The Passover Seder: It’s About Time

One Hundred and Four Dimensions of Time During Passover

Written by Bryan Schwartz

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One Hundred And Four Dimensions of Time During Passover

Every year, year after year, from start to finish, the Passover Seder is about time.

At the outset of the Seder, we thank the Creator for separating and blessing different times: ordinary days, holy days, the Sabbath. Yet in the rituals, prayers, and thoughts, we also connect to other times, from remembrances of our most distant past as a people, long before the Exodus, to hopes for a future time of perfect peace.

The Talmud says the Torah has seventy faces – seventy levels of interpretation. Reader after reader, generation after generation, looks at a passage, and there is always one more thing to say.

One part of the Tradition – the teachings and practices of the Jewish people – is the Passover festival. Almost every Jew in the world has attended a Passover Seder. Perhaps many are far more familiar with the “Bible” of the Seder, the Haggadah, than with the original Bible or the Talmud.

It occurred to me in looking at a Haggadah that it contains some references to times and time.

Just how many?

I looked and looked ...and reflected on not only explicit references but also words, rituals, and historical background....

... I believe I have found one hundred and four.

That is seventy... plus eighteen, the good luck number... plus ten for the commandments... plus four, for the cups of wine at the Passover seder—plus one, because of the Passover song, “one, who knows?” ... plus another one, because there is always another one...
Anyway, that is all I have found so far.

I am sure that others will find even more.

One day, I hope, I will too.

As the Talmud suggests,¹ we are not expected to complete the task of studying the Torah, but at least we can make a beginning…

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¹ Pirke Avot 2:16
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CYCLICAL TIME

Passover is a seasonal holiday. Let us see how Passover fits with the cycles of years, months, weeks, days, and nights.

1. Springtime Holidays Combined

Passover begins on the night of 15 Nissan – the Babylonian name for the month that the Israelites used to call Aviv.

The Passover festival incorporates two ancient Israelite festivals of the spring. One is the Sacrifice of the Firstborn Lamb – lambs are born in spring when they can eat fresh grass.

The other is the Festival of Flatbreads, when grains planted in the late fall or early winter emerge.²

2. Beginning of a Mysterious Pre-Exodus Three-Day Holiday

The Bible says that before the Exodus, Moses asked Pharaoh to let his people go – for a little while, just three days in the wilderness to celebrate a holiday.

Which holiday?

Was that an actual pre-existing Israelite festival?

Or was it all a ruse to effect a permanent escape?

One interpretation: Pharaoh’s refusal of even a three-day holiday proved how inflexible he was in his hostility.

Another interpretation: even a three-day holiday would have promoted within the Israelites a revived sense of unity and taste for freedom. They would have returned a changed people, irrevocably determined to achieve their long-term liberation.

² Why Do We Eat Matzah in the Spring? – TheTorah.com
Spring provided comfortable weather for the journey from Egypt, say the sages.\(^3\) In the end, the Israelites’ journey lasted forty summers and forty winters in the desert. (God plans, God laughs?) The generation who escaped was too fearful to reclaim their promised land. A new, more confident generation had to emerge in the desert.

In the original Passover, families united to begin a journey. Nowadays, we journey to unite families.

3. **A Calendar Date**

Yet when precisely is 15 Nissan?

The concept of a month is based on one lunar cycle. But one lunar cycle only takes about 29.5 days, not precisely thirty. So originally in Israel, the religious authorities would decide when a new month began based on reports that observers of the sky had seen a new moon at night.

Diaspora communities would then wait to see a relay of signal flares. But it took time to transmit the news, and mistakes might be made along the way. So the tradition of two Seders arose. One night or the other had to be the right one.\(^4\) (Better seder than sorry?)

James Kugel proposes that the partnership of the Creator and humankind in creating a calendar is the epitome of Judaism: a partnership between divine commands and their creative interpretation and application by humankind.\(^5\)

A further complexity arises with the calendar. Twelve lunar months of thirty days each do not add up to a solar year. Judaism, drawing on the astronomical expertise of its neighbors,\(^6\) began to adopt leap months to keep the lunar and solar calendars in sync.

Leaving things to human determination invites creativity and commitment – also fractiousness. The Dead Sea Scroll community split away from the mainstream Israelites in part over calendar disputes.\(^7\) The Samaritans similarly departed from

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3 Remember! The Exodus Took Place in Spring

4 See Maimonides, Guide for the Perplexed, 2:8

5 Not a Naïve Reading: An Interview with Prof. James Kugel

6 Jewish (Hebrew) Calendar – Origin and History

7 Not a Naïve Reading: An Interview with Prof. James Kugel
the mainstream; some say that they would deliberately light confusing relay flares to undermine the signals to faraway communities.  

Eventually, mainstream Judaism would adopt a perpetual calendar. It was not based on ongoing observation of the heavens. But a practice – like the second Seder in the Diaspora – can live in the Tradition even when its meaning and justification change.

Some say that in the Diaspora, away from the holiness of Israel itself, you need two nights to experience the theme of spiritual uplift.

4. **A State Holiday in Israel**

There is now, however, a restored Jewish sovereignty in Israel. Passover has become a week-long public holiday. The Basic Law of Israel as the Nation-State of the Jewish People consists of only eleven sections, three of which confirm the authority of the state to follow the Jewish calendar and holidays.

The Basic Law also recognizes the right of non-Jews to celebrate their own holidays and festivals. Remember that you were a stranger in Egypt, says the Bible, and so do justice to the sojourners in your own midst.

Should the Jewish state go beyond facilitating observance by those who choose? Should it shut down buses on holidays? Or ban *chametz* (food that is not kosher for Passover) from hospitals?

Passover is the festival of freedom from external control. At Sinai, the people entered into a covenant, rather than merely submit to the coercion of a higher power. The Tradition will only be maintained over generations if its truth or beauty or consolation is adopted by children – and adults – who feel free to ask more than four questions. And, now and then, to find some answers that are rational, engaging, inspiring, or – perhaps most importantly – comforting.

5. **A Non-Workday in the Diaspora?**

Public holidays in the West tend to be fixed largely by reference to Christian tradition. The seven-day week, including a weekend holiday, is a Jewish invention now adopted throughout the world. Christianity and Islam celebrate their day of

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8. *[The Signal Fires and the Proclaiming of a New Moon/Month](#)*


10. *[Annual “Hametz” Wars at Center of Crisis That Could End Israel’s 36th Government](#)*
rest one day after or before the Jewish Sabbath. One reason they do so is to define themselves as distinct from the Jewish Tradition on which each drew.11

Many modern states, however, recognize the duty of employers to accommodate religious observance, including holidays such as Passover.

6. **Sometimes, an Overlap with Shabbat**

The bracketed phrases in the *Haggadah* mention additional sentences you should add to the Passover prayers when Shabbat and the Passover Seder overlap.

Shabbat is the culmination of the story of creation: the Creator blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy, says the Bible, because on that day the Creator rested from all the work he had done in the six days of creation.

The Redemption in Egypt – the escape from captivity and march towards freedom in the promised land – recalls and reinforces the sacredness of Shabbat; the Exodus redeemed Israel from slavery when there was no escape from labour.

The stories of Genesis and Exodus take place at different times in history, but their relationship is integrated. Together, they are the essential foundations of Judaism.

7. **A Sabbath in Itself**

While not all holidays require the cessation of work like the Sabbath, the first and last days of Passover do. The relief from toil reminds us of the release from enslavement. We are liberated to focus on studying, connecting with our family and friends, and contemplating the life of the spirit.

8. **...Leading to a Week of Mini-Sabbaths**

The intermediate days of Passover are middling in their relief from work. You are allowed to work enough to avoid losses to what you already possess – but not so much as to make extra profits.

The Tradition did not denigrate work. It urged self-sufficiency and warned that idleness can lead to sin.

The Kabbalistic tradition saw the human mission as including the repairing of a shattered world. You cannot do that if you are only resting.

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It is true that in ancient times, the priestly lived off the tithes of the people and had a share in eating sacrificial meals. The labour of the priests was tending to the rituals of the Temple – including conducting the sacrifices at the festivals and inviting pilgrimages to Jerusalem, among them for the celebration of Passover.

