



# In every generation, we remember the Exodus as if we were there

**WE JEWS** are known as the People of the Book. “The Book” usually refers to the Torah, the Five Books of Moses. Christians and Muslims are also known as People of the Book because of their relationship to their sacred foundational books. In modern times, this concept has been expanded and within the Jewish context, it can also refer to the Jewish library or to other sacred texts that are important to us, such as the prayer book or the book which we read on the eve of Passover, known as the Haggadah, from the Hebrew word l’hagid (to tell the story). On this night, Jews review a foundational narrative of our history, the story of our leaving Egypt – physically and spiritually – and our journey to the Promised Land, the land of Israel, or wherever Jews sojourn in lands which they hope will be lands of promise. This journey from Egypt to Israel has physical and metaphorical meaning.

While there is a traditional Haggadah – that has come down over the centuries – there have been hundreds of varying versions of this book, especially in the contemporary Jewish period. In addition to the traditional version, with many modern commentaries, there are kibbutz versions, as well as Modern Orthodox, Conservative, Reconstructionist, and Reform ones. This year a new Haggadah has recently been published by the Reform Jewish movement in the USA.

This new Haggadah, titled *Mishkan HaSeder*, is published by the CCAR Press, a division of the Central Conference of American Rabbis, the international organization of Reform, Liberal and Progressive rabbis in the world. Edited by Rabbi Hara Person, the relatively new CEO of the CCAR, and the poet Jessica Greenbaum, the book combines traditional texts with new insights, fresh translations, inspiring poetry and amazing artwork by acclaimed artist Tobi Kahn, printed in full color.

For me, the most important passage in the whole Haggadah is the one that reminds us that we should see ourselves every year anew as if we personally were part of the exodus from Egypt.

As in every age and generation, the task is ours: to see ourselves as if we had come out of Egypt. As it is said, “Make clear to your child on that day: ‘This is because what God did for me on that day that I went forth from Egypt.’”

In fact, this famous passage is preceded in this new Haggadah by a statement by all of the participants at the Seder:

“Today wherever slavery remains, Jews taste its bitterness. And wherever oppression persists, our history tells us to act.”

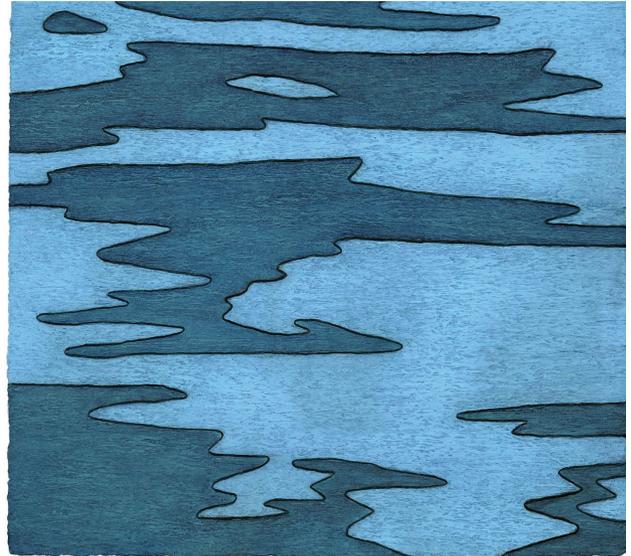
And for emphasis of this point – and to bring it to sharper consciousness for all present at the Seder – the group also recites the following statement after this passage, which includes an important biblical text which is recited by the leader of the Seder:

*Group: “Still, we remember:*

*“It was we who were slaves... we who were strangers.”*

*And therefore, we recall these words as well:*

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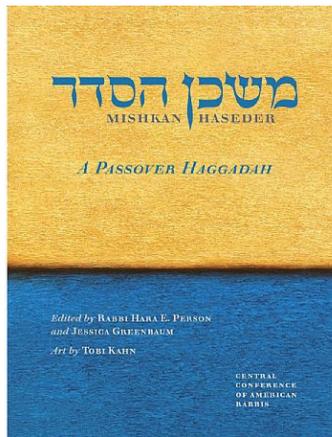
*Leader: “You shall not oppress a stranger for you know the stranger’s innermost feelings.” (Exodus 23:9)*

*Group: “Having been strangers yourselves in the land of Egypt.”*

This biblical text is added here to strengthen the main message that emanates from the recitation of our story from slavery to freedom on this special night in the Jewish calendar. This text reminds all of us of our history and the responsibility this history confers upon us in our generation.

