

A SEDER OF RETELLINGS

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UNLIKE MOST HOLIDAYS in our liturgical year, which ask us to connect to God through *tefillah* or a festive meal, the Pesah Seder invites us into a different sort of experience, one centered on how we see ourselves. A succinct formulation of this goal appears in our Seder script: “בְּכָל דּוֹר וָדוֹר חַיִּיב אָדָם לִרְאוֹת אֶת עַצְמוֹ כְּאִלּוּ הוּא יֵצֵא מִמִּצְרָיִם” - In every generation a person is obligated to see themselves as though they left Egypt.” The goal of the Seder is to see ourselves into an experience that happened in our distant past. This statement seems to imply that we’re supposed to imagine ourselves in a story in which we were not, literally speaking, characters. How do we get ourselves inside an experience that happened to our spiritual ancestors thousands of years ago?

The Haggadah answers this question in a way I find surprising. Rather than including some suggested passages from the book of Shemot, which chronicles the events of the Exodus itself “in real time,” our Haggadah text is a compilation of many texts, each recounting earlier generations’ own retellings of the Exodus story. Sprinkled throughout are a few moments of personal reenactment, but much of the story we tell on Seder night is not about a moment in time, but rather a story about storytelling. We find Rabbis telling the Exodus story in Benei Berak, parents telling the story four different ways to four different children, a recounting of a prophecy in which God foretells to Avraham what will happen, and then the core text of the Haggadah: a retelling of the Exodus story that Moshe commands the Israelites to recite as they offer their first fruits in the Temple (Devarim 26:3-8). Why does the Haggadah offer all of these retellings and foretellings of the story, rather than the story itself?

In an interview, Rachel Sharansky Danziger compares the Seder to the way her parents spoke about their own flight from the Soviet Union; she says that the authors of

the Haggadah “force us not to go away from our life to somebody else’s story, but rather to bring ourselves, our detective ability, our emotions, our memories into the story we’re looking at and thus bring the story into our life where we are.”¹ Danziger picks up on an important feature of the Haggadah, that we “bring the story into our life where we are.” The Haggadah does this by having us recite stories of people who have done so in the past. Reciting these texts connects us not only to our ancestors in their moment of redemption from Egypt, but also to the span of people connecting to that story. These stories each model different ways in; they offer us different paths for bringing ourselves into the story of the Exodus.

The most striking example of this is the passage from Devarim 26:

דברים כו:ג-ח

וּבָאתָ אֶל־הַכֹּהֵן אֲשֶׁר יִהְיֶה בַּיָּמִים הָהֵם וְאָמַרְתָּ
אֵלָיו הַגִּדְתִּי הַיּוֹם לְה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ כִּי־בָאתִי אֶל־הָאָרֶץ
אֲשֶׁר נִשְׁבַּע ה' לַאֲבֹתֵינוּ לָתֵת לָנוּ: וְלָקַח הַכֹּהֵן
הַשֵּׁנָא מִיָּדְךָ וְהִנִּיחוּ לִפְנֵי מִזְבֵּחַ ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ: וְעָנִיתָ
וְאָמַרְתָּ לִפְנֵי ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ

אֲרָמִי אֲבָד אָבִי וַיֵּרֶד מִצְרָיִמָּה וַיְגֵר שָׁם בְּמִתֵּי מַעֲט
וַיְהִי־שָׁם לְגוֹי גָּדוֹל עָצוּם וָרֹב: וַיִּרְעוּ אֹתוֹ הַמִּצְרִיִּם
וַיַּעֲנוּנוּ וַיִּתְּנוּ עָלֵינוּ עֲבָדָה קָשָׁה: וַיִּנְצֹעַק אֶל־ה'
אֱלֹהֵי אֲבֹתֵינוּ וַיִּשְׁמַע ה' אֶת־קִלְנוּ וַיֵּרָא אֶת־עָנֵינוּ
וַאֲת־עַמְלָנוּ וַאֲת־לִחְצָנוּ: וַיּוֹצֵאֵנוּ ה' מִמִּצְרָיִם בְּיָד
חֲזָקָה וּבְיָד נְטוּיָה וּבְמָרָא גָדֹל וּבָאוֹת וּבְמִפְתִּיחַ:

Devarim 26:3-8

³You shall go to the priest in charge at that time and say to him, “I acknowledge this day before your God YHVH that I have entered the land that YHVH swore to our fathers to

1 <https://jwa.org/podcasts/canwetalk/episode-40-rachel-sharansky-danziger-let-my-story-go/transcript>.

assign us.” ⁴The priest shall take the basket from your hand and set it down in front of the altar of your God YHVH. ⁵You shall then recite as follows before your God YHVH:

“My father was a fugitive Aramean. He went down to Egypt with meager numbers and sojourned there; but there he became a great and very populous nation. ⁶The Egyptians dealt harshly with us and oppressed us; they imposed heavy labor upon us. ⁷We cried to YHVH, the God of our ancestors, and YHVH heard our plea and saw our plight, our misery, and our oppression. ⁸YHVH freed us from Egypt by a mighty hand, by an outstretched arm and awesome power, and by signs and portents.”