Weeks? The seven-day week, including a Sabbath, is a Jewish invention that was incorporated into world culture. The Christian tradition moved the Sabbath to Sunday, the Islamic to Friday; how a community keeps track of time is part of the way it defines itself – and distinguishes itself from other communities.

9. **Nighttime**

All Jewish calendar days – including holy days – begin at night. The night begins, concludes the Talmud, when you can see three medium-sized stars in the dark sky.

In Genesis, the Creator first separates light from dark, day from night. The Jewish prayer book reflects our natural rhythms. Dawn, noon, night; *Shacharit, Mincha, Ma’ariv*. You are allowed to say the evening service either before the Seder or after.

The daily rituals sync with circadian rhythms in our bodies that have been wired by evolution.

Lately, however, we are on the way to “e-bolishing” day and night, to exist instead in an online continuum. The ninth plague was three days with no light. Are we equipped by nature or the Creator to live without the dark?

10. **Between Nightfall and Midnight**

The Tradition – law and custom – further divides the days and nights into sub-units. One border is at midnight. The rabbis are divided on whether you must eat the last matzah by midnight.¹²

“It happened at midnight”¹³ is a daily prayer that is included in many versions of the *Haggadah*. At midnight, it recalls, the firstborn Egyptians were slain, and a dozen other miracles occurred. At around midnight – throughout the year, and

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¹² “In the Evening They Shall Eat Matzot” – The Commandment to Eat Matzot – Mitzvah Studies – Article 8 – Chabad.org

¹³ It Happened at Midnight
not only during Passover – some Jews recite the “Rectification of Midnight” prayer, *Tikkun Chatzot*, in memory of the destruction of the Temple.\(^\text{14}\)

The *Haggadah* tells us that the sages at Bnei Brak reclined and discussed the Exodus throughout the night... until their disciples at last reminded them that it was time for the morning *Shema* prayer of the arrival of the new day.

Did the interruption mark the end of the recollection? Quite the opposite. The daily *Shema* prayer itself recalls the deliverance from Egypt.

Jewish law, no less than its liturgy, is permeated by the memory of the Exodus. The justification for rules – observing the Sabbath, dealing justice to the stranger and the poor – is founded in lessons learned from the Captivity in Egypt.\(^\text{15}\)

The *Haggadah* meditates on the biblical commandment to remember the day of Exodus “all the days of your life.” Rabbi Ben Zoma said “all” is added to include both days and nights. Other sages say “all of your life” means in the World to Come as well.

So time is segmented into nights and days, holiday days and ordinary days, days in this world and days of the next – but the duty to remember the Exodus pervades them all.

**11. Time in Ancient Times Was Not Measured and Subdivided into Fractions as It Is Now**

At today’s Seder, we might find ourselves looking at our watches or smartphones, conscious of the division of time into minutes, seconds, and even fractions of seconds. How long has this Seder thing been dragging on? When do we eat? When do I need to go, since I’m working tomorrow? What, I’m not supposed to?

In ancient times, time was not finely divided or observed. When the Bible speaks of “forty years,” some argue, it is speaking of a long stretch of time, but not necessarily a precise number. The phrase “forty years” of wandering in the desert might mean something like “for about two generations.”

Exodus tells us that the sojourn in Egypt lasted 430 years. That number does not reconcile arithmetically with the Bible’s accounts of the lifespans of various

\(^{14}\) *Tikkun Chatzot – Wikipedia*

individuals who lived through it. Reconciling apparent contradictions, however, was an obsession and a genius of the rabbis. The Torah was understood as exquisitely crafted and absolutely true and internally consistent.

12. The Tradition Eventually Divided the Day into Equal Hours of Daylight

The Tradition eventually developed the idea of “hours,” but these hours moved with the seasons. An hour was one-twelfth of the time between daylight and sunset.

Why twelve?

The ancient Near East liked the number twelve because it had many factors: one, two, three, four, five six, twelve. In the song “Who Knows One,” a folk song that is part of the Seder, we hear of the Traditional associations of all of the numbers, from thirteen to one – the one and only Creator. Twelve is associated with the tribes of Israel.

(The wide world in its timekeeping still uses minutes of sixty seconds, hours of sixty minutes, and days of twenty-four hours – all multiples of twelve).

Why does the Tradition divide the day equally among the hours of sunlight, rather than use a clock that is constant throughout the year? Perhaps because it links the observance of the daily rituals to the natural rhythms of the days and seasons, all the product of the mind of the Creator.

An example of how the twelve-part division works during Passover: the search-and-destroy of the chametz must be completed before the tenth hour of the day leading to the Seder.

13. Passover Is the Day After Passover

The Bible says the sacrifice of the Paschal lamb in the Temple was on the fourteenth of Nissan. Temple days begin during the day and end in the evening, so you had until the evening of the fifteenth of Nissan to consume the sacrificed lamb along with matzah. Why did the Tradition emphasize the fifteenth? Perhaps it was too painful to be reminded that there was no longer a Temple.

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16 How Many Years Were the Israelites in Egypt? – TheTorah.com
17 How Long Was the Sojourn in Egypt: 210 or 430 Years?
14. **A Date on the Secular Calendar**

Everyone who celebrates Passover will check what date it is this year on the secular calendar. The year is often styled “AD” for *anno domini*, meaning “year of our Lord” – referring to Jesus. Jews and other non-Christians have steered towards using “CE,” standing for “common era.”

An irony: Jesus, the historical person, undoubtedly was born into a Jewish family, lived as a Jew, and preached to a predominantly Jewish audience. Whatever he actually said as a historical figure, the Jesus movement that persisted after his death was originally a branch of Judaism. The four Gospels – at least three of which were written by Jews – characterize his life and pronouncements using Jewish ideas, precedents, literature, and symbolism.

A crucial concept of Christianity is the idea that Jesus allowed himself to be a sacrificial lamb, at the time of the Passover, to obtain redemption for all of humanity.

After all the persecutions of the Jewish people done in the name of the prophet from Galilee, many Jews take no interest in the Gospels or the historical figure on which they are based. Yet many of Jesus’ original teachings are soaring expressions of their own Jewish traditions and are primarily directed to the nation of his birth. Some day, perhaps, we should reclaim the historic Jesus – not as the Messiah, but as a human charismatic who embraced our ancient traditions of peoplehood and reverence for Torah.

15. **The Seder as the Anticipation of Shavuot**

The Exodus was not the end of the Redemption from Egypt and the Return to the promised land. It was only the first step. In the Wilderness, the Jewish people would receive the revelations of the Creator’s laws from Mount Sinai. Shavuot is the holiday commemorating Sinai. Like Passover, it is a seasonal agricultural holiday – a wheat harvest festival – but was transformed into a commemoration of history, of the Revelation.

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks has written that Pesach and Shavuot are the beginning and end of an extended festival. At the burning bush, the Creator foretold that Moses would lead the people out of Egypt and “worship on this mountain.”

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18 Geza Vermes, *The Authentic Gospel of Jesus*

Shavuot is defined not by a day on a calendar, but by its relation in time to Pesach. We count forty-nine – seven groups of seven – days between the second night of the Seder and Shavuot. The timing parallels the “seven times seven plus” formula for the Jubilee years’ seven cycles of seven years, then a year of rest for the soil and liberation of human beings from the debts or servitudes they have placed on each other.

On Passover, we begin to relive the journey that was a way not only from slavery in Egypt but towards the Revelation of the sacred law at Sinai. We eat matzah, a bread confined to its material minimum rather than permitted to rise.

On Shavuot, the ceremony involves double loaves of wheat bread. Some say that these loaves symbolize the fulfillment of the spiritual journey that began in slavery; others say that they symbolize the receipt of both oral and written Torah.

On the second day of Passover, the sixteenth of Nissan, we begin the forty-nine days of counting out loud – moving up one number each day – of the omer. The count ends with the beginning of Shavuot.

The forty-nine days of the omer constitute a journey from accepting the Torah as an act of obedience to embracing it with joy in all its varied delights. The omer was a measure of barley offered in a Temple sacrifice.

Passover and Succoth were connected with the springtime harvest, but the former is also about the liberation from Egypt, the latter about the acceptance of the Law revealed at Sinai. The holidays, some have said, are like two connected tablets. The experience of oppression in Egypt equipped the Israelites to understand and embrace the revealed law that commanded freedom and justice.

