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The Life of the Haggadah

INTRODUCTION

When I began to think hard about the life of the Haggadah in preparation for this biography, Rabbi Lawrence Hoffman, who has written extensively on this text, suggested I go to Chicago and meet Stephen Durchslag, the premier private collector of the printed Haggadah in America. I'm glad I did, because shortly after my arrival, I learned how the Haggadah lived in a distinctive way.

The father of anthropological fieldwork is Bronislaw Malinowski, who distinguished himself from the armchair anthropologists of the nineteenth century by leaving home and going into the field for an extended period to live among the people who would be the objects of his study; in those days, they were invariably called "the natives." Malinowski's description of his arrival in Melanesian New Guinea is well known. "Imagine yourself," Malinowski wrote, "suddenly set down surrounded by all your gear, alone on a tropical beach close to a native village, while the launch or dinghy which has brought you sails away, out of sight."[1] The entrance story foreshadows the anthropologist's transformation from stranger to insider. It also hints at essential understandings that will be revealed. While anthropologists today rarely

claim they have become insiders, performing fieldwork remains their primary research method and is the profession's initiation rite. They still tell entrance stories, so, nodding to Malinowski, I preface this biography with my own.

I arrived along the shore of Lake Michigan, neither by launch nor by dinghy, but by car. This was Chicago's Gold Coast, and I stood in front of the grand building where Mr. Durchslag, who had invited me to call him Steve, lived, hoping I was presentable. It was an unusually sunny and hot fall day. When I entered his modern, art-filled apartment overlooking the city and the lake, he graciously offered me a drink. I said, "Water will be lovely." I felt awe and excitement as Steve ushered me into his wood-shelved library where his Haggadot were housed. (In Hebrew, the plural of Haggadah is Haggadot; still, many people say "Haggadahs," an Anglicized mash-up of the Yiddish plural, *hagodes*.) Rare ones were just there on the shelves, not even behind glass, but placed along with his other books, even paperbacks. He selected treasures to show me, rapidly placing one on top of the next on a glass display table in the center of the room. Here was the 1629 Venice Haggadah, the 1695 Amsterdam Haggadah, and now the 1712 Amsterdam with its fold-out map of the biblical world. I could hardly keep up. Steve didn't insist I coddle each Haggadah on a special foam rest as I had in libraries' rare books collections; this was liberating, but what if I stressed the binding? He didn't ask me to put on those special white gloves the special collections librarians made me wear. I could have been perusing my very modest shelf of stacked up Haggadot in my living room, a "collection" rich in the supermarket and Maxwell House coffee Haggadot my

mother had amassed over years, not as exemplars of ephemera, but for us to use. I was anxious for the safety of Steve's books—didn't they need a more watchful eye, some protection, say, from me?

Distracting myself from these worrisome thoughts, I asked Steve how he had found his Haggadot, thinking he might have some miraculous discovery stories. He answered by matter-of-factly pulling off a Sotheby's catalog and then one from Kestenbaum's from his shelves; he pointed to a new purchase that was still in an unopened padded mailer, and he said more new ones were on their way. The tower of Haggadot he was piling on the table for me grew higher. Haggadot from Poona (Pune), Paris, South Africa, Shanghai, Melbourne, Munich. He declared it was time to clear off this batch to make space for others.

Inebriated by gratitude to be present to witness this wondrous collection, I enthusiastically stretched out my right arm over the books on the table, ready to help sweep them up so I could see even more rare Haggadot.

I had failed to notice that on this hot day, Steve had also gotten himself a drink, a bottle of diet cola, and it had been on the table all along, and it was uncapped. Now, thanks to my outstretched arm, it was spilling all over the table of Haggadot. I prayed: "Oh dear God, if the soda damages just the Sotheby's catalog—that would be enough. Or just the Sotheby's and also, the Kestenbaum's; even that would be enough."

I started to turn toward Steve, anticipating his horror and displaying my shame, but during my liturgical interlude, he had dashed off and returned with what he called a *shmatta*, a little towel. He was already clearing, dabbing,

mopping, and reassuring me: "You cannot treat them as artifacts, or they lose their value."

