

Seder of the Seder:

The Superstructure of the Haggadah

Osher Chaim Levene

THE ORDER OF PROCEEDINGS

LEIL Haseder, “Seder night” is the most “different night” of the year.

The name “seder” literally means “order”. Indeed, the Haggadah has a distinct “Order of Proceedings” in the famous 15 simonim, “signs” (Kadesh until Nirtzah). But the same description cannot be said about the central section of Maggid dedicated to the night’s biblical commandment of *sippur yetzias mitzraim*, “relating the story of the Exodus”, as this appears far removed from anything remotely containing any semblance of “order”!

The text through which we fulfil the mitzvah of *Sippur Yetzias Mitzrayim* is perplexing. Clearly, it is not a historic presentation of the Exodus. It includes a Talmudic story, some Mishnayos, and halachic discourses! But what is the structure of the “Seder” in general and of Maggid in particular?

WHAT’S THE STORY?

Besides the regular daily obligation to remember the Exodus in the morning and evening Shema, there is a specific obligation on Pesach night to expound the story – from the exile through to the redemption – using a question and answer format in the presence of the evening’s other mitzvot to reach the point of reliving the story.

In his new commentary on the Haggadah, *Ta’am HaPesach*, Rav Reuven Leuchter observes how every *sefer*, “book” tells a *sippur*, “story”. Every aspect of a story – down to the characters, scenes and narrative – combine to convey the storyteller’s central message until the reader personally experiences this episode themselves by readily identifying with the inner meaning within.

The same holds true with the mitzvah obligation of *Sippur Yetzias Mitzrayim*. Here the Haggadah comes to tell the “story within the story”. Haggadah, from the verb “*l’haggid*”, means “to relate”. Typically, Haggadah is the term used to reveal the “inner secret of something” (See *Nefesh HaChaim* 1:13). In-other-words, the Haggadah relates the story of ‘how’ to tell the Exodus story. In addition, the Haggadah also comes to reveal the story of ‘why’ one is obligated to tell this story.

A NEW WORLD ORDER

What is the unique obligation on Seder night about discussing the Exodus? On the fifteenth of Nissan, Klal Yisroel, “Nation of Israel” came into being. The Egyptian exile of the Jewish People is compared to the development of an unborn child. The Jewish people were similarly constrained within the host nation’s *metzorim*, “confines” (related to the Hebrew name of Egypt: “*Mitzrayim*”) as they propagated at an unnatural rate.

By extension, leaving Egypt was the national “birth of the nation” (Yechezkel 16:4). Here Israel, as a newly-born nation, was extricated from their mother host in Egypt. Particular



fact that significance is not simply the they came into being. It was the miraculous manner of how they came into being. Hashem Himself – and not



through any intermediary – was the One Who miraculously redeemed them and drew them close to Him.

The natural order originally set into motion with the creation of the universe would be universally applicable as the prevailing world

order for all the nations of the world. But the redemption of Israel witnessed a grand introduction of a new world system: a supernatural order exclusive to the Jewish people that would not be beholden to the rules of nature.

Hashem revealed His Divine Intervention to forge a groundbreaking relationship with Israel. Accordingly, the birth, the existence, and the continual survival of Israel, would all be founded upon the supernatural relationship that Hashem formed with His newly Chosen Nation on the first night of Pesach. By extension, the continuous survival of the Jewish people throughout world history is because Klal Yisroel is an integral part of the Divine plan: the national *raison d’être* is to live a sanctified life through serving Hashem in embracing Torah which brings spirituality down into the physical world.

This concept is vividly highlighted on this night whose unusual practices provoke bewilderment from the children until they cry out *Ma nishtana halailah hazeh*, “Why is this night different?” This evening is appropriately called “*Leil Haseder*” because it celebrates the introduction of a new world order (“seder”) – one that contradicts and is not bound to the original natural “order” of creation. It exclusively applies to the nascent Klal Yisroel to experience a special Divine Providence.

The mitzvah of *Sippur Yetzias Mitzrayim* is not supposed to commemorate a past historic event. It is meant to tap into a constant, timeless phenomenon: how the spiritual DNA of a Jew – as imprinted on this special evening – is forever bound to his eternal relationship to Hashem which subscribes to a new world order. This is the reason why the Exodus goes to the heart of Jewish identity.

THE STORY OF HOW TO TELL THE STORY

Once we realize that *Sippur Yetzias Mitzrayim* celebrates Israel’s birth as a supernatural nation devoted to serving Hashem, we can begin to appreciate the structural composition of the Haggadah.