16.  A Holiday That Follows Purim in the Calendar and Inspired It in History

The setting for the Purim story is long after the Exodus and return.

It takes place in Persia. Living there are the descendants of Jews who were conquered by the Babylonians and brought back as captives. The Persian Empire have in turn conquered Babylonia.

20 Questions and Answers on the Two Loaves – Chabad.org
Haman, the chief minister of the Persian King Ahasuerus, asks for permission to annihilate the Jews in the Persian Empire. Ahasuerus – impulsive, forgetful, inclined to listen to the last advisor he has heard from – says yes.

Esther, King Ahasuerus’ Jewish-born wife, intervenes. She pleads for herself – and for the Jewish people she now acknowledges as her own. Ahasuerus changes his mind. He orders the execution of the evil Haman and authorizes the Jews to rise and destroy their enemies.

The rabbis insisted that the two holidays of redemption should be seen as connected, so Purim must be celebrated precisely one month earlier than Passover.²¹

Yet in the two redemption stories of Purim and Passover, the role of the Creator is very different.

In the Exodus scroll, the Creator intervenes in history with overt, indeed spectacular, miracles and wonders. In the Esther scroll, the name of the Creator is never even mentioned.

Why the difference?

Let us look more closely at the Esther scroll. It has all the hallmarks of a literary masterpiece. Every time you read the Esther scroll, you see something more. You recognize the mind of a master creator. Each detail revealed in the Esther scroll is chosen with precision to carry out a coordinated and intricate design. Words are selected so that they resonate with others inside the scroll and within the wider body of Jewish scripture. You come to appreciate that behind this superb literary creation is a commanding human creator, standing outside of the tale, anonymous yet omnipresent.

The question this human creator deliberately raised is: is there a Creator who guides the unfolding of actual human history?

Is it true – as the Passover song goes – that in every generation, a supreme power will come to the rescue of the Jewish people?

How much of any redemption story depends on individual choices – like those of Esther and her cousin Mordecai? Or Joseph and Moses in the Exodus story? How

²¹ Purim is celebrated on 14 Adar in most places, and 15 Adar in traditionally walled cities. The Key dates for Passover are the 14th and 15th of the next month, Nissan. Sometimes a year has a second month of Adar, an Adar II, a leap month – and it is in Adar II that Purim is celebrated, to keep it close to Nissan.
much on luck? How much on the invisible and inaudible hand of a higher power who never forgets the covenant?

A wondrous thing about being Jewish is that you can travel through its literature, through thousands of years, and share your questions and answers or puzzlement with your forebears. And there is always something new to say – or sing, or feel, or act upon. That might be something previously unnoticed in the original texts, on the cantillation marks, on the commentaries through time. It might be something arising from your latest individual or collective experience.

Let me relate something I noticed in preparing to chant a chapter of Esther this year. I haven’t found it so far in any of the materials, old or new. It is about Esther’s name.

First, a few things we all know.

Esther, were are told early in the Esther scroll, has the Hebrew name Hadassah. It means “myrtle,” and evokes not only beauty but endurance – the myrtle is an evergreen. To this day, there are organizations and institutions in honour of her Hebrew name.

Anxious to hide her Jewish identity, she uses the name Esther, likely based on the Persian goddess Ishtar. The name is also connected with the Hebrew word for concealing; astir means “I will hide” something. Esther initially hid her Jewish identity.

Now, a discovery, or at least something I noticed myself, not in the commentaries I have so far reviewed.

As she is progressing in her preparations to meet the King, still concealing her Jewish identity, the creator mentions that Esther is “the daughter of Avihail.”

Based on her natural charm and charisma – and also her prudence and unassertiveness – she is elected to become Ahasuerus’ new wife. She becomes Queen Esther in a name.

At the climax of the story, she “cloaks herself in majesty” and intervenes with King Ahasuerus at the risk of her life. She reveals that she is asking to save not only herself but her nation. She succeeds. She has become Queen Esther in substance as well as title, a co-ruler, not only a consort.
At the end of the book, she writes to her people to ask them to remember this time of salvation from generation to generation. At this moment, the creator now refers to her as “Esther, the daughter of Avihail.”

The literary choice is no accident. 

Avihail means “father of strength.” It might refer to her own father; it might refer as well to the Creator, the father of all. The word hail is the Hebrew word used in the famous proverb about the “woman of valour.”

The bookending of the name “daughter of Avihail” is certainly not a coincidence. The Bible is replete with the use of a structuring idea called “chiasmus.” Events are sequenced in one order, then in reverse order. Moses is with his mother, is placed in the river, is pulled from the river, is back with his mother. The Israelites go down into Egypt, dwell, and return to Egypt.

Esther is the daughter of Avihail, then the Queen, and finally... the daughter of Avihail.

She remembers her father. She remembers her people. It is during Passover that she fasts and then approaches King Ahasuereus. She changes his mind and then helps to mobilize all the Jewish communities to rise in self-defense. She asks in turn that this new deliverance be remembered by all Jews, from generation to generation.

In Genesis, Joseph is separated from his father, rises to second in command in Egypt, remembers his father, saves his people, and ensures that his father is remembered. He directs that Jacob’s body will be returned to the promised land for burial, accompanied by a great procession.

In Exodus, Moses is separated from his father, rises to second command in Egypt, remembers who he is, saves his people, and asks that their deliverance be told and remembered from generation to generation. We do so at Passover, as instructed.

The late Rabbi Jonathan Sacks was once asked, as I recall, what the essence of Judaism is. He at first said “history.” Then he refined that answer, and said “Remembrance.” Our understanding of our past can bring pain, but it can also bring us a sense of identity, a heritage, and a determination to continue.22

22 Remember the Past to Build the Future | Jonathan Sacks | The Blogs (timesofisrael.com)
TIME AS HISTORY

Passover is about the Exodus as a historical event that broke out of the cycles of repetition and irreversibly changed the course of Jewish and world history.

17. Historical Progress That Breaks Out of Cyclical Repetition

The Jewish holidays follow the Jewish calendar, itself based on lunar and solar cycles. Yet in the Exodus story, the people of Israel break out of any repetitive patterns. At Sinai, they hear a unique revelation: a set of commandments directly from the Creator. When the nation accepts the commandments, it is forever changed. The Revelation brings them to a spiritual and ethical understanding they have not before known, and a mission both to abide by it and to teach it from generation to generation. By example, they are to be a light unto all nations for all times that follow. The experience of the captivity in Egypt has prepared them to understand and embrace the commandments; they have learned not to accept the deification of any earthly thing or power, to accept the radical moral equality of all human beings, and to exercise their freedom in a morally ordered manner.

Some hold that the idea of historical progress, bursting above and beyond cyclic repetition, is one of the greatest gifts of the Jewish people to humanity.23

Was there an upward spiral of progression after Sinai, after re-entering Canaan? A strain of Jewish thought says no. Rather, it holds, we are spiritually diminished as we move farther from the founders – those like Abraham who directly spoke with the Creator or the whole people who heard him at Sinai.

But when the Temples were destroyed, the Jewish people had to find new ways to preserve their identity and faith. In exile, they remember and consolidate their traditions.

It was around the time of the destruction of the First Temple and the Babylonian exile, say many historians, that the core of the Torah stories was compiled and edited. A way had to be found to enable the Tradition to become portable and more fixed and enduring in collective memory and practice, both in times of displacement and times of return.

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23 Thomas Cahill, The Gifts of the Jews
After the Second Destruction and the Bar Kochba rebellion and defeat, another set of oral traditions were recorded in writing in the second Jewish Bible, the *Mishnah*. In this further exile for most Jewish communities, the egalitarian and participatory traditions of the Exodus were refined and intensified; every home, anywhere in the world, became a sacred place.

Two millennia after the Second Destruction, many of the exiles returned again to what is now modern Israel. They joined with the descendants of those Jews who never left. The founder of the modern state of Israel dreamt of reconciling democracy, individual freedom, and minority rights with a distinctive Jewish national character. That task of balancing, harmonizing, and adapting must continue as long as the nation endures.