That is when I understood that while an individual Haggadah may be collected and cherished for its historical or artistic merits, it lives as its most authentic self when it is used, especially on a family's Passover seder table. That is when it "gets a life," so to speak. In that place of vulnerability, subject to wine spills and the assault of matzah crumbs, it choreographs the transmission of particular memories and inculcates sensibilities. I would go on to learn that a Haggadah comes to life when it leads those who have gathered to use it to ask hard questions about slavery, exile, redemption, and freeing the oppressed. Its liveliness increases each time it is taken out again to be used at a seder and each time celebrants use it. It is especially lively, but in a different way, when it fades into the background and gives rise to the conversation of those seated at the seder table, who are alive at the present moment and make telling the Passover story meaningful for themselves.

Writer James Salter introduced his memoir, *Burning the Days: Recollection*, as "more or less the story of a life. Not the complete story which, as in almost any case, is beyond telling—the length would be too great, longer than Proust, not to speak of the repetition." This biography of the Haggadah is also more or less the story of a life. The word Haggadah means "telling" and the complete story of its life—spanning more than six thousand versions over millennia—would be beyond telling and unspeakably repetitive. Just as Salter selected from the parts of his life that were important to him, a different biographer of the Haggadah—say, a scholar of rabbinic literature, a historian of the Jewish book, or an expert in

Jewish illuminated manuscripts—would make choices and craft a telling based on his or her frame of reference within the highly specialized (and brutally competitive, I have observed) academic field of Haggadah study. As the author of this telling, I recollect the life of the Haggadah by selecting versions and aspects that have engaged me and stimulated my speculation. What you have before you is not encyclopedic. It is personal, partial, and eclectic, and it reflects my being an anthropologist who investigates Jewish ritual innovation in the contemporary era. This means that when I turn backward, I do so unabashedly from a twenty-first-century perspective.

I will be introducing many versions of the Haggadah, including ones often reproduced, those deemed important for their rarity and beauty or their introduction of new artistic conventions and book-making technologies. We will also encounter versions that reflect the range of Jewish geographic distribution; disclose variations in Jewish practice; register historically significant events; or address liturgical, pedagogical, and theological matters. Making selections has been a challenge, for just about any Haggadah is a worthy springboard for reflection. Even the free supermarket Haggadah (with coupons for matzah and horseradish in the centerfold pages—I kid you not!) reflects an important facet of its story.

What Is the Haggadah?

This telling of the life of the Haggadah chronicles its recalibrations over time. We will move from its early sources in the Bible and rabbinic literature; to the years it was a

handwritten manuscript; to its life as an illuminated book in the middle ages; to its emergence as a mass-produced printed book and later, as an artist's book; to its iterations in the twentieth century in America and Israel, including those that reflect the Holocaust; and finally to the current explosion of new versions, including those using emerging technologies of our day.

Let us begin with a broad-stroked overview.

The Haggadah's life as a liturgical text came about to fulfill a biblical injunction to fathers to tell the story of the Exodus from Egypt to their children (literally, to their sons): "And you shall tell your son on that day, 'It is because of what the Lord did for me when I went free from Egypt'" (Exodus 13:8). For those Jewish men who lacked children, their students could fill in; for the childless without students, wives would do. Persons all alone could still tell the story to themselves, asking the questions and answering them, too. Transmit that memory of holy history as if it happened to you, as if you were there yourself among the children of Israel. Its essence: we were slaves, God rescued us once from degradation and brought us to freedom as a nation, and we are as grateful now as we were then. The moral: cherish freedom, or, lacking it, seek it out. And trust: the next redemption, however bleak the current moment, may be just around the bend. Transmit that memory of oppression captivatingly enough so the story attaches itself to the moral imagination. The memory of belonging to a people who knew slavery and then liberation should enliven so much empathy that one cannot help but feel responsible for helping others to achieve their own liberation.

