The Jonathan Sacks Haggada
Collected Essays on Pesaḥ

הגדת יונתן זקס

THE JONATHAN SACKS HAGGADA

Collected Essays on Pesaḥ

Maggid Books

To Michael and Penny,
beloved friends

The Jonathan Sacks Haggada
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"By reciting the Haggada, Jews give their children a sense of connectedness to Jews throughout the world and to the Jewish people through time. It joins them to a past and future, a history and destiny, and makes them characters in its drama." (Jonathan Sacks, "The Story of Stories")

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This edition is dedicated to the memory of our parents,

Tovah and Rabbi Sidney Applbaum
and
Miriam and Aaron Goetz
זכרונם לברכה

for whom the greatest joy was fulfilling the commandment of והגדת לבנך,
passing on the Jewish tradition to their children.

And, להבדיל בין חיים לחיים,
in honor of our wonderful children,

Aaron Jacob, Ariel Tsvi, and Miriam Gavriella עמו"ש,

to whom we've been fortunate to pass on this same tradition.

Hilda and Yitz Applbaum

Note to the Reader
For the full Haggada text, with translation and commentary, turn to the other end of this volume.

Collected Essays on Pesaḥ

The Story of Stories

Remember the earliest of days; grasp the years of generations that have been. Ask your father – he will tell you all; ask the elders of your kin and they will say. (Deut. 32:7)

The seder service on Pesaḥ is the oldest surviving ritual in the Western world, dating back some 3,300 years to the night, possibly in the reign of Ramses II, when the Israelites ate their last meal in Egypt, preparing for their journey to freedom. Certain features still remain from biblical times: the matza and maror, the reminder of the Paschal offering (a mere reminder until the rebuilding of the Temple), the questions asked by a child, and the explanations given by an adult. In some communities, especially Oriental ones, it is still the custom to dress as the Israelites did then, "your loins girded, your shoes on your feet, and your staff in your hand" (Ex. 12:11).

The seder is, of course, more than a ritual. It is an act of remembering, the telling of a story – the Haggada – and none has been more lovingly sustained. Each age has added something of its own. In the course of a single night, we encounter, as well as biblical passages, Hillel in the days of the Second Temple, the second-century sages at their seder in Benei Brak, the teachings of the *Amora'im* of the third and later centuries, poems by Yannai and Kalir from the post-talmudic period, an

addition from Ashkenaz provoked by the terrible sufferings of the First Crusade, and children's songs from medieval Germany. Every word we say has a history. Even the *Ma Nishtana*, the questions asked by a child, go back some two thousand years. The weaving together of these many contributions into a single narrative is the achievement of no ordinary author. It is the collective voice of the Jewish people through centuries and continents as it has encountered and responded to the word of God.

Through the Haggada more than a hundred generations of Jews have handed on their story to their children. The word *haggada* means "relate," "tell," "expound." But it is closely related to another Hebrew root that means "bind," "join," "connect." By reciting the Haggada, Jews give their children a sense of connectedness to Jews throughout the world and to the Jewish people through time. It joins them to a past and future, a history and destiny, and makes them characters in its drama. Every other nation known to mankind has been united because its members lived in the same place, spoke the same language, were part of the same culture. Jews alone, dispersed across continents, speaking different languages and participating in different cultures, have been bound together by a narrative, the Pesaḥ narrative, which they told in the same way on the same night. More than the Haggada was the story of a people, Jews were the people of a story.

During Israel's early history – the biblical era – the Exodus narrative embodied their collective memory as a nation, forged in slavery and led miraculously to freedom. Not only was it the record of their past; it was their template of ideals for the future, their aspiration to create a society dedicated to liberty under the sovereignty of God. But its influence did not end with the collapse of Jewish sovereignty in Israel. If anything, during the long centuries when Jews were scattered throughout the world, its effect was more remarkable still. It sustained Jewish identity, linking one generation to the next through the bonds of shared memory. In times of suffering – and there were many – it kept hope alive, the hope expressed at the very beginning of the Haggada that though "now [we are] slaves, next year we shall be free; now we are here; next year in the land of Israel." In ages of prosperity, it became a tutorial in mutual responsibility. It taught the great lesson of human solidarity, that we cannot enjoy the food of affluence while others eat the bread of oppression. We are not fully free if others are oppressed.

Nor was its influence confined to Jews. Through a long and circuitous route, the story of the Exodus eventually came to influence not only Jews but Western civilization as a whole. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, through such figures as John Locke and Thomas Jefferson, it gave rise to a new vision of freedom. It told of how a people might liberate itself from oppressive governments and construct a society in which "all men are created equal," possessing inalienable dignity and collective freedom. It set forth a narrative, never surpassed, of the human drama as the long journey to redemption, not in heaven but on earth, in the structures of our common life. No story has had greater influence in inspiring revolution or evolution toward a just and humane society. It is the West's great meta-narrative of liberty.

