



WWW.PROJECTZUG.ORG

Storytelling at the Seder

An Excerpt of a Project Zug course from Dena Weiss

◆ Mishnah Pesahim 10:5-6

The text produced here is found in our printed editions of the Mishnah. These modern editions broadly reflect what we find in our Haggadah today, but differ significantly from the versions found in medieval manuscripts. Nonetheless, these differences are not crucial here—but for the interested reader to track down! A good place to start is the commentary by Joshua Kulp found at the back of *The Schechter Haggadah*.

The Haggadah teaches us that it is a *mitzvah* to tell the story of the Exodus from Egypt and that the more we tell the story, the more worthy of praise we become. However, the original paschal sacrifice happened in Egypt, before there was a redemptive story to tell. And even some later sources indicate that storytelling wasn't the primary form of teaching and discussing at the Seder. In this session, we'll look a little bit at one of the alternatives to storytelling and examine what we think we are gaining and what we might be losing when we move the conversation around the Seder to this different mode.

I. THE SEDER IN THE MISHNAH

The Seder as we know it is modeled after the guidelines presented by the Mishnah in the 10th chapter of Pesahim, though the Haggadah that we use now has gone through much modification and expansion throughout the years. In this text we are going to look for the kernel of the obligation to tell the story of the Exodus on Passover. As you are reading the text, try to figure out how the different sections relate to each other.

Often in the Mishnah, there will be a disagreement without any language that says explicitly “I disagree.” When different opinions are offered it is up to us as the learners of this text to figure out how those opinions relate to each other. Is opinion 2 restating opinion 1? Expanding on opinion 1? Uninterested in opinion 1? Rejecting opinion 1?

SOURCE #1

משנה פסחים י:ה-ו

מִזְגוּ לוֹ כּוֹס שֵׁנִי, וְכָאֵן הֵבֵן
שׂוֹאֵל אָבִיו, וְאִם אֵין דַּעַת
בְּבֶן, אָבִיו מְלַמְדוֹ, מֵהַ
נִשְׁתַּנָּה הַלַּיְלָה הַזֶּה מִכָּל
הַלַּיְלוֹת, שֶׁבָּקֵל הַלַּיְלוֹת
אָנוּ אוֹכְלִין חֶמֶץ וּמָצָה,
הַלַּיְלָה הַזֶּה כֻּלּוֹ מָצָה.
שֶׁבָּקֵל הַלַּיְלוֹת אָנוּ אוֹכְלִין
שָׂאֵר יִרְקוֹת, הַלַּיְלָה הַזֶּה
מְרוֹר. שֶׁבָּקֵל הַלַּיְלוֹת אָנוּ
אוֹכְלִין בֶּשָׂר צֶלִי, שְׁלִיק,

Mishnah Pesahim 10:5-6◆

The second cup is poured and here the son asks his father—and if the son is not cognitively capable, his father trains him to ask—“*Mah Nishtanah Halayla Haze*h? How is this night different from all other nights? For on all other nights we eat either leavened bread or *matzah*, but on this night we eat only *matzah*. For on all other nights we eat other vegetables, but on this night we eat only *maror*. For on all

◆ **roasted**

Since we are no longer participating in and eating the paschal sacrifice, the text in our Haggadah replaces the question about preparing the meat with a question about reclining. (In earlier versions of the Mishnah also, the line about *maror* was missing and there were only a total of three questions).

ומבשול, הלילה הזה
כלו צלי. שבכל הלילות
אנו מטבילין פעם אחת,
הלילה הזה שתי פעמים.
ולפי דעתו של בן, אביו
מלמדו.

מתחיל בגנות ומסיים
בשבח, ודורש מארמי
אובד אבי, עד שיגמר כל
הפרשה כלה:

רבן גמליאל היה אומר,
כל שלא אמר שלשה
דברים אלו בפסח, לא יצא
ידי חובתו, ואלו הן, פסח,
מצה, ומרור. פסח, על שום
שפסח המקום על בתי
אבותינו במצרים. מצה,
על שום שנאכלו אבותינו
במצרים. מרור, על שום
שמררו המצרים את חיי
אבותינו במצרים.