In the biblical story of the children of Israel wandering in the desert, they are exhorted to explain to their children why they sacrificed lambs in the spring. While the First and Second Temples in Jerusalem stood, during Passover pilgrimages, the sacrifices took place in their vicinity. Following the destruction of the Second Temple (70 CE), and some say, even before that, the sacrifice was made symbolically with food and drink and an interpretive liturgy, including narration, and it took place in homes.

From the beginning of the diaspora from the Land of Israel until this day, the obligation of transmission is still carried out in the form of a step-by-step dining practice called the *seder*. The word means order. It refers to the order in which one recites the Passover liturgy, drinks four cups of wine, and engages ritually with symbolic foods by breaking, dipping, indicating, or hiding and seeking them. The seder is part Greco-Roman symposium (to be discussed later), part study and prayer session, part holiday dinner at Grandma and Grandpa's house, and with growing frequency, part teach-in for social justice or political protest. Because a spirit of rejoicing on Passover (one of the three Jewish pilgrimage festivals; the others are Sukkot in the fall and Shavuot in late spring) is called for, the seder table became the site for a festive repast. There, under the spell of narrative and ritual, all the other degradations, exiles, and cries of the past might be briefly repressed; all enemies, past and future, are imagined as getting their due. In a passage expressing the horror of being slaughtered by Crusader armies in 1096, there is a cry for vengeance, one that has been a source of discomfort for some who adamantly omit it on the grounds of xenophobia: "Pour out Your wrath on the

nations that do not know You . . . ; annihilate them from under God's heavens."

What exactly can you find in a fairly traditional Haggadah? I offer this synopsis: The Haggadah begins with a list of the fourteen steps that characterize the proceedings. Next comes the first of four blessings over wine, and instructions for washing one's hands, saying a blessing over a green vegetable, and breaking a matzah and setting half aside for hiding. It is followed by a minisummary that explains why Passover is observed and introduces the theme of slavery and freedom. Next, a child asks four questions, which are only vaguely answered; there is a story of four archetypal children, the questions they ask, and the answers they receive. Many passages of rabbinic literature that elliptically refer to the Exodus are eventually enlivened by instructions to name the ten plagues as well as by a cheerful song called "Dayenu" (it would be enough), which expresses gratitude for all of God's graciousness to the children of Israel along their journey. Psalms follow, and then comes a burst of ritual action: handwashing, a blessing before eating matzah, another one for eating bitter herbs, and a ritual for eating a sandwich made of the bitter herbs and a condiment called *charoset*. Finally, it is time for a festive meal. This is followed by instructions to eat the retrieved matzah half, a grace after meals, a welcome to the prophet Elijah, then more psalms, a statement of completion, and a selection of popular liturgical songs that have accrued over the years.

The Haggadah has no single author and no single editor. From the time of "tell your child," spanning oral to written cultures, the Haggadah has grown into a commonplace book chronicling generations of verbal, illustrative, and

ritual strategies that were considered, in their times and in their places, suitable for the task of transmission. Recite this! Teach that! Imbibe and ingest the sweet fruit and nut paste called charoset, the bitter herbs, the springy greens, the flat-crunchy matzah! Remember worse times, pray for better ones! Told with bursts of eloquence, courtesy of the psalms recited before and after the meal, and climaxing in loveable cumulative ditties, the assemblage of direction, prayer, and teaching became codified along the way. It has made for a night of dinner theater, in which cast and audience are one and the same as they utter, "It is because of what the Lord did for me when I went forth from Egypt" (Exodus 13:8). From the very start, qualities such as deep empathy, flexibility, fluidity, and personalization were attached to this practice of oral transmission performed communally and intergenerationally. If the gambit worked, heritage and obligation would be transmitted. The newest generation would know what their parents had known: how to remember their way into tribal belonging. Come the next year, the initiation would be repeated with age-appropriate nods to children's growing skills, attention spans, and possible alienation, and thus, membership and the experience of belonging would be intensified.

