

## The Haggadah and Healing

By Rabbi Simkha Y. Weintraub, LMSW

*Remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the Lord your God brought you out with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm... Deut. 5:15*

Reciting the Passover story reminds us not only of a transcendent moment in the history of the Jews, but of transformative times of misery and suffering - and emergence and deliverance - in our own lives. Reflecting on those moments in light of the great themes and symbols of this festival provides a wonderful opportunity to achieve understanding and healing.

The word *Haggadah* is a gerund: it means "the telling." By linking this process with personal knowledge, we can open the door to a richer and more nuanced experience of Passover.

Early in the *seder*, the Haggadah introduces the famous homily about the four children. This quartet signifies that those gathered around the table bring their individual experiences and attitudes. The rabbis who formalized the *seder* were acutely aware of the need to shape the telling to the concerns and levels of the participants.

Though the evening has a definite order (*seder*), the Haggadah should not be rote recitation, but rather dynamic exploration that involves questioning, probing, empathizing, and creative interpreting. The Haggadah provides the armature on which to construct the story.

With this in mind, here are some ideas about how everyone who is struggling with illness might draw new meaning from the *seder* and, simultaneously, contribute to it.

I've focused on two key elements of the *seder*: the ten plagues and the three essential symbols. I hope that these suggestions will encourage you to bring the *seder* to bear on your experience of illness - and to bring your experience of illness to bear on your *seder*.

### *The Ten Plagues*

For those coping with illness, undergoing treatment, or seeking recovery, the ten plagues elicit a wide range of reactions:

∴ Empathy with the Egyptians: "I, too, have known blood, boils, and deep darkness. Any person's illness is a call to compassion and assistance."

∴ Doubt and questioning: "Where is the justice in God's repeated hardening of Pharaoh's heart? In the suffering of those who were innocent? In *any* pain and disease?"

∴ Comfort: "At least here, suffering was time-limited and space-bound. It was part of a

divine plan. It was not random, unending or meaningless."

∴ Terror: "The scope and intensity of the plagues are truly horrifying. They reach from the young to the old, from the heavens to the depths of the sea, from simple animals to Pharaoh's royal family."

Of course, there can be many other emotional, intellectual, spiritual and psychological responses.

Rather than race mechanically through the recitation of the plagues, select some of the following ideas, as appropriate and helpful.

∴ Listen closely to the name of each plague. Imagine the reality; digest the possibilities and implications of each one.

∴ Explore the needs of those plagued today, particularly those who suffer AIDS, cancer, heart disease and other serious illnesses and chronic conditions.

∴ Discuss who among you is suffering or has suffered serious illness. Explore what it means for them, and what they need from, and can offer, you.

∴ Sing songs of healing and strength, such as *Esa Einay*, *Im Amarti Mata Ragli*, *Abat Sha'alti and Elekha Hashem Ekra*.

∴ Recall those who died from serious illness since last Passover. Remember their struggles, challenges, resources and legacies.

∴ Explore the challenges of each Biblical plague and relate those qualities or characteristics to those of illnesses experienced by those at the *seder*.

∴ Analyze the differences between the ten plagues and your experience: contrast the historic, cosmic and "unreal" aspects of the former with the deeply personal and all-too-real elements of the latter.

∴ Examine the plagues as a 10-stage process, a flow in horribleness from blood to the killing of the firstborn. Compose a continuum that reflects your experience, either symbolically or literally.

∴ Express the pain of the plagues and their reflection in your own suffering. Express, too, your thankfulness for recovery and for the pleasure and privilege of celebrating our freedom even as we experience our slavery.

## *The Three Key Symbols*

Shortly after the recitation of the plagues, the text introduces the three central symbols of the *seder*: the sacrificial *Pesach* (Passover) offering (originally lamb), the *matzah* (unleavened bread) and the *marror* (bitter herbs).

I suggest a 3-step process for this part of the ceremony: read the Haggadah itself; draw out the connections and associations among the three symbols; and superimpose the framework provided by the three symbols on your own experience.

### *The Pesach Offering*

This symbol works on at least three levels:

*The miracle*: God passes over (*pasach*) and spares the Israelites during that most terrifying plague, the killing of the firstborn. This embodies redemption and providential protection but also terror and tragedy.

