreement at all: It is two sentences that offer alternative journeys, without highlighting their differences. And second, while the debate between Rav and Shmuel/Rava was expressed as how to tell the story of the past, this is a multi-vocal presentation of the story in which we are still living out. This isn’t recalling a journey, it is living a journey in the present, and looking toward a time of “praise” which is

only to be found next year, in the future.

There is another selection from the Haggadah that plays out the theme of degradation to praise in yet another way. The opinion of Shmuel/Rava is expressed in our Haggadah in fuller language than it is in the Babylonian Talmud:

עבדים היינו לפרעה במצרים.
ויוציאנו ה' אלהינו משם ביד
חזקה ובזרוע נטויה. ואלו לא
הוציא הקדוש ברוך הוא את
אבותינו

ממצרים הרי אנו ובנינו ובני
בנינו משועבדים היינו לפרעה
במצרים. ואפילו כולנו חכמים
כולנו נבונים כולנו זקנים כולנו
יודעים את התורה. מצוה עלינו
לספר ביציאת מצרים.

וכל המרבה לספר ביציאת מצ-
רים הרי זה משובח.

We were slaves to Pharaoh in Egypt. But YHVH our God took us out of there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm. And if the Holy Blessed One had not taken our ancestors out of

Egypt, then we, our children, and our grandchildren would still be enslaved to Pharaoh in Egypt. And even if we were all wise, we were all perceptive, we were all elders, and we were all learned in Torah, it would still be our

This isn't recalling a journey, it is living a journey.

duty to tell about the Exodus from Egypt.
And the more one talks about the Exodus from Egypt, behold, this is praiseworthy.

Here, the arc from degradation to praise seems straightforward in the first line: We were slaves (degradation) and God took us out (praise)—echoing Shmuel/Rava's opinion in the Talmud. But the paragraph goes on to identify another form of praise: telling the story. The more one talks about the Exodus, the more praiseworthy (*meshubah*) one is. This linguistic connection between the *shevah* of the Mishnah and the *meshubah* of the act of telling brings the story into a different focus: The arrival at the end of the journey is not one of leaving Egypt or of entering the land or of committing to God. It is the act of telling that is the end of the journey. This brings us to the present moment. For both Rav and Shmuel/Rava the entire arc of the story is firmly in the past. For Ha Lahma Anya the arc ends in the future. This section identifies the praise with the present activity. We reach praise when we tell the story.

As you gather at your Seder to share stories this year, ask yourself which narrative speaks to you? How might you find your way to *shevah* (praise) this year? ♦