בכל דור ודור חייב אדם
לראות את עצמו כאילו
הוא יצא ממצרים, שנאמר
(שמות יג:ח) "והגדת
לבנך ביום ההוא לאמר,
בעבור זה עשה ה' לי
בצאתי ממצרים". לפיכך
אנחנו חייבין להודות,
להלל, לשבח, לפאר,
לרומם, להדר, לברך,
לעלה, ולקלס, למי שעשה
לאבותינו ולנו את כל
הנסים האלו, הוציאנו

other nights we eat meat roasted, stewed, or cooked, but on this night we eat only roasted. ◆ For on all other nights we only dip once, but tonight we dip twice. And according to the cognitive abilities of the son, his father teaches him.

He (= the father) begins with the negative and ends with the positive, and he teaches the passage from "My father was a wandering Aramean" (Devarim 26:5) until he finishes the whole section.

Rabban Gamliel would say: Whoever didn't say these three things on Passover does not fulfill their obligation. And these are they: *pesah* (paschal offering), *matzah*, and *maror*. *Pesah*—because the Omnipresent jumped over (*pasah*) the houses of our forefathers in Egypt. *Matzah*—because our forefathers were redeemed in Egypt. *Maror*—because the Egyptians embittered the lives of our forefathers in Egypt.

In each and every generation a person must view himself as though he left Egypt himself, as it says: "And you shall tell your son on that day saying, because of this which God did for me when I left Egypt" (Shemot 13:8). Therefore we are obligated to acknowledge, praise, glorify, extol, exalt, honor, bless, revere, and laud the One who performed all of these miracles for our ancestors and for us: He took us out from slavery to freedom, from anguish to joy, from mourning to a Festival, from darkness

◆ Tosefta's

The Tosefta is a collection of oral tradition that runs parallel to the Mishnah. It comes from roughly the same time and place (3rd century Eretz Yisrael) and features many of the same Sages. The precise relationship between the Mishnah and the Tosefta is a hot topic of modern scholarship!

מַעֲבָדוֹת לְחֵרוֹת, מִיָּגוֹן
לְשִׁמְחָה, וּמֵאֲבֵל לְיוֹם
טוֹב, וּמֵאֲפֵלָה לְאוֹר גָּדוֹל,
וּמִשְׁעָבוֹד לְגֵאֻלָּה. וְנֹאמַר
לְפָנָיו, הַלְלוּיָהּ:

to a great light, and from enslavement
to redemption. And we will say before
Him: *Halleluyah!*

Questions from Dena Weiss

1. In the Mishnah we see the questions of the Mah Nishtanah. Do these questions ever get answered? If so, how? If not, how do we understand the role of asking these questions?!
2. These two *mishnayot* can be divided into four sections: a) the four questions, b) the obligation to tell the story with a negative to positive arc based on the biblical passage of “My father was a wandering Aramean,” c) Rabban Gamliel’s three things one needs to say, and d) the obligation to look at oneself as if we were redeemed from Egypt and are therefore obligated to praise God.

Let’s look at b, c, and d as three different possible responses to the child’s four questions.

- » Why would the response to these questions be the story?
 - » Why would the response to these questions be explaining the three items: *pesah*, *matzah*, *maror*?
 - » Why would the response to these questions be our obligation to praise?
 - » Are these three options in tension or in harmony with one another?
 - » What do you think the right approach is?
3. In the Mishnah, there appears to be a scripted, if not word for word, sense of which questions to ask and options for responses. Does it make sense to have a scripted question and answer? What are the benefits of having these guidelines? What are the downsides?

II. ANOTHER MODEL OF THE SEDER

What is the obligation for storytelling as we see it in the Haggadah? What is it an alternative to? In this section we are going to look at the Tosefta’s understanding of what is supposed to happen at the Passover meal. In the Tosefta, we will see a different version of a familiar story from the Haggadah. We’ll read them both and then try to tease out the significant difference between them.

◆ **They**

It is not clear who the “they” are who are coming into the story. It appears that “they” cannot be Rabban Gamliel and his associates, because it says “from in front of them”—meaning that a third party came in and removed something from in front of them. Probably, it means servants or their students.

◆ **plate**

In the Hebrew it merely says that they raised “it” from in front of Rabban Gamliel and the Elders, but does not say what they raised. Most likely, “they” are taking the tray or plate from before them, signifying that the meal is over.

