

The Haggada In Plain English

It is an embarrassing and shameful fact, but we're going to have to admit it: We started off as slaves. Slaves to the Pharaoh of Egypt. In fact, we would still be slaves today if it weren't for the fact that the Holy One (blessed be He) liberated us from there with a strong fist and an outstretched arm. We would be slaves, our children would be slaves, our grandchildren would be slaves. Nobody would even have thought of the whole idea of freedom.

That's why we're telling this story tonight. Even if we would all be wise and understanding, even if we all knew everything that's written in the Torah and all the holy books, we would still be telling this story tonight. And the more you tell the better.

Just to give an example, there was a case where five of the greatest rabbis were sitting around in B'nei Brak the whole night telling the story of the liberation from Egypt. There was Rabbi Eliezer, Rabbi Yehoshua, Rabbi Elazar ben Azariah, Rabbi Akiva and Rabbi Tarfon. They didn't stop until their students arrived and said, "Our teachers! It's already time to say the morning prayers!"

What do you think they were discussing? Well, Rabbi Elazar ben Azariah mentioned that he had been attempting for many years—interjecting that he was about seventy years old—to convince the other sages that there is a mitzvah to mention the Exodus every night.

"It says, 'the days of your life!'" he exclaimed, waving his thumb in the air. "Nowhere does it say anything about the nighttime!"

So then Rabbi Elazar went on to praise a young sage who doesn't even get called by his own name. Bright guy, though. "Zoma's son," they called him. (That's Ben Zoma in Hebrew.)

Ben Zoma explained that there's an extra word here: It says every day of your life. Well, that could also be read as the whole day of every day of your life—depends on how you translate it. "If it just said remember the exodus on the days of your life," Ben Zoma went on to explain, "I would know that every day I had to mention the exodus in the daytime. But since it says the whole day, I know that I have to do the same at night as well."

Blessed is the One Who Contains All Space & Time, blessed be He. Blessed is the One who gave Torah to His people, blessed be He. The Torah tells four different ways to tell four different kinds of kids this story. One is wise, one is bad, one is simple, and one just doesn't know how to ask questions, nebuch.

So what does the wise one say?

"Explain to me all the symbolism, the rituals and the rules that Hashem our G-d commanded you?"

So you have to tell him all the rules of Passovers, all the way to the last rule that you don't eat anything after the Afikoman.

As for the bad one, what does he say?

"Why do you guys do all this?"

He says you guys, excluding himself. So you blunt his teeth. Quote the verse, "It's because of this that G-d did all these things for me when I left Egypt." If he's excluding himself already, so he's excluding himself from leaving Egypt. If he had been there, he would never have been redeemed.

What about the simple son? Well, he just says,

"What's this?"

So you tell him about all the miracles, saying, "With a mighty hand, G-d took us out of Egypt, where we were slaves."

And the one who doesn't know how to ask? Well, you'll have to open the conversation. Tell him, "G-d did all these things for me in Egypt so that I would do all this. Like this trying to get you to ask questions."

Suddenly, the kid who never asks questions comes up with a question:

"Hold on, maybe we should be doing this seder on Rosh Chodesh!"

"Why then?"

"Because that's when G-d told Moses about the mitzvah of Pesach."

"Nope, it says on that day."

"Okay, so then we should be doing it during the day. Now it's night already."

"Nope."

"Why not?"

"Because it says, for the sake of this stuff. Meaning this matzah and bitter herbs that we eat on the night of Pesach. So we have to wait until we're supposed to eat that stuff—and that's tonight."

Now, it's an embarrassing and shameful fact, but we're going to have to admit it: Originally, our forefathers were idolaters. But now, G-d has brought us into a great deal, working for Him. That's what Joshua said to all the people, "So says Hashem, the G-d of Israel, "Your fathers lived on the other side of the river for a long time. There was Terach, the father of Abraham and Nahor. And they served other gods."

"So I took your father, Abraham from the other side of the river and I walked him through the whole land of Canaan. I gave him lots of descendants. I gave him Isaac. To Isaac I gave Jacob and Esau. To Esau, I gave Mount Seir to take over. Jacob and his children went down to Egypt."

Blessed is the One who keeps His promise to Israel, blessed be He! Because G-d set a limit to how long we would be in exile as He promised to Abraham in the Deal Between the Parts. That's what He said to Abraham, "Know that your children will be strangers in a land that is not theirs for 400 years. They will be enslaved and oppressed. Also know that I will judge the nation that they serve. Then I will take them out with great wealth."

[Sing]

It's this promise that has stood strong for our ancestors and us. Because not just one nation alone has arisen to against us to wipe us out. In every generation, they stand against us to wipe us out. And each time, G-d saves us from their hand.