

**Dr. Avigdor Shinan Online Hagaddah Class**  
**Nahum Goldmann Fellowship Program**  
**Course Summary Prepared by Michele Klein**

Studying the Haggadah means for me at least 3 different things:

[a] Understanding that this text has a very very long history. For me – as a scholar and not as an educator or a rabbi – the most important question is the question of origin and time of each unit and custom. Since when do we break the middle Matzah into two? Since when do we tell the enigmatic story about the rabbis in Bene Brak? When and how did Laban become the most terrible villain as described in the text? Since when do we deal on the first night of Passover with the number of the plagues that the Egyptians suffered on the seven day of Passover, when the people crossed the Red Sea? and so forth. Once we answer such questions, the road is paved for new ones – a long trip indeed.

[b] Asking questions is as important as answering them. Sometimes a good question is much more interesting (and sometime provocative) than an answer. I love the “Ma Nishtana” part (i.e. asking questions) more than I love the “Avadim Hayinu” (we were slaves, i.e. the answers). That is why I always deliberately asked questions, which I was not sure that even I have the best possible answer for them. The Seder night should be a night of asking, and sometimes also answering. Please remember that the many (hundreds? Thousands?) books and articles about the Haggadah are just an attempt to answer a very short list of questions!

[c] By asking questions and providing possible answers we do enrich our Seder night, participate in the huge enterprise of telling and retelling the story of exodus anew. In my home we discuss various issues emerging from the Haggadah as a way of fulfilling its claim that “Kol HaMarbe” – the more you speak about Exodus - the better.

As you must be aware of, the Haggadah was not composed in one day and not by one person. It has a real history. Reading the Haggadah one has always ask oneself regarding each unit in the Haggadah:

1. The introductory Aramaic text came into the Haggadah only in 8th century Babylon.

It is not found or hinted at in the Mishnah, the two Talmuds [but Taanit 20b?], Midrashic literature, or even in the earliest (Palestinian) Haggadah that we possess. We are aware of this text only from Geonic literature (7th century onward) and it is in Aramaic, the language of the common people then.

What is it all about?

Here's a translation of the Aramaic opening:

This is the bread of affliction which our ancestors ate in the land of Mitzrayim.

All who are hungry, let them enter and eat.  
All who are in need, let them come celebrate Pesah!  
Now we are here; next year in the land of Israel!  
Now we are enslaved; next year we will be free!

It is not a prologue to the Haggadah, but it is a full Haggadah by itself for those common people who could not read or understand Hebrew or who didn't have a Haggadah!

Let us remember, today buying a Haggadah is so easy that we are not aware of the fact that in the ancient world most people could not read and buying an Haggadah was an expensive enterprise. So, what can I tell a simple man who wants to celebrate the Passover night:

a - speak about the past, the history of Passover, using the Matzah as a point of departure (that is what we do actually today till the meal!)

b - sit down to eat

c - finish by messianic expectations and looking forward for a better future (that's what we actually do after the meal)

The Haggadah is composed of 3 parts - speaking about the past, eating in the present, and speaking about our hopes for the future.

HLA for me, therefore, is the table of content of the Haggadah and - for those who knew very little, and spoke Aramaic - a short summary of the whole Haggadah!!!

2. It happened that Rabbi Eliezer, Rabbi Yehoshua, Rabbi Elazar ben Azariah, Rabbi Akiva and Rabbi Tarphon were reclining [at a seder] in B'nei Berak. They were discussing the exodus from Egypt all that night, until their students came and told them: "Our Masters! The time has come for reciting the morning Shema!"

This story is not found in the vast rabbinic literature (Mishnah, Tosephta, Talmuds and Midrashim). There is a story in the Tosephta which may be seen as a very remote parallel.

This story is not found in the very early Haggadot, but appears for the first time only in the mid-Geonic period (8th-9th century?), hundreds of years after the time of the rabbis who feature in it. Where did the story come from? We do not know. Is it a real ancient tradition (from the 2nd century) that somehow survived till much later? Who knows?!

