



ואכלו את הבשר בלילה הזה

Commemoration or Reenactment?

The Exodus and the Timing of the Seder

Rabbi Ethan Tucker – tucker@hadar.org

Parashat Bo 5776

I. Introduction

We remember things in all sorts of ways. Most commonly, we commemorate them. We engage in rituals and ceremonies that will call ideas and experiences to mind. We set aside days that are focused on various themes and historical occurrences. Sitting in our own space and time in the present, we conjure up memories of the past. Commemoration can be flexible and adaptive. George Washington's birthday can be observed on the Monday closest to February 22nd if the day falls on an inconvenient day of the week. Creative ceremonies can be created to connect the treasured memory more effectively to contemporary sensibilities. Fireworks on the 4th of July help create a celebratory and magical atmosphere that can inspire gratitude for America's history and loyalty to its ideals.

Sometimes, we remember through reenactment. If commemoration is about transporting a memory from the past into the present, reenactments aim to transport people living in the present back into the past. When the Declaration of Independence is read in period dress from the steps of the National Archives on July 4th, when men suit up in colonial and crown costume in Lexington, MA on Patriots' Day, the goal is reenactment. Timing, dress and location are all critical for achieving this effect. Reenactments are more rigid, more demanding of the participants. They aim to do something unconventional and require both more preparation and more involvement.



The Pesah Seder is a perfect example of a Jewish event that mixes elements of commemoration and reenactment. We don't travel back to Egypt each year in order to reenact the exact experience of the Exodus, nor is there a requirement to mimic the unified Temple ritual by gathering all in one place to observe the commandments associated with this special evening. As such, this home-based ritual, observed home by home across the world has strong commemorative elements.

But a thread of reenactment runs strongly through the Seder rituals as well and, in some contexts, comes to dominate and define them. In this week's longer essay, I explore in depth one particular aspect of the Seder: its timing. The question of when to start (and end) the Seder is ancient in its pedigree and contemporary in its ongoing ability to create family tension. In this summary, I will briefly review the different answers that emerge from the sources and aim to illuminate the values that stand behind these various positions. I would suggest that beneath the technical debate is a deeper discussion over the Seder and whether it is primarily a commemoration or a reenactment.

II. Timing of the Exodus and its annual reenactment

The Torah preserves a somewhat complex account of the timing of the departure from Egypt, and this is on full display in this week's Torah reading. On the one hand, Moshe warns Pharaoh that the final plague will come in the middle of the night, כחצת הלילה, striking down the Egyptian firstborn, and the Egyptians will then press the Israelites to leave immediately. According to one part of the narrative, this is exactly what happens, with the Israelites picking up and leaving in the middle of the night, carrying unrisen dough in their kneading bowls on their shoulders. Normally, dough would have been mixed prior to going to sleep and allowed to rise overnight, so that it could be baked first thing in the morning. Here, that process is prematurely ended as they leave in the middle of the night.

In accordance with this memory of nighttime departure, **Devarim 16** specifies the precise timing of the Paschal sacrifice as being in the evening, when the sun has set, at the time you left Egypt. This text is clearly not concerned with midnight *per sé*. It is sufficient to consume this sacrifice sometime after the end of daylight, thus locating the ritual in the night as opposed to the day. The sky above will look the same as it did when our ancestors fled.



However, other passages suggest a different story. We hear also in our *parashah* ואתם לא תצאו—the Israelites are to remain indoors all night, waiting for the Egyptian firstborn to be smitten so that they can leave triumphantly in the morning. But this passage too specifies that the lamb to be eaten as part of the nightlong vigil must be eaten at **night**—ואכלו את הבשר בלילה הזה.