While the Haggadah shapes the way the Exodus narrative is told, how the sacramental foods are eaten, and how God is to be acknowledged, there is—now especially—significant range in how much authority a Haggadah asserts. On one extreme, there are those who follow their texts to the letter; they can even find, in the small print, instructions for how to measure the precise amounts of matzah that must be eaten. On the other extreme, there are

many, worldwide, who skip over what seems just too much. They include the father of playwright Tony Kushner, whose skipping practices are humorously recalled in his 1995 play "Notes on Akiba" written for a third seder performance piece at the Jewish Museum in New York. (Here's why his father skips the section about the ten plagues: it is "lengthy, too close to dinner to be endured, and exceedingly blood-curdling."[2])

Recently, a blogger from Hawaii found her childhood Haggadot while cleaning out her mother's basement in Kansas City and wrote:

> My father's copy is carefully marked in red pen so he could lead our seder . . . to dinner as efficiently as possible. He even wrote the word "Skip" in many places. Thank goodness. The Gershun family has always been short on seder and long on food! We definitely follow that tradition in this Gershun home to this day.[3]

Some quit their seders midway, putting aside their Haggadot for good when the festive meal is served. While some use an abridged version (even a Passover coloring book, even after the children are now grown!) and are done in minutes, others, proud that their seders extend into the wee hours, make it to the very last pages. Their Haggadah might inspire interruptions: debates, classical teachings that come to mind, new readings, specially composed songs and dances, and planned and spontaneous dramatizations. I think of the Passover my mother, who had just received a walking stick and a cape for her April birthday, took up on the spur of the moment and called herself Grandma Moses. She led a mid-seder parade of little grandchildren rushing

through the living room until they were chased by Pharaoh's invisible army as they crossed the laundry room, which she designated as the "sea." A few years back, in an unscripted portion of the seder, my colleague, a Jewish Studies professor, put his Haggadah down and invited his preschoolers to break, piñata-style, the gold-painted modern-day idol he had constructed for them out of cardboard: a larger-than-life computer. Such instances of home-style performance art may evoke 1960s happenings, but they are actually inspired by even earlier generations of Jews who have been lively Haggadah enactors.

The Haggadah is unlike most other Jewish texts in terms of the laws that govern its usage. Let me explain. Whereas Jewish law stipulates that the Torah scroll must be read from and the Scroll of Esther must be heard, no laws stipulate how the Haggadah should be read aloud or heard. While there is usually a leader who chants the Haggadah or directs those around the table to take parts, one could read it quietly to oneself and perform the required ritual acts. As with the Torah, there are traditions of cantillation for singing the Haggadah that have been passed down in Judaism's different ethnic groups, but this is a home ceremony, so no guardians stand by to correct words that are inadvertently skipped or misread.

Conceivably, given that the Haggadah is constructed as a script or prompt, one could not use a Haggadah at all and conduct a Passover seder from memory. Until codified, Jewish liturgy, law, and learning were orally transmitted; the grand exception was the written Torah scroll. Orality preserved the dynamism of Jewish tradition, its freshness. If a memorized general script for the seder might have once

been sufficient for a people with a strong oral tradition, it eventually ceased being so, except in moments of terrible trials, such as during the Holocaust, when for some, the only available Haggadah was the Haggadah of memory.

The Haggadah also has a distinctive life as a Jewish ritual object. Containing the name of God, protocols of respect must be observed. Drop it and it is kissed. When it is worn out, it should be stored in a repository called a *geniza* until it can be buried. Such considerations aside, the Haggadah is considered less sacred than a Torah scroll. (The rule of thumb: the more sacred an object is considered, the more rules there are governing its production and usage.) A Torah must be handwritten on sheets of parchment made from the skin of a kosher animal (usually from a cow) that has been soaked in limewater, stretched, and scraped. The ink is made of plant gall, copper sulfate crystals, gum arabic, and water and is applied with a quill from a kosher goose or a turkey. It is written out precisely and accurately using traditional letterings, spacing, and columns. No illustrations. The sheets of parchment are sewn together with strings of animal sinew and wound on wooden rollers. If there is an error in the Torah scroll or any defacement, it is not kosher, fit for use, the same word used to describe foods permitted to a Jew. This work can only be done by a ritual scribe, called a *sofer*, who prepares for the day's work with prayer and ablution.