People used to eat sitting on chairs (or on the floor) or reclining on sofas. On Pesach we all recline, but the story does not take place on Pesach davka. OTO HALAYLA is a peculiar term indeed (meaning: that very night) but maybe it can easily be explained on the assumption that our text was taken from a broader context, in which the night was mentioned more than once. The rabbis

were really telling about the big miracle of Exodus, and they were so absorbed in studying that they did not pay attention to the coming of the new day. So simple, so basic, so naive!

We still do not know who composed the story, how true it is (historically), but we assume that it was introduced into the Haggadah just as an illustration of the rule that KOL HAMESAPER etc = The more you speak about the Exodus - the better!

The idea that the story deals with some preparations for a rebellion came into being only in the last 70 years or so. Those who believe in that would say that the story is taking place in Bene Brak, R. Akiva's place, since he was one of the leaders of the Bar-Kochbah revolt, and that is why even older rabbis than he would come to his place. They sat, of course, in a closed room so that is why they could not see the sun rising. The students were not with them, since they were standing outside, guarding their teacher, etc. And yes, hard to believe, but some scholars even suggested that "Keriat Shmah" was the code-name for the rebel led by Bar-Kochbah (or Bar Kosiba as he was really called) in 132 CE. Such an explanation – fascinating as it is – seems to be just a modern interpretation (one may say: Midrash) on a text that most probably had nothing to do with Pesach or Bar Kochbah.

maase - has been translated either as a story/tale/telling or in one case as an event (it happened). It probably does not make much difference, though the statement that something happened somehow enhances an awareness of the story's "historical relevance", that it really happened and isn't a story alone.

mesubin - has been translated as reclining or a gathering/assembly (i.e. as related to either "hesaba" or to "saviv"). The addition of "seder" is logical, but it's not in the original text and seems to be intended to create a connection to our seder - on which we read this story.

kol oto halayla - the "oto" - that night or this night - is in some translations omitted, or it is rendered as "the first night of Passover"

mesaperim bitziat Mitzrayim - has been translated as either telling/re-telling or discussing, the second option suggesting a more intensive kind of retelling, a "brain storming", interpretations, machlokot, rather than just telling a story. Discussing is probably more correct (we're talking of important hachamim after all, and they probably did not yet have a fixed haggadah), telling is closer to what we do today.

Mitzrayim - was rendered in English as Egypt or taken as it is - perhaps Mitzrayim should be "more than the geographical Egypt"?

3. The discussion of 4 verses from Deuteronomy, starting with "Arami Oved Avi" (which can be translated in many ways). Hence AOA as the acronym for the discussion.

Come and learn what Lavan the Aramean tried to do to Yaakov our father! For Pharaoh decreed the death of the male children only, but Lavan tried to destroy us all' as it is said: "An Aramean sought to destroy my father; and he went down to Egypt and sojourned there, few in number; and he became there a great, mighty and populous nation."

"And he went down to Egypt" – this means compelled by the Divine Word. "And sojourned there" - this teaches us that our father Yaakov did not go down to settle in Egypt but only to stay for a time, as it is written "And they said to Pharaoh, We have to come to sojourn in the land, for your servants have no pasture for their flocks, for the famine is severe in the land of Canaan; and therefore, we pray thee, let your servants dwell in the land of Goshen."

Few in number" as it is said: "Your fathers went down to Egypt with seventy persons, and now the Lord, your God, has made you as numerous as the stars of heaven."

"And became there a nation" this teaches that Yisrael developed their distinctive ways there.

"Great, mighty," as it is said: "And the children of Yisrael were fruitful and increased abundantly, and multiplied and grew exceedingly mighty, and the land was filled with them."

"And populous," as it is said: "I have caused you to increase like the plants of the field, and you did increase and grew great you did come to excellent beauty; your breasts were formed and your hair was grown, yet you were naked and bare." "and when I passed by you and saw you wallowing in your blood, I said to you 'In your blood live; yea I said to you 'In your blood live!"