We have tasted the bitterness of slavery in our history, and we remember that history – every Friday night when we recite the Kiddush – in which we are mindful of the Exodus from Egypt – and certainly on the eve of Passover when we go through the ritual of reciting the story of our own people’s journey from slavery to freedom. Yet, remembering the past is not enough. We can learn from our particular history as to how to act in the contemporary world, not just for ourselves, but for humanity. Wherever oppression exist, the editors of this new Haggadah tell us, our history tells us to act. In this way, the Reform Jewish movement today – as in the past – sees a clear universalistic message in the ritual of reciting our foundational narrative on this important holiday.

In addition to this, the editors of this artistic and innovative Hag-



### Mishkan HaSeder

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 Art by Tobi Kahn  
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gadah also bring us some new commentaries on this central biblical text that they have added to our recitation of the story.

When the Biblical text refers to strangers who dwell with you, who does this refer to? The term for stranger in Hebrew, the word *ger*, refers to those who have come from outside of the land to join with the Israelite community. In Biblical days, the stranger would have faced a most uncertain existence. He or she could have easily become marginalized and vulnerable. In order to deal with this potential problem, the Torah text repeatedly shows compassion for the welfare of the stranger.

According to Dr. Ryan Bonfiglio, this is why we find the command not to oppress the *ger* in both the book of Exodus and the book of Deuteronomy. Furthermore, in the Holiness Code in the book of Leviticus (chapter 19), the Hebrew Bible goes a step further by saying two important things: 1) The stranger who resides with you shall be to you as one of your citizens! And 2) you should love the stranger, just as you should love all of your citizens!

Also, according to the commentary by Rabbi Tamara Cohen Eschenazi, professor of Biblical Literature and History at the Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion in Los Angeles, who is also the editor of *The Torah; A Women's Commentary* (a groundbreaking work of 1,400 pages that was published in 2008), the idea of loving the stranger is an important concept in the Bible:

Love in the Bible is about commitment, loyalty and action, rather than feelings. To love others is to take responsibility for their well-being...The biblical prophets underscore the significance of caring for the disenfranchised, warning that a society is only as strong as its most vulnerable members.

Thus, the reminder to love the stranger – which comes in the same chapter of Leviticus as “Love your neighbor as yourself” – reminds us of our duty as Jews to build an inclusive society, wherever we live, whether in the far-flung countries of the Diaspora or within the state of Israel, where we Jews are in charge and therefore have an even stronger responsibility for caring for the minorities within our midst. Accordingly, this Haggadah is also very relevant for those of us who live in the contemporary state of Israel, in which the challenge of how we treat the stranger fairly is one of our central obligations.

In the Passover Haggadah, this passage – which reminds us that we have all experienced the liberation from the bondage of Egypt and that this experience should guide us in our actions today – is followed by the recital of psalms of thanksgiving. This is a Jewish holiday in which we are meant to feel grateful and that is why we sing the fa-

mous *Dayenu* song during the Seder, to express our gratitude for being able to celebrate this festival of freedom each year.

We recite or sing some psalms before the meal, that remind us of our past redemption and other psalms are recited or sung after the meal, which alert us to the future redemption to come in messianic times. In many homes and communities, these psalms are sung with much gusto and with beautiful melodies. Singing these psalms has always been one of my favorite parts of our family Passover celebration each year.

Before we sing these psalms, we recite the following beautiful paragraph:

*Therefore,  
 this is our sacred task:  
 to thank, praise, revere and exalt:  
 beautify, bless, acclaim and adore  
 the One who did wondrous things  
 for our mothers and fathers of old  
 and for us.*

*God brought us forth  
 from slavery to freedom,  
 from sorrow to joy  
 from mourning to celebration  
 from darkness to radiance  
 from the yoke of tyranny to the dawn of redemption  
 So, let us bring forth a song that is new.*

(layout and translation by the editors)

The editors of this new Haggadah have indeed brought us a new song this year. The Hebrew word for song, “*shira*,” is the same word for poetry. This new book is replete with traditional songs and new poetry, to uplift the soul and to stir our consciousness during our observance of our festival of freedom. In addition, it contains useful commentaries from traditional and modern sources that can enhance the meaning of the seder for all participants. This Haggadah renews our spirit with ancient and contemporary texts interwoven beautifully throughout the book.

I believe that this new Haggadah will be useful in the English-speaking world to help contemporary Jews – especially those who like poetry – to derive meaning and spiritual significance from this holiday. Along with many new Haggadot that have been published by movements as well as individuals in recent decades, this beautiful new book is a vital new edition to Jewish religious and cultural life in our times. ■