**18. The Stylized Recounting of an Actual Historical Event, or Only of a Myth?**

Probably somewhere in between.

It is doubtful that the Exodus story in the Bible is a precise and accurate recounting of all the events that occurred. But is it entirely a myth?

Almost certainly not.

A people do not naturally invent a founding myth based on the humiliation of being enslaved. There is almost certainly a historic trauma behind why the Tradition emphasizes freedom – the Shabbat every year, the Jubilee year – and so many other laws explain themselves by references to the Exodus.

Other fundamentals of the Tradition appear to be counteraction to bondage in Egypt: the emphasis on this life, not preparing for life after death; the recollection of being strangers in a strange land.

The Exodus story in the Bible is also replete with reasonably accurate Egyptian names for individuals and places. The story appears to satirize aspects of Egyptian culture, such as a Pharaoh’s boast in public monuments to have defeated an enemy with a mighty hand.

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25 The views of Joshua Berman can be found here: [Was There an Exodus?](https://www.tikvahfund.org/podcast/how-we-know-the-exodus-really-happened/) and [The Tikvah Fund » Podcast: Joshua Berman on Whether the Exodus Really Happened](https://www.tikvahfund.org/podcast/how-we-know-the-exodus-really-happened/). Those of Richard Elliot Freedman can be found at [The Exodus Is Not Fiction | Reform Judaism](https://www.reformjudaism.org/).
19. **An Event in World History or Only Jewish History?**

The Exodus enabled the Israelites to survive as a distinctive people and reclaim their homeland. Most of the nations mentioned in the Bible have disappeared. The Jewish people would survive against all odds through time and, despite their small size, have an enormous influence on world history.

Part of the Jewish people’s impact was through others who found the Jewish Bible, including Exodus, to be a source of uplift and a guide to action. The Enlightenment movement towards freedom and political equality was heavily influenced by biblical models – including its hostility, or at least aversions, to one-man rule; its commitment to the rule of law and constitutional government; its belief in checks and balances, such as prophets criticizing the king to his face and to his people; and its tolerance for outspoken dissent, such as prophets condemning the indifference of the rich to the poor or the exhibitionism of religious leaders who placed ritual over acts of kindness.

The Exodus story was expressly invoked as a source of inspiration by Oliver Cromwell in leading the English Civil War, by American revolutionaries like Benjamin Franklin, and by civil rights activists like Martin Luther King, among others.26

20. **An Event in Egyptian History?**

Rabbi Sacks has wryly observed that the first-ever reference to the Israeli people outside of the Bible is in the Merneptah Stele, an ancient Egyptian victory monument from about 1200 BCE, which includes the inscription “Israel is laid waste, her seed is destroyed.”27 There is no consensus among archaeologists, however, about which Pharaoh was the one referred to in the Exodus account in the Bible. It is not clear which, if any, remaining records from Egypt refer to the flight of the Israelites.

The Bible portrays Joseph as a powerful and effective prime minister of the whole Egyptian nation. His innovations included establishing more central control of the economy, such as storing food in times of surplus to help the people survive later famines.

26 Michael Walzer, *Exodus and Revolution*

27 [Once Upon a Time, Long Ago, There Was a Nation in Slavery | Rabbi Sacks](https://www.jewisheducationalmedia.org/once-upon-a-time-long-ago-there-was-a-nation-in-slavery/)
Did the exit of the Israelites make much difference to Egyptian society as a whole? While the Bible says that the Israelites grew from a small nation to a populous one in Egypt, at least one contemporary scholar holds that it was only the tribe of Levi whose experience is the basis for the Exodus account.28

We know nothing of the fate of the Jews who chose to stay behind in Egypt rather than follow Moses. Over the millennia that followed, however, other emigre or refugee Jewish committees would emerge in Egypt. Two thousand years ago, Philo of Alexandria philosophized there; a thousand years later, Maimonides found refuge there and practiced medicine and theology; in the twentieth century, Jewish Egyptians helped to create a national cinema. After the founding of the modern state of Israel, the beleaguered Jewish community of Egypt made their modern-day exodus, and today there is almost no one left.

The lasting impact of the original Exodus, however, is still felt in Egypt through the Jewish contribution to the theology and rituals of Islam as well as Christianity. The Koran recalls Moses as a mighty prophet, and the Sunni Islam holiday of Ashura commemorates the Exodus.29 Simon Schama has characterized Islam as “essentially Jewish” in its core beliefs and practices.30

21. **History with Causality**

The Israelites have been called “the first historians.”31 At their best, they scrupulously studied their source material and tried to convey it accurately. Then they organized events into narratives in which events are produced by causes. A recurring causal narrative is this: the Israelites – the people – make a covenant with the Creator; they break it; the Creator does not intervene to protect them when a foreign power invades and expels them; the Creator forgives the chastened people and redeems them.

Some of us no longer accept such stories. We might doubt that there is a supreme being. We may be agnostic or atheistic based on scientific evidence for logic. Others may refuse to accept the existence of a Creator who would remain passive while his people, no matter how devout, are massacred by earthly powers driven

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28 [The Exodus Is Not Fiction | Reform Judaism](https://www.reformjudaism.org/article/the-exodus-is-not-fiction)


30 [“The Story of the Jews: Finding the Words (1000 BCE – 1492)”](https://www.storyofthejews.org/)

by hatred and bloodlust. Still other Jews practice a way of life more wholly
governed by Jewish practice than any Israelite in biblical times and are
unwavering in their belief in the existence of a caring Redeemer.

It is not clear that the sojourn in Egypt fits the covenant-backslide-disaster-
redemption-return narrative. The causal chain that some commentators have
found is that the Israelites needed an education, not necessarily punishment for
their earlier sins. The captivity taught the Israelites what was right by subjecting
them to what was wrong: tyranny, enslavement, brutality, cruelty to the stranger
in your midst, and pretension to divinity by human overlords.

In the end, the Creator who had remained silent through the captivity remembers
his people. They in turn gather together and boldly walk out of captivity on their
way to accept a new covenant at Sinai.

22. Counterfactual History

At Passover, the meaning of history is explored by imagining alternative scenarios.
The Haggadah states: “If you, the rebellious son, had been at Sinai, you personally
would not have been saved.” If the Creator had not intervened, says the
Haggadah, we would all still be slaves.

The imagined alternatives are a way of highlighting that choices – of both beings
and the Creator – have consequences for the course of the future.
“Counterfactual history” is a technique that modern historians use to try to better
understand the causes of what actually did happen.

A song eccentrically filled with “counterfactuals” is “Dayenu.” We keep singing
that if the Creator had stopped at a certain stage in the Exodus story, we would
still be grateful, it would have been enough. Really? If, say, God had not parted
the Dead Sea, how would that have been enough? Does it mean that some
remnant of the surviving recaptured Israelites – or some fragment who never
made the attempt – would later have succeeded?

Or maybe “Dayenu” can be sung in the tradition of Jewish theological whimsy.
The sages must have laughed, at least inwardly, when they imagined scenes like
the Creator wearing tefillin, the prayer phylacteries and Jewish prayer boxes
strapped to the forehead during daily prayers.
23. Chiasmatic History – Events Proceed According to an Underlying Quasi-Mathematical Structure

The Tradition believes that there is an underlying coherence among different sacred texts, even when they seem to contradict each other at first glance. The rabbis create laws, stories, and interpretations that aim to tie everything together into a coherent, consistent, and mutually reinforcing package. Their guiding belief is that the scriptures are dictated or inspired by the mind of a single rational Creator.

In modern times, the success of Jews in science and mathematics is consistent with the Tradition, rather than a radical departure from it. An Einstein could depart from believing in a Creator with a personality who intervenes in history, but he was wholly committed to finding the law-bound and mathematically coherent order in the cosmos.

The language of physics is mathematics. The Israelites and the rabbis were not great mathematicians like the Greeks, but the Tradition exhibits a fascination with numbers. The opening of the Bible recounts the Creation, numbered by day; the lifespans from Adam to Noah are always a multiple of five, with a seven sometimes added on.32 (Exception: Methuselah’s mysterious 969-year lifespan.)

Every letter of the alphabet is also a number, and the rabbis would use that system to make connections among disparate texts. In the Bible, the number seven is considered positive, and in many chapters of the Bible, a key word is mentioned precisely seven times.