While there are some more or less established conventions for a Haggadah's layout, there is no protocol for how it must be written. What inks, paints, or paper can be used? How should it be bound? It's up for grabs.

There is no protocol for storage and handling. The Torah scroll, crowned with a silver headpiece or silk scarves and

wrapped in embroidered velvet or enclosed upright in a decorated metal or wooden box, is taken from an often ornate ark that is the focal point of the synagogue's architecture. Before and after it is read from, it is processed before congregants who have risen in its honor and reach out to transfer a kiss on it by hand, prayer book, or fringe of the prayer shawl. The choreography makes it clear: the Torah represents both God's word and God's palpable presence. There is no elaborate choreography for Haggadot, kept mostly at home. True, they may get places of honor on bookshelves next to other Jewish texts. An especially lovely Haggadah may be displayed and given pride of place in the living room alongside a Hanukkah candelabra, which, together with a mezuzah on the door, indicate a Jewish American home. (Interestingly enough, many Jews who have Haggadot at home won't have a Bible or prayer book.) Likely enough, after Passover, most Haggadot are stacked in batches, rubber-banded, packed away in a box along with the Passover dishes and the chopping bowl, and stored in the basement, attic, or closet until they get taken out again next year. Come Passover eve, like spring crocuses, they appear again, perhaps a little worse for wear. But who notices? It's a sometimes scruffy, familiar item.

Rare Haggadot have been stored in mundane places, though not necessarily on purpose. In 2013, an auctioneer appraising the contents of a home in North Manchester, England, discovered an ornately illustrated eighteenth-century Haggadah made by a scribe to the imperial court in Vienna for the Oppenheim banking family. It was languishing in an Osem soup carton in the garage! It had apparently come from Belgium to Britain when its owners escaped the Nazis, but the current owners had no idea they even owned it, let alone

how it had come into the family's possession. Dr. Yaakov Wise of the Centre for Jewish Studies at the University of Manchester said of this miraculous discovery: "This was probably in use for 200 years. There are wine and food stains on it which is exactly what you would expect when it was at the table. It is easy to imagine the wealthy family in Vienna sitting around in their wigs and their buckled shoes reading it by candlelight."[4] It was later sold at auction for $340,000.

A Haggadah has a life as an object that is viewed, but not used, in museum and library collections, and they are found in private Judaica collections as well. Everyday people collect Haggadot too, sometimes purposefully—say, by purchasing a new one each year—and often by chance—it's quite easy to walk out of a supermarket with a free (or "free with a purchase") copy. OK, I confess: a few free copies.

There have been exquisite Haggadot, including illuminated versions of the medieval period, publications in the new age of printing, and periodic revivals of illumination, including the arresting mid-twentieth-century Haggadah of Arthur Syzk. In our age, there have been fine art versions, originals, limited editions, and mass-produced copies. Some of my personal favorite Haggadah artists are Zoya Cherkassy, Maty Grünberg, Tamar Messer, Avner Moriah, Mark Podwal, Ben Shahn, Eliyahu Sidi, and Barbara Wolff.

An exceptional Haggadah designated as a collector's item generates veneration and might spend its days at the Jewish National Library in Jerusalem (which is said to have the world's largest collection of Haggadot—over 10,000!), the British Library, the Bodleian, the Library of Congress, the New York Public Library, the library of the Jewish Theological Seminary, the Morgan Library, and even the

Vatican—not to mention in university libraries, synagogues, Jewish museums, or private homes. Still, there is pride of place for a workaday variant, such as one that has been passed down by family members and distinguished by the patina of love and memory; its link to generations past stimulates a loving respect and attaches an extra freight of meaning.