R. David Silber in his Haggadah, *Go Forth and Learn*, points out that something remarkable happens here, something true of the book of Devarim more generally: the person offering their first fruits to God recites this formula in the first person plural—“we”—despite the fact that there is no way that they themselves in fact experienced the Exodus. R. Silber connects this passage to another in Devarim doing similar work. At the beginning of the book, recounting the story of revelation on Mount Sinai, Moshe says to the people:

דברים ה:ב-ד

ה' אֱלֹהֵינוּ כָּרַת עִמָּנוּ בְּרִית בְּחֹרֵב: ³לֹא אֶת־אֲבוֹתֵינוּ כָּרַת ה' אֶת־הַבְּרִית הַזֹּאת כִּי אֲתָנוּ אֲנִיחֶנּוּ אֵלֶּה פֶּה הַיּוֹם בָּלָנוּ חַיִּים: ⁴פָּנִים בְּפָנִים דִּבֶּר ה' עִמָּכֶם בְּהָר מִתּוֹךְ הָאֵשׁ:

Devarim 5:2-4

²Our God YHVH made a covenant with us at *Horev* [Sinai]. ³It was not with our ancestors that YHVH made this covenant, but with us, the living, every one of us who is here today.

⁴Face to face YHVH spoke to you on the mountain out of the fire.

In this remarkable passage, Moshe asks the Israelites not to **reenact** the experience of revelation, but to **remember** themselves into it. We are not imagining a fictional universe in which we were at Sinai, but rather, asserting that we were, in fact, there.

This same dynamic is present in Devarim 26. The first person plural mode invites the religious pilgrim to remember themselves into the story of the Exodus. This provides a model for how we, too, can enter the story of the Exodus despite not having, in a historical sense, experienced it ourselves. In R. Silber's words: “Deuteronomy is the book that addresses the Jew who, despite the historical divide, is able to say: ‘The Egyptians did evil to **us** and abused **us**’ (Deut. 26:6); but ‘I have come into the land’ (Deut. 26:3).”²

For many of us, accessing the experience of the Exodus itself is challenging. We might live in North America, or Israel, or somewhere else in the world—but almost certainly not in Egypt. We may love or hate our jobs, but thankfully, nearly all of us do not experience anything like enslavement. Imagining ourselves into the story is nearly impossible. By offering us Devarim 26 as the core model for how to do this, the Haggadah provides us with a template: we see ourselves as though we are the generations who recently entered the land, who themselves are trying to imagine themselves back in the story of the Exodus. In so doing, we connect ourselves to generations of people who, each in their own way, are trying to manage the same divide as we are. By connecting with this generation, we acknowledge that seeing ourselves in the story requires a paradigm shift. We are not the first ones to make this shift. Filling the Haggadah with examples of retellings allows us to connect with countless generations who also made this shift, suspending their current reality to remember themselves into the story of slavery and freedom that is the Pesah story.

The idea that the Haggadah is a chronicle of earlier engagements with the Pesah story explains a core piece of Pesah choreography that I have long found perplexing. The Mishnah tells us that everyone, even the poorest of us, is required to recline at the Seder (Mishnah Pesahim 10:1). Reclining at the Seder derives from the late antique dining habits of aristocratic Romans. For our Rabbis, dining like the aristocracy was the ultimate expression of freedom. For us, nowadays, this significance is absent. Some medieval Ashkenazi authorities therefore ruled that, in our time, it is not essential to recline as a symbol of freedom (Shulhan Arukh Orah Hayyim 472:7). So why do we nonetheless do so when it is neither a feature of the Exodus story itself, nor an expression of freedom that we find resonant today?

By reclining, we connect ourselves not to the experience of the Exodus itself, but rather to the experience of

those Rabbis in Benei Berak retelling the Exodus story. By leaning, we imagine ourselves into the Seders of generations past, including those that took place in a time when this gesture held its own cultural meaning.

This brings us back to the idea that we all need to see ourselves as if we left Egypt. The Haggadah tells us that we bring the story of the Exodus into our own lives, in whatever way makes sense for us in that moment. Ironically, we do that by remembering that this is how Jews have always remembered our escape from Egypt—not by imagining ourselves as ancient Israelites leaving

Egypt, but by imagining ancient Israelites as rabbis reclining in Benei Berak, or medieval Jews running from persecution in Spain, or even as Jews in New York or Tel Aviv in 2024, fearful for the future of our world. We recline because this is how our Rabbis at the time of the Mishnah reenacted redemption. “בכל דור ודור - in every generation” we see ourselves into the experience of the Exodus by literally leaning into the rich traditions of retelling in our Haggadah, accepting the invitation to ourselves become re-tellers of redemption. ♦