This complex narrative evoked several rabbinic attempts at harmonization. The basic conclusion: The actual physical Exodus happened in the morning. But the Israelites already experienced themselves as *redeemed* at night, even before they left, knowing that the Egyptians' fate had been sealed and their bondage had ended. As a result, Pesah offerings—unlike any other sacrifice—may not be eaten while it is still day. In the words of **Mishnah Zevahim 5:8**: הפסח אינו נאכל אלא בלילה. Its consumption must wait for nightfall, in keeping with Devarim's basic directive: Consumption of the Paschal sacrifice is a *reenactment* of its initial consumption in Egypt. Just as the Torah tells the generation of the Exodus that they must eat the meat of the lamb בלילה הזה—at **night**—so too, later generations eating the Paschal sacrifice must reenact this timing and wait until nightfall. Shemot 12:8 states that the Paschal lamb is eaten with מצות/*matzah* and מרורים/bitter herbs, placing the consumption of these items at night as well.

Having established that the ritual foods must be eaten at night, what about the rest of what we know as the Seder, the *maggid*? This often lengthy portion of the evening is equally central, and, if anything, establishing when it must happen is much more determinative of the timing of the Seder in contemporary environments.

Rabbinic sources assume that retelling the glory of the story of the Exodus and expressing gratitude for it are core parts of the observance of Pesah. The Paschal sacrifice of old and the Seder of today are not mere celebratory family meals, they are also meant to be reaffirmations of the national story. For *Hazal*, this narrative part of the ritual was anchored in another verse from this week's Torah reading, one that imagines a parent explaining to a child the reason for the annual Paschal sacrifice:

שמות יג:

והגדת לבנך ביום ההוא לאמר בעבור זה עשה ה' לי בצאתי ממצרים:

Shemot 13:8



And you shall tell your child on that day, as follows: “It is because of this, what the Lord did for me when I went out of Egypt.”

On a surface level, the plain sense of this verse seems to be a general instruction to inform one’s children—when they ask—about the meaning of these rituals and practices connected to the commemoration of the Exodus. **ביום ההוא** means, “in the future,” on the day when your child asks. But the surrounding verses deal with the specific observances around the Pesah holiday, opening up the notion that **ביום ההוא** means, “on that day,” i.e. the date when you do these things each year. This verse thus becomes the basis for the idea of the obligation to *tell* the story once a year. The Mekhilta, an early *midrash* on the book of Shemot, indeed derives from here that the telling of the story must be linked to the annual rituals of Pesah. One only fulfills the obligation to tell the story “at a time when *matzah* and *maror* are laid out in front of you on your table.” This would seem to demand that the story must be told at night as well, when one can fulfill the obligation of eating *matzah*. This suggests treating the storytelling itself as a kind of reenactment: We only tell the story about the Exodus once we have entered into the time of day—nighttime—when the Exodus actually happens. We are not telling a story *about* the Exodus, we are asking people to inhabit the narrative in the first person, something they can only do at the proper time.

III. Medieval models

In fact, however, various medieval authorities interpreted these materials in conflicting ways and generated four different models for thinking about the timing of the Seder. (I review the textual and legal arguments in the longer essay.) What do these various legal positions stand for? How does the seemingly minor detail of timing affect our experience of the Seder? I would like to suggest that each position here encodes very different understandings of the rituals on the first night of Pesah, such that we should understand the argument here to be a proxy for a broader debate as to what the Seder is all about. Rather than focusing on stringencies and leniencies, we should ask ourselves what it looks like to inhabit each of these halakhic positions in real, religious time.



A. Commemoration

The first approach is that of R. Yehudah Sir Leon, a 12th-13th century French Tosafist. He suggests that we must understand the obligation to eat the Paschal-offering and the *matzah* at night not as grounded in *astronomy*, but about the proper ritual calendrical frame. As long as one has ritually begun the 15th of Nisan—by lighting candles, saying Kiddush or otherwise mentally accepting Yom Tov—one can eat the sacrificial meal and its components. This notion of *תוספת יום טוב*—starting the festival early and transforming mundane time into sacred time—is of biblical force, and can actually turn the waning hours of the 14th of Nisan into the 15th. When the Torah says *וְאָכְלוּ אֶת הַבָּשָׂר בַּלַּיְלָה הַזֶּה* / “You shall eat the meat on this night”—it means to say that you may not eat this meat until you have begun treating it like the nighttime, with all of its corollary restrictions and liturgical character. It is not, however, demanding that the sky above be dark and full of stars. This would mean that a Seder can be begun well before nightfall, since the *kiddush* at the beginning establishes the time frame as that of Yom Tov and can usher in *Pesah* early, validating even biblical commandments.

