

TALK THIS WAY

Dena Weiss

The storytelling of the Seder is highly prescribed. The story must be told dialogically, through a process of questions and answers. It must have a positive arc, starting with the negative and ending with the positive.¹ And there is a preference for length, as we say in the Haggadah: **וכל המרבה לספר ביציאת מצרים - הרי זה משובח** - anyone who tells the story of the exodus from Egypt at length is praised."

The editor in me finds this last recommendation to be at odds with what I consider to be a good and compelling way to tell a story. Why do we incentivize the storytellers at the Seder to drone on and on? Why shouldn't we choose to be concise? What is the value of this lengthy telling?

I think that the way to understand this storytelling guideline is in light of another. A key element of the Seder's drama is that each person is told that we should think of ourselves as if we had left Egypt.² When something truly miraculous, exciting, and life-changing happens to us, we want to talk about it; we want to tell everyone about it—and in a way that is not edited and meticulously planned. We repeat ourselves, we exaggerate the exciting moments, we punctuate our telling with exclamations—"Can you believe it?!" "It was the most amazing thing!" "I still can't get over it!" And the story might, in fact, be amazing, but it is unlikely to be told in the most artful way. The way that we tell the story of the Exodus needs to accord with the unbridled enthusiasm we would feel about what had happened to us if we ourselves had experienced these miracles and seen the hand of God, if we ourselves had been redeemed. An excited telling is also, often, a verbose telling.

This approach of celebratory recounting on Pesah is in stark contrast to the somber tone of Tisha B'Av, when we commemorate the loss of our freedom and mourn the

destruction of the Temple and all it represents. The destruction doesn't inspire garrulous conversation. It is accompanied by shock and a loss for words, as it says in Eikhah (3:28), **ישב בדד וידם כי נטל עליו** - he sits alone, and is silent, for he has laid [it] on him." When we relive the trauma, we adopt the same approach of stunned silence.

On Tisha B'Av, in contrast to Pesah, speech is limited and restrained. When the atmosphere of mourning is at its most intense, even greeting one another and asking, "how are you doing?" is prohibited.³ When the news is terrible, we are careful and mindful about how we speak and how much we say. We are sparing with our words. We are deliberate in our speech and similarly deliberate in our silence.

This approach to national tragedy is a reflection of the behavior of individual mourners. A person who is mourning the loss of a relative is encouraged to be appropriately silent and anyone who comes to comfort the mourner is obligated to take their cues from the mourner: being silent when the mourner is silent, and engaging the mourner in appropriate conversation if that is what the mourner invites:

רמב"ם משנה תורה הלכות אבל

הכ, יג:

ומניין שהאביל אסור בשאילת שלום, שנאמר "היאנך דום" (יחזקאל כד:יז) ... אם בשאילת שלום נאסר האביל קל וחומר שהוא אסור להרבות דברים ולשחוק, שנאמר "דום" (שם) ...

ואינן רשאים לומר דבר, עד שיפתח האביל תחילה את פיו - שנאמר "ואין דובר אליו, דבר" (איוב ב:יג) ... וכיון שניענע האביל בראשו, שוב אין המנחמין רשאים לישוב אצלו, שלא יטריחוהו יותר מדי.

Maimonides Mishneh Torah
Laws of the Mourner 5:20, 13:3

From where do we know that a mourner is prohibited from greeting [people]? As it says, "restrain yourself in silence" (Yehezkel 24:17)... and if the mourner is prohibited from greeting people, how much more so is it forbidden for them to speak excessively and to laugh, as it says, "silence." ...

And [the comforters] are not allowed to say anything until the mourner first opens their mouth, as it says, "and no one was saying anything to him" (Iyyov 2:13)... and once they nod their head, the comforters are no longer permitted to sit with them, so as not to overly inconvenience them.

Just as on Tisha B'Av our speech patterns are modeled after how an individual mourner behaves, so too on Pesah we talk the way an individual who has experienced the Exodus would talk. A mourner might have a hard time finding the right words, might need some space and some silence; a celebrant wants to tell you all about it, and the more they get to elaborate, the happier they become!

The lesson of being sensitive to the mourner's needs with respect to speaking or not speaking is one that we are accustomed to. When we are having a difficult conversation or are talking with someone who is experiencing sorrow, we naturally have a heightened awareness of ourselves as attentive listeners and participants in the conversation. When the Haggadah encourages all of us to tell the story with rapturous and repetitive language, it has the mirror lesson to teach us. Just as there are guidelines to follow around speaking about difficult things, so too there are guidelines for when we are talking to someone with great news to share. Just as we take our conversational cues from someone who is suffering in silence, so too

1 Mishnah Pesahim 10:4.

2 As we say in the Haggadah: **הוא יצא ממצרים**.

3 See Shulhan Arukh Orah Hayyim 554:20.

we need to take our conversational cues from the person who is jubilant and garrulous. We should honor and participate in their joy through active and enthusiastic listening.

This is an important and overlooked element of what it means to be a supportive friend. We aren't just there "if you need to talk" about something difficult. We also should be there when our friends and community members need someone to listen to their excitement. We should invite them to tell their happy stories to us! Even if the telling is somewhat repetitive, or less than riveting, or even if we've heard it before. Just as we support people by allowing them to express their sorrowful emotions, so too we need to support people in allowing them to express their happy emotions and letting them know that just as we are with them in their sorrow, we are also with them in their joy. ♦