The Israelites found other logical patterns in the unfolding of events. One of them, chiasmus, is found at every level in the Bible: sentences, chapters, books. An event unfolds as A-B-C-D. Then events – or, more precisely, variations of the events – occur in the reverse order: D-C-B-A.33

Here is an example of chiasmus – embedded in a commandment rather than a narrative statement: “Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed” (Genesis 9:6).

Another example, this time from a story in the Book of Exodus:

32 The Ages of the Antediluvian Patriarchs in Genesis 5 | Bible.org
Moses is with his birth mother; she places him in a basket; the basket is placed in the river; his sister Miriam watches.

Moses then returns to the starting point through a reverse order of events.

Pharoah’s daughter sees the basket; she pulls it from the river; she removes Moses from the basket; she decides to become his adoptive mother; at the suggestion of Miriam, she places Moses back with his birth mother to nurse him.

So much of the Exodus story echoes Genesis. Noah, like Moses facing destruction, builds an ark on dry land; the waters begin to fall; he enters the ark; he sails through the storms; the waters begin to recede; the ark reaches dry land; Noah leaves the ark and returns to his life. Noah and Moses will both make covenants with the Creator. In the Tradition, the code of conduct for all of humankind is the Noahide covenant; the special responsibilities of the people of Israel are in the covenant at Sinai.

The Bible even uses the same Hebrew word – tevah – for Noah’s ark and Moses’ basket.

Perhaps the most important chiasmus in the Haggadah is the succession of plagues, which is effectively a reversal of the story of Creation in Genesis.  

Here are some examples. In Genesis, night and day are separated; in Exodus, there is a plague of darkness only. In Genesis, the waters and the sky are separated; in Exodus, there is a flood. In Genesis, the Creator “says” fourteen phrases that bring the world into being; in Exodus, the Creator “says” fourteen phrases that bring the world of the Pharaoh into ruin. The undoing does not strictly mirror the order of Creation, but the chiasmatic logic still controls.

A variant on chiasmus is the concentric pattern, in which events proceed in the pattern A-B-C-X-C-B-A. Here, X is an event in the centre of the chain that is not repeated. One scholar has proposed that the “X event,” the centre of the story of exile and return in the entire five books of the Bible, is the service in the Tabernacle.

34 Invoking Creation in the Story of the Ten Plagues – TheTorah.com
35 Thomas B. Clarke, “What Is a Chiasm (or Chiasmus)?”

Remember the three-day holiday mystery I mentioned earlier? I wonder: is there some sense of chiasmus involved there? The Captivity began with a temporary sojourn that turned into potentially permanent captivity. Does the Liberation
potentially begin with a temporary holiday that turns, sooner or later, into a permanent escape?

We find other structures of history in the *Haggadah*. One is the climax: a series of events, fraught with tension, that builds up until a peak is reached. The instruction from Talmudic times for telling the Exodus is to “begin in disgrace and end in glory”: to start in the oldest times, when we were a little tribe of wanderers prone to idolatry, and explain how we became a great Nation in Captivity, then how we were redeemed and received the Revelation at Sinai.

The plagues build up to the death of the firstborn and Pharaoh’s permission to leave. The song “Dayenu” is a series of events from enslavement in Egypt to the construction of the permanent (or so it was hoped) Temple in the promised land, in its eternal capital in Jerusalem. In the song “Had Gadya,” an ascending chain of predators ends when the Creator kills the angel of death.

**24. History Is Reembodied into a Cyclical Holiday**

The Bible demands that the historical story be commemorated in a seasonal holiday throughout the generations. It explains the weekly Sabbath as both the recollection of the creation story and an affirmation of the liberation – at least once a week – from the tedium and weariness of productive labour.

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**FAMILY TIME**

*Pesach is a time for family gatherings, at which one grown-up generation tells the next about the Redemption.*

**25. Time Measured in Generations**

In the Bible, time and events are often organized into generations. The sequence may be embedded in one of the genealogies: so-and-so begat so-and-so, and so on and so on....

These lists can be tedious to the reader, but the artful authors of the Bible at least once found a way to make an unexpected and arresting use of the formula. The Book of Ruth concludes with a genealogy containing a birth that is a historical, even cosmic, surprise: the line of descent of Ruth the Moabite leads to King David, the founder of the house that will eventually produce the Messiah.
The essence of Jewish continuity is the transmission of peoplehood, faith, and learning from generation to generation. In the Passover Seder, the younger generations inquire, and the older generations answer.

One understanding of survival beyond death in Judaism is that your family and people live beyond. In the movie *Full Metal Jacket*, the sardonic drill sergeant tells the trainees that some will soon die in service, but they are all part of something that never dies: the Marines. Yonatan Netanyahu, who died in the Entebbe Raid, told his brothers that he was prepared to lose his life defending his people because that commitment gave his life meaning.

The Bible presents life after death largely in terms of succession, not survival of the individual soul. Some say that the Bible’s reticence about individual life after death was a reaction to the Egyptian culture from which the Israelites escaped, with its obsession with life after death, and all its cruelty and oppression based on building pyramids to facilitate the Pharaoh’s transition from this world to the afterlife.

26. **The Stages of Life within a Generation**

In Shakespeare’s *As You Like It*, a character misanthropically identifies the “seven ages of man,” from babyhood through the lusting and fighting stages of life to final babyhood. In *Pirke Avot* (the Ethics of the Fathers), the culminating book of the Talmud, the stages of life are about a life well lived through learning. A child begins to study scripture at the age of five and expands his learning until he achieves wisdom at forty and the fullness of years at seventy – before the potential decline and decay of living on for decades past that.

The Passover Seder has a similar vision. The parents pass on the sacred stories and laws to their children. The youngest typically asks the four questions. The grandparent is not made to feel irrelevant; the story in the *Haggadah* of Rabbi Ben Zoma contemplates that he will continue studying the story of the Exodus and might achieve his greatest understanding when he is older, even seventy years old.

Seders are a time for family gatherings. For many Jews, their strongest memories of their departed grandparents might come from Seders.

I remember my own grandfathers reading from the *Haggadah*. They lived their lives as refugees here in this land foreign to them, Canada; their occupations did not befit their intellects, and they often lived in material poverty. They were not
raised by scholars. Their first languages were Yiddish and either Russian or Polish, from the lands where they lived in poverty and under constant menace. Someone – a little shtetl school, an itinerant teacher? – taught them something of the Tradition.

Yet on the Seder night, you could sense their feeling of elevation. They took turns answering the familiar four questions in fluent and rapid-fire Hebrew, the language of the Israelites when they lived as a free and sovereign people the holy language of the Torah and Mishna. For a night, they felt free, prosperous, and honoured to be charged with fulfilling the commandments of the Creator.

They never spoke about their parents and siblings who were murdered in the old country – not at Seders, not ever in my recollection. Did they forget their grief for a Seder evening as they recalled an ancient redemption? Or did they feel an unexpressed despair beneath their apparent exuberance?

27. A Time for Nostalgia for Our Own Personal Childhood

When families gather, we remember ourselves when we were little children at our first Seders – initially excited, eventually impatient, anxious, or eager to take centre stage by asking the four questions; fighting with our siblings, grudgingly deferring to our parents, disarmed by the sheer ancientness of our grandparents.

The Haggadah quotes from Ezekiel: “You, the children of Israel, were as helpless newborns when I adopted you as my people.”

Seders encourage and enable us to relive experiences from the longest, most enduring recesses of our memories.

We have aids to memory like photographs, recipes, and family heirlooms from Seders past. We take for granted that we can carry out Seders and other prayers using printed books like the Haggadah. In many times and places in Jewish history, tradition was conveyed from generation to generation orally, or books were prohibitively expensive or physically unavailable. Throughout the Seder, we see the use of memory aids from those times. One such aid is the acronym: using the first letter of words to create abbreviated forms, like the distillation of the ten plagues. The “It Happened at Midnight Prayer” uses the alphabetical acrostic – starting each line with a successive letter of the Hebrew alphabet. The song “Ehad, Ani Yodea” (“One, I know”) begins each line with a consecutive number, starting at one.