The opening section before Maggid stirs our children to probe and question. Strange customs (remove tables [as in time of Chazal] or covering up the matzos, hiding of the Afikoman, eating Karpas before the meal, distributing nuts and sweets) are meant to capture their attention and excite their interest to realize this night heralds something extraordinary.

The Malbim Haggadah explains how the arrangement of Maggid mirrors the main verse (Shemos 13:8) that contains

this mitzvah: *V’higadita l’vincha ba’yom ha’hu leimor, ba’avur zeh asah Hashem li b’tzeisi m’Mitzrayim*, “You shall relate to your child on that day saying “It is because of this that Hashem acted for me when I came out of Egypt”

Continued from page 51

The structure of Maggid is modelled on the central verse subdivided into six subsections

1. "YOU SHALL RELATE TO YOUR CHILD..."

The section from "Avodim Hayinu" until the "four sons" answers the question of who is obligated: **every Jew throughout time**. Hashem intervened in world history to select Israel as His Chosen Nation whose destiny would experience a special Divine Providence. If not for this event, we would have remained in Egypt – an ordinary nation like all others.

The Sages' all-night session on Seder night illustrates how the mitzvah is **not simply about knowing, it is about practically living it**. It is a personal account *because* it defines the very identity of a Jew. It is equally meaningful to the contemporary Jew as it was to all his ancestors. Thus, the more detail contained in his account, the better his connection to this event and his life as a Jew.

The timeless impact of the Exodus is recalled day and night and throughout history is noted by mention of the Mishnah of Rebbi Elazar ben Azaryah. Still, there is a special obligation on this night to not simply 'recall'. It is to 're-experience' this event in its transmission to the next generation:

Different approaches to the four sons illustrate how Torah-and by extension how the father imparts Torah teachings- must speak to every individual on his own terms and must find it practically applicable in mitzvah observance. (The conversations deal with practical halocho and not theology.) We chastise the Wicked Son for trying to exclude himself from the Jewish congregation that merited the redemption. And we open up "to the Son Who Does Not Ask" to show that the Exodus is relevant to him today.

2. "...ON THAT DAY..."

When is there the special obligation of *Sippur Yetzias Mitzrayim*? The timing of this mitzvah is not from Rosh Chodosh Nissan (*Yochol me'Rosh Chodosh...*) as the beginning of the revation of this new world order. Rather, one needs this to be on this special evening (15th Nissan) "when matzoh and maror are in front of you".

3. "...SAYING..."

Starting from the paragraph beginning *mitchilah ovdai avodei zara*, "At first, our ancestors were idol-worshippers..." the Haggadah deals with what to say in order to fulfil the mitzvah.

There is a dispute whether the famous principle *mas'chil b'genus u'mesayim b'shach*, "you begin with degradation and finish with praise" applies to the idol-worship of Avrohom and Terach or to the Egyptian bondage. Our Haggadah incorporates both. There are two interrelated stories being told in the birth of the Jewish nation. This helps explain why the Haggadah backtracks to mention Lovon's schemes before its sweeping picture of the Egyptian exile and redemption.

Rav Leuchter explains the emergence of Israel arose in two stages. First, there was **Yetzirah**, "formation" – the development of the Jewish **family** going back to the Jewish Forefathers. Here the original degradation was idolatry. This relates to Lovon's threat to "uproot everything" – to prevent Yaakov and wives leaving to set up the Jewish family as a separate entity – one founded by the 12 Tribes of Israel. Second, there was **Hanhagah**, "providence" in the development of the Jewish **nation** with the

emergence of Klal Yisroel in the Exodus. Here the degradation was that of their enslavement to Pharaoh where they are unable to act as an independent people. It was once they would leave Egypt in their national birth that Hashem would rear them displaying His special protection and education.

The Egyptian exile was prophesied to Avrohom at the *Bris bein Habesorim*, "covenant of the parts" in the early indication that His Chosen Nation would be miraculously redeemed because of an inseparable pact (*bris*) with Hashem – not a partnership that can be dissolved. The supernatural relationship forged by Israel with Hashem on Seder night transcends the regular natural order. Consequently, we declare that this is what assures Jewish eternity – *Vehi Sheomda* – and despite the many conspiracies of their enemies throughout the ages, Hashem has given His pledge to preserve them, no matter the natural odds against them. Hashem considers Israel His business. Like then, Israel will be redeemed again.