"And the Egyptians dealt cruelly with us and afflicted us and imposed upon us hard bondage"

"And the Egyptians dealt cruelly with us" as it is said: Come, let us deal wisely with them lest they multiply and if should come to pass, that a war should occur, they too will join our enemies, and fight against us and so go up out of the land."

"And afflicted us" as it is said: "Therefore they did set over them taskmasters to afflict them with their burdens, and they built for Pharaoh treasure, Pitom and Raamses."

"And Imposed upon us hard bondage" as it is said: "And Egypt made the children of Yisrael serve with rigor"

And we cried to the Lord, God of our fathers, and the Lord heard our voice and looked upon our affliction, and our toil and our oppression.

"And we cried the Lord, God of our fathers," as it is said: "And it came to pass in the course of those many days that the king of Egypt died; and the children of Yisrael sighed by reason of their bondage and they cried out. And their cry came up to God by reason of their bondage"

"The Lord heard our voice" as it said: "And God heard their groaning, and God remembered His covenant with Avraham, with Yizhak and with Yaakov."

"And Looked upon our affliction" this refers to their separation from their wives, as it is said: "And God saw the children of Israel and God new."

"And our toil," this refers to the sons, as it is said: "Every son that is born you shall cast into the river and every daughter you shall save."

"And our oppression," this refers to the force used, as it is said: "And I have also seen the oppression with which the Egyptians oppress them."

"And the Lord brought as out of Egypt with a mighty hand and with an outstretched arm, and with a great terror, and with signs and with wonders."

"And the Lord took us out of Egypt," not by an angel, not by seraph, nor by a messenger, rather the Holy One, blessed be He, Himself, in His glory!

as is said: "For I will pass through the land of Egypt in this night, and I will smite all the firstborn in the land of Egypt, both man and beast, and against all the gods of Egypt I will execute judgments, I am the Lord."

"For I will pass through the land of Egypt," I myself, not an angel;

"And I will smite all the firstborn" I myself, not a seraph;

"And against all the gods of Egypt I will execute judgments," I myself, not a messenger;

"I am the Lord," - I am He, no other!

"With a mighty hand," this refers to the cattle plague, as it is said: "Behold, the hand of the Lord will be on the cattle in the field, upon the horses, upon the asses, upon the camels, the oxen and upon the sheep, there shall be a very grievous plague."

"And with an outstretched arm," this refers to the sword, as it is said: "And a drawn sword in His hand, stretched out over Yerushalayim."

"And with great terror" this refers to the feelings of the peoples when God revealed before their eyes the glory of His Presence, as it is said: "Or had God ventured to go and take Him a nation from the midst of another nation, by trials, by signs and by wonders, and by wars and by a mighty hand and by an outstretched arm, and by great terrors, according to all that the Lord your God did for you in Egypt before your eyes!"

"And with signs," this refers to the staff, as it is said: "And you shall take into your hand this staff with which you shall do the signs."

"And with wonders," this refers to the blood, as it is said: "And I will show wonders in the heavens and on the earth."

The AOA unit is the longest and most important part of the talk done around the Seder table. By taking Deuteronomy 26, verses 5-8, apart – almost word by word – the story of the people of Israel in Egypt is told, expanding the biblical verses with many aggadic traditions, some explicit and some implicit.

We put on the web 2 translations of these verses with their interpretations / expansions / elaborations. The issues that I would like to discuss – along with any other that you may find interesting and worth dealing with – are:

[1] The Image of Laban (Lavan) the Aramean. How come that the father-in-law of Jacob became such a villain? Worse than Pharaoh?! Where in the Bible (or elsewhere) do we find a base for such a harsh “accusation”?

I still think that the last word regarding Laban is a new book by Karin Zeterholm (from Sweden) which discuss the history of this figure in rabbinic literature. For me Laban became the code-name for... Herod (who was Edomite) and the text that sees him as worse than Pharaoh came into being at his time. That means that the AOA piece is really very old!

[2] The verse from the book of the prophet Ezekiel: “By your blood you shall live”. How is it connected to the story of Exodus?

The connection is in the Midrash of the story of Ezekiel 16 as an allegory about the relationship between God and his young nation. That verse (“By your book etc...”) plays there a main role.