This casts the entire Seder as a commemoration, not a reenactment. Not unlike July 4th celebrations, we gather on a specific date to recall a momentous event in our history. But we do not imagine that we are reenacting it in any precise way. What matters is that we convene in a time that we treat as the 15th of Nisan. Even if it is broad daylight out, even if the entire Seder is completed before it is fully dark, we are still convening in the evening of the basic date when the redemption happened years ago. The power accorded Jews to begin sacred days early makes such an “early” commemoration both real and effective.

B. Gearing up for reenactment

Described this way, it should be no surprise that this view is utterly rejected by all who encounter it and it plays no subsequent role in the halakhic discussion. Abandoning reenactment to this degree, playing with the meaning of *הלילה הזה* / “this night” to this extent, was simply too much for most interpreters.

R. Ya’akov of Corbeil, a Tosafistic contemporary of R. Yehudah Sir Leon, emphasizes that eating the *matzah*, like eating the *Pesah*-offering it is meant to accompany, is a reenactment that must take place after dark. With the ritual eating at the Seder, we imagine ourselves standing in the shoes of our ancestors in Egypt, “tasting” the deliverance that is about to



come. Put most tangibly, *matzah* must be eaten at a time when we can look up in the sky and see the same darkness that our ancestors would have as they spent their final hours waiting for redemption.

The storytelling, however, can happen earlier. The *haggadah* functions much like an orientation film at a good museum: In order to imbue the potentially pedestrian artifacts with meaning and gravity, the film tells a story that emotionally cues up the visitor for a peak experience. *Matzah* is, after all, bread. For it to be filled with meaning, for it to conjure up redemption, we must set the stage for its central and religiously elevated role. This is the role of the Exodus story, which must be told as the “*matzah* and bitter herbs are lying in front of you on your table.” Indeed, this is the explicit structure of the very end of *maggid*, which culminates in Rabban Gamliel’s stripped down version of the story’s obligation: to explain and contextualize the Pesah-offering, *matzah*, and bitter herbs. The story is thus essential, but it is the handmaiden of the ritual eating. The center of the evening is the *matzah*, just as the point of a museum is its artifacts. Nonetheless, the opening film is critical (and often extremely popular), and so too is the *haggadah*, without which the Seder might not be much different than any other night of Pesah when *matzah* and romaine lettuce might be on the menu as well.

C. Finding ourselves in the story

For **Maharil**, a few centuries later in Germany, there is more to the story telling than this. Not merely an introduction for the *matzah*, the *haggadah* is *itself* a reenactment that must happen at night. For this approach, there are ramifications of taking seriously the *haggadah*’s imperative that *בכל דור ודור חייב אדם לראות את עצמו כאילו הוא יצא ממצרים* / “In every generation, one must see oneself as if one has personally left Egypt.” Most notably, the story doesn’t just prepare us to reenact the consumption of *matzah*, it invites us to become its protagonists. We too depart Egypt each year on the 15th of Nisan, something we can only do if we tell the story at the time of day when we were delivered. For Maharil, telling the story during the day is like trying to reenact a historical battle in contemporary civilian clothing. Not only will the mood not be set, but there will be no real reenactment to speak of. Delaying the story itself until the nighttime is the only way to fulfill the biblical imperative to see this story as being about us, not our ancestors. *ואותנו הוציא משם*—God took *us* out of there, and we can look up at that sky at that moment of narrative reenactment and see the same moon and stars that our ancestors saw as the story happened to them in real time. This reenactment is of course



encased in a festive meal, which happens in the present. *Kiddush* introduces that meal like on any other sacred day, and its timing is not especially important on this night. But once we move to the special rituals of the evening and hear children asking about things we do בלילה הזה, on this night, it must indeed be night.