SOURCE #2

תוספתא פסחים י:ח

אין מפטירין אחר הפסח
[אפיקומן] כגון [אגוזים]
תמרים [וקליות] חייב
אדם [לעסוק בהלכות
הפסח] כל הלילה אפילו
בינו לבין בנו אפילו בינו
לבין עצמו אפילו בינו לבין
תלמידו.

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...

Tosefta Pesahim 10:8

We do not follow the paschal offering with an *afikoman* like nuts, dates, and toasted wheat. A person is obligated to engage with the laws of Passover the whole night, even if it [is only a discussion] between him and his son, even just between him and himself, even if it is just between him and his student.

It happened that Rabban Gamliel and the Elders were having the meal in the house of Beitos ben Zunin in Lod, and they were engaging with the laws of Passover all night until the cock's crow. They[◆] raised the [plate[◆]] from in front of them, and they [then] convened and went to the house of study...

SOURCE #3

הגדה של פסח

ואפילו בָּלָנוּ חֲכָמִים בָּלָנוּ
נְבוֹנִים בָּלָנוּ זְקֵנִים בָּלָנוּ
יֹדְעִים אֶת הַתּוֹרָה מִצְוָה
עָלֵינוּ לְסַפֵּר בִּיצִיאַת מִצְרָיִם.
וְכָל הַמְרַבֵּה לְסַפֵּר בִּיצִיאַת
מִצְרָיִם הָרִי זֶה מְשֻׁבָּח.

מַעֲשֵׂה בְּרַבִּי אֱלִיעֶזֶר וּבְרַבִּי
יְהוֹשֻׁעַ וּבְרַבִּי אֶלְעָזָר בֶּן עֲזַרְיָה
וּבְרַבִּי עֲקִיבָא וּבְרַבִּי טַרְפוֹן
שֶׁהָיוּ מְסֻבִּין בְּבֵנֵי בֵּרַק וְהָיוּ
מְסַפְּרִים בִּיצִיאַת מִצְרָיִם

Passover Haggadah

And even if we are all wise and all understanding and all elders and all knowledgeable in the Torah, it is a *mitzvah* for us to tell the story of the Exodus from Egypt. And anyone who tells the story of the Exodus from Egypt at length is praised.

It happened that R. Eliezer, R. Yehoshua, R. Elazar ben Azaria, R. Akiva, and R. Tarfon were all eating together in Benei Berak and were telling the story of the Exodus from

◆ **morning Shema**

Though we generally think of saying the Shema as part of the morning and evening prayers, reciting Shema twice a day is an independent obligation with different timing. One is permitted to say the morning Shema when light just peeks through the horizon, while reciting the full Shāḥarit prayers can only happen after sunrise.

◆ **in the Haggadah**

On this transition, see David Henshke, *Mah Nishtanah: The Passover Night in the Sages' Discourse* (in Hebrew).

כָּל אוֹתוֹ הַלַּיְלָה, עַד שֶׁבָּאוּ
תַּלְמִידֵיהֶם וְאָמְרוּ לָהֶם
רַבּוֹתֵינוּ הִגִּיעַ זְמַן קְרִיאַת
שְׁמַע שֶׁל שַׁחֲרִית.

Egypt that whole night. Until their students came and said to them, “Our teachers! The time has come to recite the morning Shema.”◆

Questions from Dena Weiss

1. In these texts we have two stories about rabbis staying up all night. Rabban Gamliel and his colleagues (“the Elders”) appear in the Tosefta, while R. Eliezer *et al* appear in the Haggadah. What are the rabbis studying in each of these stories? In each story, how do they know that it’s morning? What do these rabbis do when they realize it is morning in each of the stories?
2. It seems that we have a transition between the standard scholarly activity of studying laws in the Tosefta to a more innovative decision to imagine the rabbis as telling the story in the Haggadah.◆ And this story comes to “prove” that, no matter how scholarly you are, you also need to tell the story. Why is this an important part? Why isn’t it the case that we just tell the story to children, but not to adults or scholars?
3. The Haggadah not only says that everyone is obligated to tell the story, but it also says that the more one elaborates and the more they tell, the more praiseworthy they are. Why is telling stories considered to be such a good thing in the context of the Seder?