And everywhere, there are melodies.
Modern psychology has found that one of the most enduring forms of memories is embedded in songs; we can remember both the content and the episodes in which we learned or performed a song. The familiar foods from a Seder can also reignite memories from when we experienced their taste and aroma.

For many Jews, their debut performance in the Tradition is not the bar or bat mitzvah. It is when, as a child who might be as little as three, you take the spotlight and sing “Ma Nishtana,” the four questions. You remember learning it, you remember the praise from those assembled around the table, and you might remember the first time your own children take their turn....

28. ...and Regression into Our Childhood

...and when we gather, we may feel and re-enact the anxieties, resentments, and jealousies from our childhood days, and sometimes act them out in our adult roles. The Jewish Bible is fraught with stories of conflict between parents and children, as well as sibling rivalries. Those too are sometimes enacted when we gather as families. But we are still family.36

29. And Progression into Greater Individual Understanding?

In the Haggadah, Rabbi Ben Zoma tells us that he was almost seventy before he finally understood a single phrase in the Exodus story – “all the days of your life” – when another sage explained it to him. The Tradition is about reader after reader, generation after generation, understanding better and better the original meaning of a sacred text. The Seder is repetition, but on each repetition, there is an opportunity for historic progress – in our individual or collective understanding.

When I first encountered the Seder, the Exodus story was in a language I did not understand, Hebrew, chanted in a rapid-fire jumble. Year after year, studying – mostly on my own – in both secular and Traditional reading, I think I have understood a bit more almost each time. Like anyone, I am wrapped up in the bonds of physical entropy; at some point, fresh data and further processing are counterbalanced and inevitably, inexorably, overborne by the deterioration of the processor.

36 “SCTV Passover Seder”
If you are optimistic, you hope that you have added a page to the book of Jewish understanding, as it is added in each generation.

30. Greater Understanding Collectively?

After the Shoah, paradoxically, we have entered the golden age of Jewish scholarship in the universities.

The scientific approach to scriptures is to view them with searching curiosity, rather than reverence. Who wrote this? Were there multiple authors or editors over time? What were their beliefs, their agendas? How did they conform – or dissent – with the society of their time?

The reverential approach to studying the scriptures is to view the materials from the inside and become an instrument in following them, interpreting them, or adding to them.

The scientific approach was originally dominated by Christian traditionalists. They were actually not so scientific. They tended to view the Jewish scriptures as rudimentary and preliminary – the products of a less-developed culture of belief that was replaced with a newer, better, and more universal one.

In the last decades, we have experienced a golden age in the scientific approach to studying Jewish texts. Jewish scholars were able to enter the universities and bring to “Jewish studies” a respect for the Tradition.

We have seen in recent decades a wealth of profound yet accessible material, much of it in English, that explains the Tradition. It does not assume or even accept unprovable beliefs – such as the existence of a caring Creator – but it does illuminate them. It turns out that the Tradition was produced by brilliant thinkers, writers, musicians, and mystics. They were just as smart, just as learned in their own way, just as courageous in confronting the mysteries and paradoxes of existence as the best of us are now. They created a deep ocean of ideas, emotions, and art in which you can spend a lifetime swimming.

Yet there is always something fresh and new to say. That might be from the scientific perspective. My grandfathers may not have appreciated that the Seder has some of its origin in Greek and Roman practices, but now we know.

Those working inside the Tradition add to it as well. Why did the Creator keep “hardening the heart” of Pharaoh? One answer from within was offered thousands of years after the Exodus: the Creator allowed Pharaoh to think what
he wished; he merely gave Pharaoh the fortitude to act on his delusion and malice, rather than be intimidated by overriding force.37

How can the scientific approach be reconciled with the traditionalist approach? It has been said that a mark of genius is the ability to hold two contradictory ideas in your mind at the same time. There are other ways; you can view the Tradition as dynamic and evolving, not the mere preservation of initial beliefs, but an ever-developing continuation of an inspired but not infallible body of ancient traditions.38

The universities in recent times have been taken over by another ideology – some would say a religion in itself – that is hostile towards the modern Jewish state and to both Jewish and Christian traditionalism. It is increasingly difficult to be affirmatively Jewish and feel at home in the academy, or even find a place in it.

Meanwhile, in some of the modest traditionalist communities in Israel, an anxiety about modernity leads to some leaders encouraging parents to avoid educating their children in subjects like mathematics and science. A belief system that will crumble in the face of questioning and truth might make you happier – at least until reality intervenes.

The future of Judaism must be based in finding a way in which tradition and science, reverence for tradition and never-ending scepticism, can co-exist, even nourish each other. It is a mistake to believe that the strictest forms of Jewish practice are the most Jewish or the most traditionalist. The ancients adopted a Bible that challenged itself; that presents different conceptions of the Creator; that includes the prophets who criticize excessive ritual at the expense of justice and kindness, even a sometime nihilist like Kohelet, Ecclesiastes, who said, “the more knowledge, the more pain.” And yet the Jewish people have been defined, from within and without, by a love of learning.

31. ...or Does the Flame of Learning Eventually Consume Itself?

For some, science and faith cannot be resolved. The same Jewish love of learning and commitment to rigorous dialogue and analysis can lead them to conclude that the findings of modern science are incompatible with the existence of any

37 Pharaoh’s Hardened Heart, and Ours: the principle of Free Will: Maimonides
38 fnari
Creator who stands outside of nature or cares about the fate of individual human beings or nations.

The greatest threat to Jewish continuity now, however, may be the turn of secular universities towards irrationalism – towards a quasi-religious ideology that is hostile to the Jewish people and Jewish state. Under this form of progressivism, the former are typecast as “privileged” and the latter as the product of “European colonialism.”

In reality, Jews in the Diaspora, including the most advanced democracies, are the victims of hate crimes in vast disproportion to their numbers. In reality, the Jewish people are indigenous to Israel. Some are descendants of families who never left in the first place. More are refugees from the surrounding Islamic world or Ethiopia rather than from Europe. Those who came from Europe were for the most part fleeing states in which the Shoah took place and in which antisemitism remained a threat to them. Some are now concluding that the “progressive” ideology that has overtaken the universities and many other arenas leaves them no place to pursue their Jewish identity outside of Israel. Others remain in place but distance themselves from their Jewish identity.

The long course of history does not necessarily arc in favor of enlightenment.

I am not sure that the Tradition – or the people who have lived it, the Jewish people – will endure in the face of the ideological as well as physical threats that confront them.39

They say, though, that you can be an optimistic Jew or a pessimistic Jew, but either way, you have to have hope.

32. An Occasion with Reminders of Birth Order

Birth order, some hold, has a strong influence on our character.40 Is the story of the four sons told in order from oldest to youngest: from the burgeoning scholar, the rebelling younger brother, the later-born son who only asks a simple question, to the youngest who does not even know to ask? We often assume that sequence, but the Haggadah does not clearly confirm it.

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39 It's Time for Jews to Realize They're No Longer Welcome in American Universities – Tablet Magazine

40 The Relationship of Birth Order and Gender with Academic Standing and Substance Use Among Youth in Latin America
The Bible is full of stories of younger siblings, like Joseph, exceeding their older brethren – in the love of a parent, in their leadership of their nation, in their relationship to the Creator. Moses was younger than Miriam and Aaron. The older siblings may react with resentment. Miriam saved Moses’ newborn life through her courage and quick thinking, and Aaron acted as his spokesman, yet both older children would later at times envy their prodigious brother. Had not the Creator also spoken through them as well, they asked?41

The Exodus story begins, however, with the story of Miriam’s courage and cunning in saving her little brother from death.

By Tradition, it is the firstborn children who observe a fast before the Seder.

The Bible dwells extensively on both the privilege and vulnerability of the firstborn child. The parents are commanded to “redeem” a firstborn son and pay a payment of silver to a Kohen, a priest. One interpretation: otherwise, the child would be duty-bound to serve in the priesthood. A firstborn under law receives a birthright. He would be the father’s successor in rank, the head of the family, blessed with the greatest portion of the inheritance but duty-bound to look after the widows and orphans in the extended family. The greatest sacrifice a divine power could command was that of a firstborn. In the “binding of Isaac” story, we are taught that the Creator does not, after all, exact obeisance. In the Exodus story, Pharaoh in effect sacrifices his firstborn son, and those of his countrymen, through his rejection of the Creator’s commands.