[3] The idea of separating men from women as the interpretation of “God looked upon our affliction”. What is the text talking about? [the Hebrew is: Perishut Derech Eretz]

a Midrash (found in the Talmud and in Exodus Rabbah) where Pharaoh decreed that men and women will be separated, so the people of Israel will not multiply. Men were instructed to stay at the fields and not return home at nights. The Egyptian king believed that by that he will decrease the number of the Israelites. God saw that our fathers were in a distress (ONI) and decided to come to their help. There is also a beautiful story about the women that went at nights to the fields and had there(!) intercourse with their husbands, by that proving the important role of women in the exodus story.

[4] Why is the text so eager to state, more than once, that “not by an angel” etc.? is it a polemic against any other explanation of the exodus story?

Here we can see a clear polemic against any belief in the power of angels and any other heavenly bodies but God himself. The interesting part is the fact that the text also states that “not be a messenger” aiming clearly against Moses (who is the messenger in our story). Moses is not mentioned in the Haggadah and

there are many reasons for that. The statement that “not be a messenger” should be seen as part of this tendency to leave the stage for one hero only – God.

the Creator of the Universe personally, not through an intermediary, took a direct hand in our liberation from Egypt. To me, the central question for every Jew is that each of us born into a covenantal relationship with the Creator and must spend our lives trying to figure out how to live up to our end of the contract.

First and most obviously, this is a statement directed against Christianity. We, Jews, believe in pure monotheism; God did not and does not have to operate through any other being. There is direct interaction between God and human beings.

Second, the emphasis on God's role is to deny any central role to Moshe. Indeed his name does not appear in the Haggadah unless it is part of a quotation or in a prayer. The compilers of the Haggadah wanted to make absolutely certain that later generation, not having a leader like Moshe, would not feel unworthy of redemption. God alone is the sole hero/ protagonist of the Exodus. To the Almighty alone can we ascribe the historical event, as it is written, "I, Y-H-V-H, your God took you out of the land of Egypt." The Haggadah's compilers sought to teach the lesson, As God redeemed our ancestors from Egyptian bondage, so will we be redeemed -- if we are worthy.

In the 2nd century BCE - 2nd CE, the Samaritans were a big nation and since they sanctified only the Torah, they pictured Moses as the only prophet, as a sacred man of God, bordering almost (I say almost!) on personality cult. Such a dangerous description could not be imitated by the Rabbis, and in the time when Jews and Samaritans had a bitter polemic, each believing to be the true heirs of the ancient Hebrews, assigning Moses a significant role in the story of the Haggadah would have been playing into the hands of the Samaritians.

[5] What do we know about Moses' staff which is mentioned later on in the text?

The Midrash has many stories about the signs and wonders Moses performed with his staff. At the burning bush, it is said, God endowed it with wonder-working capabilities to provide Moshe with the kind of authority that would impress Pharaoh and his court. The Midrash tells that God had Moshe throw his staff to the ground, where it turned into a snake. Then God told him, "Now put out your hand and grasp the snake by its tail." When he did so, it became a staff again.

[6] why use verses from Deuteronomy to tell the story of the book of Exodus? Could they not find enough verses in this very book to use for telling the story of Yetziat Mitzraim?

Some will say because these verses were very popular (since they were said in the second temple period each time you brought Bikurim [=the first fruits] to the temple). Some say because they do not mention Moses – a figure who was not invited to participate in the seder night! (this issue deserves a full course by itself). Some say that the rabbis liked the number of the verses – four – since almost everything (questions, sons, cups of wine etc.) is four. And if we could look at about the 500 different commentators on the Haggadah and the thousands scholarly and semi-scholarly discussions of this fascinating text – we should for sure find many more. The questions remains – the answers vary.

The question that begs asking, writes Rabbi Riskin, is why the Haggadah chose a biblical section dealing with bikkurim -- first fruits -- to use as the basis for studying the Exodus. Why not go to shmot -- the book of Exodus -- which relates directly how we left Egypt.