*The actual sacrifice*: The shankbone recalls the original Pesach offering, which the soon-to-be freed Israelites prepared while still in Egypt.

*The days of the Temple*: The Passover Feast was consumed by throngs of Israelites at the Temple in Jerusalem in a major annual pilgrimage.

### *Matzah*

The unleavened bread enjoys several paradoxical dual identities:

∴ The bread of affliction and the bread of redemption; symbol of humility, vulnerability and servitude - and also freedom, choice, being God's children;

∴ A reminder of the Israelites' total lack of preparedness, and yet their total willingness and readiness;

∴ A sign of God's self-revelation and Israel's self-discovery.

The matzah recalls the stunningly abrupt divine deliverance - but equally, the incredibly trusting act of faith of the Israelites to follow their invisible God into the wilderness, even after 400 long years of enslavement.

### *Marror*

Of the three symbols, this is the easiest for us to appreciate. The Jewish experience in recent times and the experience of many other people and nations who suffer hardship make it particularly accessible. Note that the bitterness is described not only in terms of excruciatingly hard labor, but as the ruthless oppression of one people by another.

As you look for the connections among the three symbols, you might find it helpful to create a chart (ahead of time), like the one below.

PESACH	MATZAH	MARROR
Future	Present	Past
Relief	Reorganizing	Pain
Redemption	Thankfulness	Bitterness
Miracles	Positive response, Adaptive	Oppression
Recovery, Hope	Treatment	Diagnosis
Sobriety	Recovery	Addiction
<i>- And whatever else you think of!</i>		

The Haggadah recommends that "in every generation, every individual should feel as though he or she had actually been redeemed from Egypt." This sentence empowers those who have struggled with illness to rethink the three symbols through the prism of illness and recovery. Relate the many aspects - some of them paradoxical and dualistic, as above - of these intensely personal experiences to the national story of slavery and freedom:

∴ Do you feel that you are still enslaved? In what ways have you been set free?

∴ If you had to name three actual, physical symbols to parallel those of the *seder*, what would they be? What encapsulates both your confinement and your delivery? What embodies your suffering and bitterness?

∴ As you articulate aspects of your odyssey with illness, treatment and recovery, try to relate them to the Exodus story and the liberation of the Hebrew slaves: How was their experience like yours? What emotional, psychological and spiritual processes did they have to undergo that reflect your own?

Your *midrash* - your personal interpretation based on your particular experience - links your history to that of the eternal narrative. It is a unique one that adds to the meaning of Passover for all assembled. "In each generation" means nothing if not here and now, and "every individual" implies all those gathered at your table and their deepest, most profound experiences.

The Haggadah is not just a chronicle of a bygone historic moment. It is a script for a live, unfolding drama, with all of us as players.

*Next year in Jerusalem!*

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## The Second Half of the Seder: Healing, Hope and Redemption

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Every year, as Pesach approaches, I plan that we will go a little faster through the first half of the *seder*, and that I will serve a lighter meal, so that we can devote sufficient attention to the second half of the *seder* service. Every year, we linger over new and familiar interpretations of the early rituals and *maggid*/ telling the story of the Exodus. Every year, I prepare all of the favorite dishes of the meal. So every year, we quickly “davven” our way through the last two cups, Hallel and the concluding songs, without stopping to examine the meanings of this rich liturgy.

That is unfortunate, because the second half of the *seder* is as ripe for interpretation, and has us much to teach us as does the part prior to the meal. The *seder* of our time is structured so that the first half fulfills our obligation to retell and to symbolically re-experience the bitterness of slavery and the wonder of God taking us out of Egypt. The second half of the *seder* has a different function. It is when we remind ourselves, and God, that redemption is not yet complete. There is much still to be done, but we express our confidence that redemption will come for our people and for our world. The first half of the *seder* is both our national story and a metaphor for our individual stories. “Each of us must see ourselves as if we had come out of *Mitzrayim*/ the narrow place.” So, too, the second half is not just a national expression of longing, but it is also a promise of hope for each of our individual journeys through life.

The meal concludes with *Tzafun* as the hidden afikomen is revealed. Every *seder* ritual has many layers of meaning and fulfills multiple functions. The afikomen is at once the memory of the Passover sacrifice and a game to keep the children involved. It also offers powerful teaching about life. Each of us has times when we feel broken, yet without the broken matza, our *seder* is incomplete. Each of us has times when we are lost, and long for someone to look for us. Each of us experiences God’s hidden face, but only in the searching can we have the possibility of finding God present in our lives again.