The Seder also has a place for the latest-born children, who ask the “four questions.” The Jewish Tradition, from its beginning, was about questions: forebears who asked the Creator about his own wisdom, scholars who were exploring the meaning of even more ancient texts and questioning previous interpretations. It would be enough if the little children someday are asking questions from the Tradition, even if their answers are different from ours. An essential part of the Tradition is hoping that your children and grandchildren will exceed you in all ways, including in their wisdom.

33. A Celebration of Our Earlier Celebrations

During the Seder, we recall earlier Seders in our lives, with family still with us, with those who have passed.

41 Numbers, chapter 12
We may think of the ancestors of whom we know little – except that they likely celebrated a similar Seder hundreds and thousands of years ago.

My Hebrew name is Pesach. I am told I was named in honour of my father’s mother’s mother, Pesya. The name is a variation on Bat El, daughter of the Creator. She lived to only the age of about twenty: she married my grandfather, Pesach, and passed away. She left behind only one child, Chava (“life”) – my grandmother.

I did some genealogical research a few years ago. Pesya was born in Plizkow, a town in Ukraine named after a songbird. The town of her childhood was famous for a mineral pool that never froze. A small Jewish community lived there; they were poor materially but rich in the care they took for each other.

It was wiped out during the Holocaust.

Pesya was a gifted seamstress. We have a tablecloth she sewed, and beyond that... no living or recorded recollections from those who knew her, no portraits, no photographs. But we do know that around the same time of the season we celebrate Pesach this year, she was seated at a table, celebrating the Redemption.

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**RITUAL TEMPOS**

*Passover involves many rituals. They are carried out in chronological sequence, according to their own logic, not against a stopwatch.*

**34. Time Measured in a Sequence of Rituals**

The passing of a series of human actions is not always counted by ticks of a clock. It can be counted event by event. A baseball game proceeds through twenty-seven outs. A chess game proceeds in an ordered sequence of moves; each move can be counted as a tempo. You can add clocks to speed up baseball or chess moves, but you can also play the games without them. The *Haggadah* at the outset defines the order of ceremonies that must be carried out. There are “to-do” lists within the larger frame: the four cups of wine, the sequences within individual songs.

The Seder uses the number four in some of its sequences: the four cups of wine, the four questions. Yet four was generally considered unlucky in the Jewish
Tradition. The sages explained that the Exodus was such an auspicious event that the Seder can embrace and celebrate orderings of four, rather than shun them.

There is no rigid “clock time” for carrying out the ritual sequences, no specified metronomic time for how quickly or slowly to carry out each move – not even the sort of qualitative suggestions in classical music, such as allegro, “quickly.”

Do we savour each moment of the Passover? Perhaps our ancestors in the Diaspora did, when life all around might have been hard and dangerous. Nowadays, do we impatiently wait to get through the checklist... to the meal... and then to a liberation from the ceremony itself, so we can return to the demands and diversions of ordinary life? Many Diaspora Jews might remember wishing to rush past what we heard as mumblings in a foreign language to get to the meal – or in Canada, where I have had all my Seders, to get back to watching the hockey playoffs.

35. Melodic Time

The markings in Torah scrolls – the tropes, the squiggles around the words that every bar or bat mitzvah child sees while practising – tell us about the rise and fall of pitches as we sing out the scriptures, about the length of a phrase, and about the length of pauses between phrases.

There is a trope for Seder reading. As melodies mostly do, the Seder melodies start with a home tone, rise up in pitch, reach a peak, then move back down to the starting tone. Perhaps the trope at Seder should be one that falls downward in pitch before it returns home. Israel, Egypt, Israel; live in the promised land, descend into enslaved exile, rise up and return home.

In the Jewish Tradition, up is associated with spiritual elevation, down with evil and death. In ancient times, you ascended the Temple Mount to hear the priests and witness the sacrifices; you descended after death into Sheol. In modern times, we still speak of “making Aliyah,” making an ascent, when a Jew leaves the Diaspora and takes up life in Israel.

By the way, why do we associate rising musical pitches with moving physically upwards? My guess is that lower-pitch sounds are produced from lower in your body, with the sound production moving up towards the top of your head as you sing higher and higher notes.

Pitches are sometimes used to symbolize the meaning of an event. The cantorial melodies at the time of Yom Kippur, it has been suggested, evoke the reversal of
time. The human voice ends phrases often by dropping down a half-step to the first tone sung, rather than moving up a half-step to reach a climax. In repentance, we seek to seek to undo past errors – in a way, to reverse the flow of time.\footnote{David P. Goldman, “How Time’s Arrow and the Phrygian Half-Step Make Jewish Music Holy”}

36. **Choral Time**

Most of us read the narrative in the *Haggadah*, rather than chant it. We stay in musical time together. But we still sing many of the songs it contains. All out loud, not silently. There is a place in Judaism for silent prayer, but Passover is audible, as well as visual, as well as gustatory.

The first night of Exodus was before the departure; it was a time when Jewish people came together as families and unified before they marched to freedom. At a Seder, we share a meal, just as households did on the night before the departure, and we sing together. Judaism is a musical religion, and the primacy emphasis is on the human voice, not instruments. In Temple times, a virtuoso professional choir led the singing; now we all can all join in, not necessarily with skill, but with gusto.

In modern times, we have perhaps slid back towards elite rather than democratic participation in prayer and celebration. The major holidays can be occasions to listen to an expert cantor or choir, with the congregation merely a passive audience rather than active participants.

The Jewish future depends on our ability to sing together as amateurs. Feeling must count more than precision. Yet a wondrous thing about singing together is that the individual errors are blended into an overall sound that is righteous.\footnote{“In Concerts, Why Is the Audience Never Heard as Off-Tune?”}

37. **Ritual Sequences That Echo the Chiasms of the Bible**

We have seen that in the Bible, there are underlying structures like chiasmus, concentricity, and climax. We see the same in the rituals and songs. The Passover Seder can be viewed as having a concentric logic: the middle is in the middle. Two of the four cups before, two cups after. Prayers before, prayers after. The service begins with an orderly agenda, the agenda is carried out, and it ends with a
declaration that all the steps have been followed. Indeed, the whole service is called a “Seder,” an order.

38. Ritual Sequences Involving “Call And Response”

In the ancient Temple, the experts would lead, but the people would participate. A reader or a professional chorus might sing out a line from a psalm, but the people would respond with a “sela” or an “amen.” In the Haggadah, we have songs where someone sings a challenging line, and then the whole table can respond with a “dayenu” (“it is enough”) or “Ki Leolom Hasdo” (“the mercy of the Creator is endless”).

The core of the ceremony, as set out in the Haggadah, is the singing of the four questions by the youngest child and the recitation of the Haggadah’s response by members of the older generations.

The four questions are mentioned in the Mishnah, the code of oral law that is the core of the Talmud. The commentaries on the Mishnah in the Talmud pervasively deploy the question-and-response format. The Jonathan Sacks Haggadah observes that there are two nouns for inheritance in the Torah: nahala and yerusha. Nahala suggests a flow in which the recipient is passively carried along. Yerusha, by contrast, suggests that the recipient actively takes hold. The question-and-answer dialectic in the Haggadah invites this kind of active engagement.

THE EXODUS AS AN EVENT IN WORLD HISTORY

39. An Event for Non-Jews as Well as Jews?

The deity of the Jews reveals himself to Moses as eternal and universal; he is not merely a tribal power, but the master of nature and of humankind. The story of the plagues proves to the mightiest potentate on earth that the Creator’s power exceeds that of any human. The Creator may not demand the extra observances placed upon the Jews, the nation of priests, but the Jews are expected to be a light unto nations – a model of justice and morality to inspire the wider world. They must act kindly to the strangers in their midst, remembering that they themselves were once strangers in Egypt.

Non-Israelites participated in positive ways in the liberation from Egypt. In the Haggadah, we read of two midwives, Shiphrah and Puah, who subverted the
Pharaoh’s order to kill the firstborn males. Were this pair Jewish, Egyptian, Egyptian converts to Judaism? Different interpretations have contended through the millennia.