The solution is that the story in Exodus is told in the third person while our section from Deuteronomy is in the first person. The speaker in Deut. is a native of the land of Israel, a farmer bringing the first fruits of the land to the priest at the Sanctuary.

Though the Exodus may already have taken place far in the past, and though his verbal recitation is a formal one, the farmer identifies with his people and its history.

This would not take place in a third-person narrative-type recitation of the event. So the compilers of the Haggadah chose Torah verses that speak in the first person, which was found in Deut. In this way the Seder effects the total identification of the celebrant with his past and his people.

[7] Please look at Deuteronomy 26, verse 9.

The fact that Deuteronomy 26, verse 9, is not cited in the Haggadah – as a possible continuation of the 4 previous verses (mentioned in question 5) – is sometimes explained at the non-Israeli (i.e. in the diaspora) origin of the Magid unit, and therefore any “Zionist” ideas were not likely to be incorporated into the Haggadah. In many modern Israeli Haggadot this verse was added to the text of the Haggadah.

4. the “Pour Thy Wrath” unit.

“Pour out Your wrath upon the nations that do not know Thee and on the kingdoms that do not call on Thy Name. For they have devoured Yaakov and

laid waste his dwelling place. Pour out Thy indignation upon them, and let Thy fierce anger overtake them. Pursue them with wrath, and destroy them from beneath the heavens of the Lord”

There are few different translations of this text (composed mainly from verses from the Psalms and Lamentation) and I assume that they may pose a real problem in a context in which Jews and gentiles live together, especially on good terms.

The questions that come to my mind are (and you may, and probably will, have others as well) are:

1 – Why is this unit, from the very beginning, found in the Haggadah? since when is it included in the Haggadah? Where did it all start? Why these specific verses? Do other non-Ashkenazi communities (such as the Yemenites) include the Shfoch verses in their Haggadah? Are they saying another verses instead?

The so-called curse against the enemies of Israel is known to all [modern?] Haggadot, but it is not as early as it seems to be.

It came into being only in the Middle Ages and in Europe, after the crusaders and the way they treated Jews on their way to save the Holy land from the Muslims. But – there are 20(!) different verses in the different Haggadot. Not only Ps 79 and Lamentation 3:66 but also Ps 35:5, 2:9; Jeremiah 17:8 and many more.

Even the Geonim (7th-10th) were not yet aware of this custom. I think that the entrance of these verses into non-Ashkenazi Haggadot was an outcome of the printed texts from Europe which flooded the eastern communities after the 17th century and not before that. Shfoch is in the sephardi haggadot.

the Christians have/had in their Eastern liturgy a curse of the Jews (if I am not mistaken, the Catholics do not have it any more, whereas the Orthodox Christians do). Is there a connection? Easter is almost always at the time of Pesach.

I also think of the custom of pouring wine during the reading of the ten plagues (or sprinkling a bit from your cup), so perhaps this is a connection to „pour your wrath“. The traditional explanation of the mentioned custom is of course anything but showing our wrath by pouring the wine.

2 – Why are they said after the Grace after the meal and in the middle of reciting the Hallel?

Hallel is recited as thanks for the salvation (from the Egyptian bondage), so this place might be appropriate to add a plea for another salvation (in this generation). Also, by adding it after the meal, it doesn't detract from the story of yetziat Mitzrayim which was finished before the meal.

3 – Why do we usually open the door while saying this unit? I do not know why and when Elijah entered the Haggadah in this specific point. The reason for opening the door while saying these verses originated most probably also in Europe and the reason seems to be very simple: before saying the harsh words against one neighbors, he has to make sure that no one is listening. You open the door, look around and make sure that the coast is clear.

traditionally as a sign of trust in the divine protection. I have read there is a custom of singing Eliyahu hanavi at this point of the seder. This song is neither included in the haggadah I use (or any that I possess), nor have I myself been on a seder where it was sung.

The Entrance of Eliyahu into the Haggadah seems to be a relatively modern addition, and singing Eliyahu Hanavi. Perhaps the custom of "inviting Elijah" is also a defensive mechanism. Considering the unpleasant reality of life for Jews in Eastern Europe which intruded itself particularly on this eve of the "festival of freedom," the messianic hope of Elijah coming to redeem us probably provided some comfort and tied in well with this passage.