We follow the *seder* feast, as we do every meal, by thanking God for the food we have eaten. *Birkat hamazon* is an extended collection of blessings praising God who feeds all creatures, who gives the Land of Israel, and who rebuilds Jerusalem. It also includes many personal and communal requests for spiritual and physical nurturing. This prayer reminds us of the importance of gratitude. Sometimes we feel physically and emotionally nurtured and it is easy to sing *Birkat Hamazon*. Other times, we are so overwhelmed with suffering that we can not see beyond our distress. The discipline of a regular expression of gratitude can allow us to acknowledge that there are always blessings in our lives. This recognition can be critical as we struggle to climb out of the depths.

There is a phrase near the end of *Birkat hamazon* which takes on a special meaning at the *seder*. “May the Merciful one send us *Eliyahu Hanavi* to bring us the good news of salvation and consolation. Although the *Kos Eliyahu* (the cup of Elijah) is a relatively late addition to the *seder*, it is beloved. Like many rituals, it has a double meaning. It looks forward to redemption, but it also provides a moment for the expression of anger and the desire for vengeance for all of the pain of Jewish history. Constructive anger has a role in healing, giving us the energy to move from helplessness to action. The desire for vengeance is a cry against injustice, and it demands appropriate action to set the stage for the redemption which *Eliyahu* will announce. There are different customs as to how the *Kos Eliyahu* is to be filled. One meaningful practice has each *seder* participant add wine/grape juice to fill *Kos Eliyahu*. In this way, we declare our intention to do our part to bring justice and healing to the world in anticipation of *Eliyahu*’s arrival.

*Kos miryam*/ the cup of Miryam, filled with water, is a new addition to the *seder* table. It represents the essential role of women in maintaining hope during the darkest days of slavery and for their actions during the Exodus. This cup can also be used to convey a healing message. In the Torah, Miryam is often associated with water. The midrash adds that a well of water, Miryam’s well, accompanied the people in the desert as long as Miryam lived. It was this well which sustained them in the dry places. Miryam devoted her life to care-giving. Unrelieved responsibility can take a significant toll on the caregiver. Perhaps this explains Miryam’s hurtful accusations against her brother, Moshe. God seems to punish her with *tzaraat*, a temporary skin disease. However, it might be that her enforced separation from the center of the camp was a blessing. Miryam needed to learn to take time for herself, and to allow the people to care for and to pray for her. Many of us are care-takers and can find ourselves overwhelmed. This year, at the *seder*, pass *Kos Miryam* around and pour some of the refreshing water from this well into your cup. Quietly, or out-loud, ask for a blessing, not for the world, and not for loved ones, but for yourself. Allow the others at the table to care for you by responding “Amen”.

Hallel is a unit of psalms (Psalms 113-118) which is thought to be one of the oldest parts of the Passover evening ritual. The first two psalms, 113 and 114 are known as Hallel Mitzri, and are a poetic description and celebration of the past redemption, from slavery in Egypt. They are recited as the triumphant conclusion to the *Maggid*/telling prior to the meal. The remaining psalms look forward to future redemption, but tell a more personal story. The psalmist describes his suffering, despair, calling on God and being heard and he expresses the longing to come rejoicing into God’s presence. We often think of Hallel as a cycle of joyful songs, but it is much deeper than that. The joy of Hallel is the joy that comes after we face the void, after we are bereaved, when we return to the fullness of life, well aware of its fragility and preciousness.

The *seder* service approaches its conclusion with a collection of praises which are also found in the siddur as the introduction to the morning service. In language which is at once as intimate as our bodies and “as limitless as the sky”, we express our gratitude to God for the many national and personal acts of redemption we have experienced. It is these past acts which God has performed that gives us reason to hope for a better future.

The songs which end the *seder* envision a world which has order; a world which despite its chaos and pain, will once again be the peaceful, merciful and just garden of God’s original creation. The ancient rabbis created a *seder* service in which looking forward to the future is as essential as retelling the story of the past. Perhaps this year, at my *seder* table, we will be able to devote ourselves to exploring the meanings of these texts and rituals of healing, hope and redemption for us as individuals, as people and for all of God’s creation.

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