How many versions of the Haggadah are there? Determining that has fueled a cottage industry of Haggadah bibliographies. In 1901 there was Shmuel Wiener's *A Bibliography of the Passover Haggadah* listing 909 publications; Abraham Yaari's *A Bibliography of the Passover Haggadah* (1960) lists 2,700, and later increased the number by 174.[5] In his magisterial 1975 book *Haggadah in History*, which chronicles five centuries of the Haggadah in print, from its appearance in liturgical compendia to its existence as a freestanding volume, Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi characterized the Haggadah as "the most popular and beloved of Hebrew books." He tipped his hat to bibliographers who cataloged over 3,500 editions coming to light, the most reprinted, widely translated, frequently illustrated, and widely issued volume wherever Jewish presses have flourished.[6] Yitzhak Yudlov then compiled a 1997 *Haggadah Thesaurus* accounting for 4,715 Haggadot since the beginning of printing until 1960. Now, whenever figures are cited, the number is usually 5,000 and counting. Nearly every article about the Haggadah notes its many revisions, with Edward Rothstein in the April 17, 2011, *New York Times* offering one of the most eloquent accounts:

> Though only read once or twice a year, it has probably had more wine spilled on it than any other book ever published. Over the centuries, it has been paraphrased, abridged,

> translated, transliterated and transformed. It has been sung, chanted, illustrated and supplanted. And in 5,000 or so editions since the invention of the printing press.[7]

Why so many? Why has the Haggadah resisted being fixed once and for all? To answer this question, I traveled around America and to Israel consulting with Haggadah experts—Jewish museum curators, Judaica librarians, collectors, scholars, rabbis, and those who have created and published Haggadot of their own. I inevitably heard three answers.

The first is geography, because Jews have lived all over the world. Since the Haggadah may be recited in any language so it can be understood, it has been printed in Hebrew and translated into English, Yiddish, Judeo-Italian, Judeo-Spanish, French, Spanish, Russian, Polish, Chinese, Italian, Croatian, Danish, Czech, Finnish, Turkish, Swedish, Hungarian, Amharic . . . just to name a few. An 1874 Haggadah written in Hebrew and Marathi depicting the Bene Israel Jews of India is often used to make this point of the diversity of Jewish settlement. In this same vein, we hear about community Haggadot from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, written in Hebrew, Aramaic, Chinese, and Judeo-Persian that were used by Jews who had settled in the Chinese city of Kaifeng.

The second answer is diversity of Jewish practice. The Haggadah has accommodated the many ways Judaism has been practiced and reflects different liturgical rites. We see that easily in contemporary America, with Haggadot created for Reform, Conservative, Reconstructionist, Orthodox, Sephardic, Ultra-Orthodox, Hasidic, Renewal, Humanist, and secular Jews as well as for those describing themselves as nondenominational or postdenominational.

History is the third answer. The Haggadah has expanded to chronicle events—especially crises and cataclysms—that have become assimilated into the story Jews tell about themselves at the annual ritual of peoplehood. Consider the Haggadah written during the Holocaust that comes with nightmarish illustrations reflecting concentration or DP camps. Consider, too, the many Israeli or American Haggadot issued soon after the Six-Day War of 1967 with celebratory images of Israeli soldiers praying at the Western Wall or whimsical drawings of Jerusalem's Old City. As it happens, there are Haggadot, such as the Schechter Haggadah, which, in addition to providing the traditional materials for the seder also tell the history of Jews through pictures and commentary. Jacob Ari Labendz has called them historiographical Haggadot because they reveal how Jews in different places and eras saw themselves observing Passover and also engage the reader in self-reflexive embedding. Think of the Morton Salt girl who carries a container of salt with smaller picture of herself—into an imagined infinitum. "It is as if they ask their reader to *look upon himself as though he were a Jew of another era looking upon himself 'as though he went out of Egypt.'*"[8]

In the course of this biography, we will see precisely how geography, practice, and history have occasioned revision . . . and, in all likelihood, will continue to do so. As we come to know the life of the Haggadah more intimately and learn how it has functioned as an organism, we shall see how its capacity to maintain a core and still be an ever-flexible work in process, produced with the ever-changing needs of the current celebrants and their situations in mind, has been a key to its longevity.

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A page number in italics refers to an illustration.