The Egyptian experience is summarized in four sentences (Devarim 26:5-8) taken from

		Translation	Section in Maggid	Objective
1	וְהִגַּדְתָּ לְבִנְךָ	You shall relate to your child	עבדים היינו - ארבעה בנים	Who is obligated? Every Jew
2	בַּיּוֹם הַהוּא	On that day	יכול מראש חודש	When? The timing
3	לֵאמֹר	Saying	מתחילה - דיינו	What to say? The Exile and Redemption
4	בְּעִבּוּר זֶה	It is because of this	רבן גמליאל	Where? The context/setting
5	עָשָׂה ה' לִי	that Hashem acted for me	בכל דור ודור - לפיכך	Its personal dimension
6	בְּצֵאתִי מִמִּצְרַיִם	When I came out of Egypt	הללו-קה	How it obliges us to thank Hashem

the confession recited when bringing *bikkurim* where each word or term is subject to Talmudic analysis. These verses are inclusive of both the exile and the redemption. The first discusses the descent into Egyptian exile and their growth within dire straits. The second describes the affliction. The third mentions the stirrings of redemption when Israel cried out to Hashem Who hears their anguish. Finally, the fourth mentions the actual redemption where Hashem redeems the Jewish people.

The mention of the 10 Plagues of the supernatural order is because they pushed aside the 10 Sayings of Creation within the natural order (which are also dependent upon the will of the Creator). The final plague in the Death of the Firstborn resulted in *gilui Shechinah*, "Revelation of the Divine Presence" where Hashem Who descended from Above passed over them – namely, leaving them a space to survive (*pesach* means "pass over") but which killed the Egyptian firstborn. But their survival was conditional upon their acceptance to become servants of Hashem – to do "His work" in the same way that a slave stands to do his Master's work.

This is followed by a list of 15 steps or stages after the Exodus – following the progression of Israel until the building of Temple – a clear indication of the work that Israel is entrusted to do – each stage taken individually deserving of its own thanks.

4. "...IT IS BECAUSE OF THIS..."

The next part of the verse "because of this"

deals with the setting of this mitzvah. It parallels the Mishnah where Rabban Gamliel demands placing the mitzvah of *Sippur Yetzias Mitzrayim* within the context of the simultaneous obligation concerning the evening's food-related mitzvos: *pesach*, *matzah* and *maror* (See Rashi, Shemos 13:8 and Mechilta). The term *zeh*, "this" is typically used where one can point to objects (like the explanation *matzah zu, maror zeh*). Once again, this relates to *Yetzias Mitzrayim* as Israel's commitment to accept upon themselves the practical application of the mitzvos.

5. "...THAT HASHEM ACTED FOR ME..."

The paragraph *B'chol dor v'dor*, "in every generation" affirms how this story is both universal and deeply personal. The timeless impact of the Exodus – "that Hashem acted for me" – directly affects the Jewish personality who is personally obligated to "see himself leaving Egypt". Indeed, the existence of every Jew was shaped by this event. *Yetzias Mitzrayim* is what defines "who he is" and "how he is to behave". He is an integral member of Klal Yisroel whose supernatural being was formed by this event and his national mission is meant to reveal Hashem's Glory in this world.

6. "...WHEN I CAME OUT OF EGYPT"

The departure from Egypt mandates our personal obligation to thank Hashem for His kindness. This is conveyed in the paragraph *L'fichach anachnu*, "therefore we are obligated to thank you" which is immediately followed by the first two paragraphs of Hallel as a natural response for someone who had personally experienced a great miracle who must express his praise for his salvation from danger or adversity.

This is what the Haggadah achieves in defining the inner reason for *Sippur Yetzias Mitzrayim* and how its structure mirrors the verse that details the necessary components of how to fulfil this mitzvah.

WHAT YOU ORDERED

The Maggid section is followed by consumption of the Pesach foods. This marks how the newly-born Jewish people fulfil their calling to bring holiness into the world through their physical actions such as the otherwise mundane act of eating. This is followed by *bensching*, the recitation of Hallel in praise of Hashem's kindnesses, and the yearnings within the final section of *Nirtzah* for the future redemption from exile. The redemption from Egyptian exile sets the precedent for the future redemption from exile when the world would universally acknowledge the kingship of Hashem.

So the "Leil Haseder" celebrates the introduction of a new "seder", world order that reaches to the heart of the unique, supernatural identity of a Jew. This lies behind the wonderful mitzvah of *sippur Yetzias Mitzrayim* within the Haggadah which is forever relevant to every Jew in every generation.

One must not get sidetracked in anything that can divert his attention away from the story within the Haggadah. The superstructure of the Haggadah enables us to personally experience the Exodus with the realization that **this event is what made him into a Jew** and was the stepping stone to become servants of Hashem in the subsequent acceptance of Torah at Sinai.

This essay is adapted from a pre-Pesach talk given at Orah.

The writer is author of Set in Stone and People of the Book: from Adam to Yehoshua: Personalities of the Torah.