D. The Seder: A set piece

Terumat Ha-Desehen, just half a century later, takes us further. For him, the entire Seder is a set piece entirely about reenactment. It is a *Seder*, an order where every piece plays a role. Not only the *matzah*, not only the story, invite us in as protagonists. Even the festive cups of wine we drink on all manner of festive occasions take on mythic significance on this night. The four cups become reminders and experiences of redemption itself, conjuring up the four promises of redemption made by God to Moshe. If we are to experience the wine in this way, how can we begin before the hour of redemption has arrived? For Terumat Ha-Deshen, there essentially is no normal evening meal on the Seder night. Everything we do, from *kiddush* through the ritual eating, is intended to transport us to another time and place. When we recite the order of the Seder, קידוש plays just as critical a role as מוציא מצה in shaping the character of the evening. We wait until the time of redemption—the dark, starry night with its full moon—before we begin our dramatic reenactment. Waiting for dark to say *kiddush* is perhaps the most intense way to assert that this is no commemoration, no mere holiday meal where family gathers together. This is a ritual time capsule of sorts, one that spirits us back to our founding moment as a nation.

IV. Conclusion

The **Shulhan Arukh** takes a strict view on starting *kiddush* after dark, following Terumat Ha-Deshen. There is no question that this position is completely dominant and vastly preferred by all as the ideal way of doing things. This is true both for reasons of substance—the Terumat Ha-Deshen’s compelling vision of a set piece of reenactment from beginning to end—and reasons of convention and authority—the Shulhan Arukh rules this way. To compromise on the start time of the Seder is to weaken the very powerful experience of לראות את עצמנו כאילו יצאנו ממצרים/to see ourselves as if we left Egypt. This is a reenactment. Drinking the four cups to the lees means drinking them all after dark.



Nonetheless, sometimes a given Seder must account for the very elderly or the ill. Also common is the predicament of a person attending a Seder where the host is not attuned to concerns around start time, and will not be persuaded to change what has become conventional and convenient for the other attendees. The latter sort of case can lead guests to get stuck without a clear sense of how to proceed without causing a major family dispute. The sources we investigate in the longer essay and alluded to here reveal a richer language for understanding a variety of practices that deviate from what emerged as halakhic consensus in most communities. In particular, great *poskim* like the Hatam Sofer revive the viability of views that permit the telling of the story to culminate in eating *matzah* immediately upon nightfall. It is appropriate to rely on such views in cases of extreme need, and I explore these at in greater depth in this week's longer essay.

By contrast, healthy children of an age who can really participate in the Seder blessedly love staying up late, and appreciate better than most adults the power of dramatic reenactments like that of the Seder. Our culture routinely enables and validates late nights for the World Series, the Super Bowl or the stroke of midnight on December 31st. The Seder is a wonderful opportunity to remind our children that Jewish rituals are of ultimate importance and at least as significant as these other secular milestones. Making the language of הלילה הזה real is a powerful dimension of this once (or twice) a year reenactment. And of course, Judaism is a religion for adults. Children surely play a critical role at the Seder, but on a deeper level, it is not a pediatric experience. Part of attending a Seder as a child is growing into it, reaching each year ever more resolutely to make it to the end, after a few years of passing out on a couch immediately after the meal is served. This is a journey that takes effort. Like all journeys into adulthood, it is demanding and ultimately gives a deep sense of having fully entered a grown-up space, to have taken one's place in this great annual reenactment of the Jewish people.

May the Seder this year and every year be redemptive. And may its unusual rituals and timing transport us to another place, elevating and inspiring us in the process.