4 – Is there any reason why we should continue saying these verses in our modern time when many of us dwell peacefully among non-Jews? How do they react – if they are familiar with this custom – to the harsh request of them being totally destroyed? I will tell you later about a cardinal (a real one! The cardinal of Milano) who was my guest on a Seder night, and his answer to this question).

Some very modern Haggadot replace the Shefoch with "Pour your love upon all nations" etc., and each of us, of course, should decide whether this change fits his or her feelings toward the text of the Haggadah and its modern-time implications.

A living culture, religion (any) is always subject to interpretation. You can interpret the Tenach or the Christian Bible or the Koran or in our case the Haggadah in an aggressive or in a peace loving way. Shefoch hamatecha can therefore be understood to mean your neighbours, goyim in general, or you can put emphasis on „ki achal et Yaakov...“ – meaning are those who try to destroy us. And they unfortunately haven't disappeared yet.

5 – how is the Haggadah treating the non-Jew? Is he mentioned in other parts of this text?

in Vehi shamda we say that in every generation there are people who want to harm us; For my understanding of Haggadah, the non-Jew (save the Egyptians) is not an important „character“ in it.

The Cardinal whom I invited to my Seder (twice) was the cardinal of Milano (and almost a pope, they say), Cardinal Martini, and he assured me that he says the Shfoch wholeheartedly, since he sees himself and modern-time Christianity as people who know God (remember the verse in Shfoch: “Pour Thy Wrath upon those who do not know you” etc.), so the curse is not directed toward him. A simple solution, maybe un-historical – or maybe anti-historical – but he finds it satisfactory.

ECHD ME YODEA? The last-but-one text in the most common Haggadah. As you know, the last part of the Haggadah – the 6 or 7 songs (or Piyyutim, liturgical poems) – looks forward, to the future, saturated with all kind of messianic hopes.

[1] Since when is this song incorporated in the Haggadah? It entered the Haggadah almost at its last stage of development (15th century) but - as some of you noted - was known earlier as a wedding song in the remote community of Cochin. When this song was transferred to Europe, the 13th stanza was added, probably to mock at the Christian belief of the bad luck of the number 13 (something that has to do with the last supper, which was a Seder night!).

[2] Is it found in all Haggadot of all Jewish communities?

[3] What is it doing in the concluding part of the Haggadah which mainly deals with the future (building the Temple, slaughtering death, Next Year in Jerusalem etc.)? I think that EMY was added to the Haggadah not only in order to please the children (a good reason by itself) but also as a polemic against Christian dogmas. One is our God (as opposed to the Holy Trinity) and there is not only one Mother but four. A child should be born after 9 months (hinting at the Christian tradition that Maria's pregnancy was much shorter) and everyone should be circumcised (including Jesus [as told in the New Testament], but not his followers!) etc. I do not think that every stanza in this song is really aiming at this point, but when I am asked what is EMY doing in the Haggadah, I usually say that it comes both to entertain the kids and to repeat important and basics elements of the Jewish belief.

[4] Is this song more than a number-game intended for kids? in other words: is there any significance to the topics chosen for each number: one God, three fathers etc.??>

[5] Why stop at “13 ME YODEA”? What is ,if any, the problem with other numbers as well? The number 13 -I think - speaks of the 13 attributes of God (so the song begins and ends with God), and the 11 are of course the stars in Joseph's dream.

[6] Are you familiar with parallel songs in other cultures? there are many parallels to such a song in almost every western community, and yes, they are usually intended for kids. Lots of counting songs offered by respondents.

Some say the seder is a Greek invention. It follows the steps of a symposium, and see Plato's description of such a happening. Some discussion, wine, good food, reclining and theology in a pleasant atmosphere. Maybe even those rabbi's at BB had one, which made them take so long. Afikoman is a greek word for dessert, even though those ancients arguably did other things after their theological discussions than giving presents to the children and prepare for the after seder.