

חַד גָּדְיָא CHAD GADYA



IN A NUTSHELL

This strange and haunting song seems simple on the surface but has hidden depths. Concluding one of Judaism's most important evenings of the year with a children's song tells us a lot about how important children are, especially on this night. The Jewish love of, and focus on, children means that we look forward to the future even more than we look back to the past. Just as we began the Seder with the questions of a child, so we end it with a nursery rhyme, reminding ourselves that what sustains a faith is not strength or power, but its ability to inspire successive generations of children to add their voices to their people's song.



DEEP DIVE

The theme of *Chad Gadya* is the destructive cycle of vengeance and retaliation. In one interpretation, the young goat represents Israel. The "father" who bought it for two coins is God, who redeemed Israel from Egypt through His two representatives, Moshe and Aharon. The cat is Assyria, which conquered the northern kingdom of Israel. The dog is Babylonia, which defeated the southern kingdom of Judah. The stick is Persia, which replaced Babylonia as the imperial power in the sixth century BCE. The fire is the Greeks, who defeated the Persians in the days of Alexander the Great. The water is Rome, which superseded ancient Greece. The ox is Islam, which defeated the Romans in Palestine in the seventh century. The slaughterer is Christianity – specifically the Crusaders, who fought Islam in Palestine and elsewhere, murdering Jews on the way. The Angel of Death is the Ottoman Empire, which controlled Palestine until the First World War. The song concludes with an

expression of faith that "this too shall pass" and the Jewish people will return to their land. So it has been in our days.

One Little Goat,
The Jonathan Sacks Haggada

The song, disarming in its simplicity, teaches the great truth of Jewish hope: that though many nations (symbolised by the cat, the dog, and so on) attacked Israel (the goat), each in turn has vanished into oblivion. At the end of days God will vanquish the Angel of Death and inaugurate a world of life and peace, the two great Jewish loves. *Chad Gadya* expresses the Jewish refusal to give up hope. Though history is full of man's inhumanity to man – dog bites cat, stick hits dog – that is not the final verse. The Haggadah ends with the death of death in eternal life, a fitting end for the story of a people dedicated to Moshe's great command, "Choose life" (Devarim 30:19).

Commentary on Chad Gadya,
The Jonathan Sacks Haggada

Living at the turn of the 21st century, do you feel this song and the message behind it is still relevant to Jewish history?



FURTHER THOUGHTS

So, having earlier expressed the Jewish hope, "Next year in Jerusalem," we end our Seder night with the *universal* hope that the Angel of Death will one day be defeated by the long-overdue realisation that God is life; that worshipping God means sanctifying life; that God's greatest command is "Choose life" (Devarim 30:19); that we bring God into the world by reciting a blessing over life.

I find it almost unbearably moving that a people that has known so much suffering can summon the

moral courage to end this evening of Jewish history on a supreme note of hope, and write it into the hearts of its children in the form of a nursery rhyme, a song. For what we give our children on this night of nights is something more and greater than the bread of oppression and the taste of Jewish tears. It is a faith that in this world, with all its violence and cruelty, we can create moments of redemption, signals of transcendence, acts of transfiguring grace. No people has risked and suffered more for a more slender hope, but no hope has lifted a people higher and led it, time and again, to greatness. So we end the night with a prayer and a conviction. The prayer: "God of life, help us win a victory over the forces of death." And the conviction? That by refusing to accept the world that is, together we can start to make the world that ought to be."

One Little Goat,
The Jonathan Sacks Haggada

What is the main focus at the end of the Haggadah, and how is it different from the beginning of the Haggadah?



QUESTIONS TO THINK ABOUT AND ASK AT YOUR SEDER

1. Why do you think we end the Seder with a song for children?
2. How do you think the message of the song is connected to the Seder night?
3. How does this song connect to our lives today?



EXPERIENCING THE SEDER

Ask every person at your Seder table in turn to share what their hopes for the next year are: hopes for themselves, for the Jewish people, and for the world.