More remarkably still, in the nineteenth century it inspired a series of figures, some religious, others secular but moved nonetheless by the power of the ancient narrative, to set in motion a new exodus and homecoming of the Jewish people. It began with a new Egypt – the rise of racial anti-Semitism, followed by the Russian pogroms, then the anti-Jewish program of the Nazis, which moved inexorably to the Final Solution, the worst recorded crime of man against man. It culminated in a redemption more astonishing than any other in post-biblical history: the only time a people dispersed for two thousand years has returned to its land to begin its history again as a sovereign power. Speaking in the United Nations in 1947, David Ben-Gurion argued the case for the creation of the State of Israel and did so by referring to Pesaḥ and the Haggada:

> Three hundred years ago a ship called the *Mayflower* set sail to the New World. This was a great event in the history of England. Yet I wonder if there is one Englishman who knows at what time the ship set sail? Do the English know how many people embarked on this voyage? What quality of bread did they eat? Yet more than three thousand three hundred years ago, before the *Mayflower* set sail, the Jews left Egypt. Every Jew in the world, even in America or Soviet Russia, knows on exactly what date they left – the fifteenth of the month of Nisan. Everyone knows what kind of bread they ate. Even today the Jews worldwide eat matza on the fifteenth of Nisan. They retell the story of the Exodus and all the

> troubles Jews have endured since being exiled. They conclude this evening with two statements: *This year, slaves. Next year, free men. This year here. Next year in Jerusalem, in Zion, in Eretz Yisrael.* That is the nature of the Jews.

Thus history repeated itself, and a new chapter was written in the Jewish story of exile and homecoming more than three thousand years after the first. The story of the modern State of Israel, with its restoration of Jewish sovereignty; the ingathering of exiles from 103 countries, speaking eighty-two languages; the rebirth of Hebrew, the language of the Bible; and the rebuilding of Jerusalem, Israel's ancient capital, exemplifies one of Judaism's most hope-creating truths: that a vision can shape the destiny of a people. Ideas, if we live them, have the power to change the world.

The great message of Pesaḥ is that history is not what Joseph Heller once called it: "a trash bag of random coincidences blown open by the wind" (*Good as Gold*). It is, or can become, a journey toward a place where people are valued not for the wealth they own or the power they wield, but for who they are – a trace of God in a world that so often seems to deny His presence. In ways that remain obscure yet still majestic, a whole series of individuals – beginning with Abraham, culminating in Moses, and continuing through an almost unending sequence of prophets, visionaries, sages, saints, philosophers, poets, jurists, and commentators – was inspired by a vision of society in which simple acts, relationships, and lives could become vehicles of the Divine Presence.

As we sit around the seder table on Pesaḥ, rehearsing the journey from the bread of oppression to the wine of freedom, we commit ourselves to a momentous proposition: that history has meaning. We are not condemned endlessly to repeat the tragedies of the past. Not everywhere is an Egypt; not all politics are the exploitation of the many by the few; life is potentially something other and more gracious than the pursuit of power. Though we have not yet constructed the perfect social order, and though the messianic age with its reign of peace remains over the horizon, we are not wrong to travel in that direction, however long it may take before we reach our destination. In his *A History of the Jews*, Paul Johnson expressed as well as anyone has the nature of the Jewish journey:

> No people has ever insisted more firmly than the Jews that history has a purpose and humanity a destiny. At a very early stage of their collective existence they believed they had detected a divine scheme for the human race, of which their own society was to be a pilot. They worked out their role in immense detail. They clung to it with heroic persistence in the face of savage suffering.... The Jewish vision became the prototype for many similar grand designs for humanity, both divine and man-made. The Jews, therefore, stand right at the center of the perennial attempt to give human life the dignity of a purpose.

"The dignity of a purpose": that remains, even today, a radical hope. Throughout history there has been no shortage of those who claim that ideals are illusions and hope a form of hubris destined to end in failure. Today that view is as likely to come from science (specifically "scientism," the belief that science is all there is) as anywhere else. We are, on this view, a mere concatenation of chemicals, cosmic dust on the surface of infinity, living out lives that are no more than infinitesimal disturbances in a blind and purposeless universe that came into being for no reason, and for no reason will, billions of years from now, cease to be.

Judaism is now, as it has been since its earliest days, a protest against such despair in the name of humanity and of God, whose breath we breathe and whose voice, if we listen, we can still hear through the echoes of time. The universe is not blind to our hopes, deaf to our prayers. Somewhere at the core of being is a personal presence, a transcendental Thou, who created the world in love, brought us into being as a parent does a child, who spoke to Abraham and Sarah, asking them and their descendants to undertake a long and momentous journey, and who is with us on the way. Pesaḥ is the festival of faith, the faith of our ancestors, who followed that voice across the wilderness of space and time, in search of a freedom that honors the presence of God in the affairs of mankind.

Few texts have received more attention than the Haggada. There are thousands of commentaries, and more are published each year. Anyone who contemplates adding to this number must ask not "Why is this night different?" but "Why is this edition different?" My answer is that I wrote this commentary because, among all the many I have read, I could not