The Bible says that a “mixed multitude” joined the Exodus. One interpretation is that these were Egyptians who converted to Judaism. The implication for modern times might be that we welcome solidarity with the Jewish people even if others maintain their faiths, and that we welcome strangers who have chosen to fully join in our fate.

Can a non-Jew participate in a Passover Seder? Debatable under the Tradition. Nowadays, many of us are glad to welcome non-Jews to join in the celebration as an act of friendship, and as an opportunity for others to understand our Tradition and our devotion to it. The more Traditional hesitancy about inviting non-Jews had several sources. One is textual: the Bible contains express commandments for Jews to remember Passover from generation to generation. The Bible, however, does not expressly exclude the participation of non-Jews. So perhaps the real origin of the hesitancy is practical. There have been times and places when Eastertime, a counterpart of the Passover, was the occasion for pogroms. The agitators and perpetrators viewed Jews as historically complicit in the death of the Messiah. Easter might be a time to spew the “blood libel” – the utter falsehood that Jews use the blood of gentiles in their rituals. The truth is that the Tradition, going right back to the Bible, is opposed to human sacrifice as well as murder of any kind, and that even the blood of animals is never kosher.

In these modern times, we are still often surrounded by hostility to Jews, whether in the Diaspora or in Israel. We may be tempted to retreat, both spiritually and physically. But the ingathering of the Passover was a prelude to a launch back into the community of nations. The Israelites left a place of servitude to join the family of independent nations, to do justice and mercy to the stranger within, and to be an inspiration to all without.

40. The Seder as the Prototype Embodied in World Religions with Counterpart Holy Days

The Israelites believed that the Creator was universal and created all human beings in the Creator’s own image. The revolutionary idea of the Bible is that of radical equality, rather than the belief in an intrinsic hierarchy among fallible

44 Inviting a Non-Jew to the Passover Seder | UTJ Viewpoints
human beings. The sacred laws were a specific gift to the Israelites, chosen because they were the smallest of peoples, but the mightiest. They were entrusted, tasked, burdened – privileged – with the mission of being a model of justice to the whole world.

Christianity was originally a branch of Judaism, and almost all of its founding figures – Jesus, Paul, at least three of the four Gospel writers – were Jewish. Eventually Christianity would assume a distinct identity, and become the religion of the Roman Empire, of European civilization – which in turn would, for a time, dominate the world. For all of its departures from mainstream Judaism, Christianity maintained the sanctity of many of Judaism’s beliefs and rituals. The Last Supper is modeled after the Passover Seder. Good Friday is celebrated around the time of Passover, although the Christian calendar would rotate its annual holidays using a different calendar.

In the Koran, the Prophet is often pictured as having learned from the Tradition and adopted it. The story of Moses and the Redemption of Israel is portrayed approvingly, and in Shiite Islam there is a commemorative holiday, Ashura, that commemorates the Exodus.

Some would say that certain forms of Judaism, or of the Christianity and Islam to which it contributed, have been incorporated into various modern ideologies. There are founding figures and saints of the movement, writings that assume quasi-scriptural importance, and political leaders who claim to be in direct contact with the Truth.

In defense of the Tradition, it embraces dissent, from the prophets to the debates beyond. It made room at the outset for doubt and theological anguish, as in the Books of Job and Ecclesiastes. The leaders in the Tradition, even Moses, were all flawed in their own ways. Moses was the “most humble” of men and was portrayed as often being doubtful of himself, exasperated by his followers, and questioning the ways of the Creator. The Tradition is in many ways more tolerant than many of the secular ideologies that have claimed to be instruments of liberation.

Still debated is whether the Gospel writer Luke was a Jew; from my reading, he probably was too. See, for example, Cameron Joyner, “Was Luke Really a Gentile?”
41. A Holy Day for the Jewish People That Triggered Persecutions from the Neighbours

The Seders will themselves be the focal point of future historical events. Some hold that there was a Last Supper of Jesus, and that it was a Passover Seder. The “blood libel” – including the accusation that Jews would use the blood of gentile children to bake into matzah – was the trigger for massacres of Jews throughout history. Among the laws from Sinai is that blood from any source cannot be consumed. It is a reminder that blood, the symbol of life, is – or at least should be – in the hands of a higher power, not human beings.

This irony – that Jewish Tradition sees blood of any kind as ritually impure – was decisive in the story of Mendel Beilis. The prosecution attempted to prove that the “blood libel” is true and that Beilis acted upon it. At the trial, both gentile and Jewish experts presented defence evidence about the ritual impurity of blood of any kind in Judaism. His conviction would likely have triggered a wave of pogroms – and preempted my own existence. I remember my father’s mother, about half a century ago, joyously singing to me a song she recalled from a time and place where she lived near the trial. It ended with “and all Europe celebrates.” I was silently sceptical about how much of Europe actually welcomed Beilis’s liberation. It is half a century later, and Europe is increasingly a hostile place for the Jewish people, rather than true to its Enlightenment traditions.

The story of the binding of Isaac in Genesis specifically instructs us that the Creator does not ask for the sacrifice of human children. In the Book of Judges, a victorious king vows that as a thanksgiving offering, he will sacrifice the first thing to emerge from a door. It turns out to be his own daughter. No one can read the story as approving either his reckless promise or his horrific persistence in carrying it out.

The Exodus story reinforces that ancient Judaism developed rituals to address the anxiety that an infinitely grateful people might be led into human sacrifice in service of an almighty Creator. Moses’ quick-thinking wife reminds him to circumcise his newborn boy in order to avoid lethal harm to either Moses or the child. The Creator later tells the people of Israel that they are his firstborn, but that he will accept the dedication of the Levites to Temple service as a means of satisfying the nation’s accompanying duties. While human sacrifice was never demanded or permitted in the Jewish Tradition, throughout the history of the
people, the question has been put of whether Jews should accept execution or carry out suicide in order to avoid enslavement.\footnote{The Massacre of the Jews at Clifford’s Tower | English Heritage}

In modern Israel, facing the ongoing threat of destruction from neighbouring enemies, most Jewish young men and women are required to serve in the armed forces for several years. Some of the “ultra-Orthodox” claim that young adults from their community should be exempted in order that they may study the Torah. Is that position really one that Jewish Tradition supports, or one that the survival of Israel – and with it, Jewish civilization – can sustain?

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**PASSOVER AS PART OF THE SET OF COMMEMORATIONS CLOSED LONG AGO**

*The Passover rituals fold a historical event – the Exodus – into a cyclical set of rituals. At some point, the recollection of historical events and commemorative rituals is closed.*

**42. Zakhor - Commemoration**

At some point, the sacred writings of the Jewish Bible were collected and closed off from further revision. The Bible is open to constant performance and interpretation, but no more books can be added to it, and it retains a uniquely elevated status.

Similarly, as Yoseph Hayim Yerushalmi observed in his brilliant book *Zakhor*, Jewish Tradition tended to arrive at a closed canon of commemorations for events. Historical events that followed tended to be commemorated within the established canon of rituals. The *Haggadah* tends to focus on the events of biblical and Temple times; it does not recall the many persecutions and survivals that followed.

**43. Beyond Zakhor – Additional Events Added to the Canon**

In modern times, the Jewish state has added more holidays – the Day of Independence; a memorial day for those lost in the wars of modern Israel. A day that remembers the Shoah.
Within the existing holidays, to what extent do we or should we add to the canon? The captivity in Egypt was not the last or the worst of the persecution of the Jewish people. Should we recall by name the crushing of the Bar Kochba rebellion? Perhaps it is implicitly recalled in the ban on celebrations in between the holidays of Passover and Shavuot. Should we remember the expulsions from Spain and Portugal? The Shoah?  

The *Haggadah* continued to evolve through the centuries. It is neither a Bible text nor the *Mishnah*, both closed to revision. In addition to what we recount, we can balance reverence for *Zakhor* with an appreciation that the Jewish story has continued.

### 44. A Time in the Shadow of the Shoah

There have been massacres and expulsions throughout Jewish history. Many were on a large scale, such as the brutal Roman conquests of ancient Israel, the expulsion from Spain, and the mass murder of tens of thousands of Jews during the Khmelnitsky uprising. The Shoah demonstrated a potential for evil to achieve an absoluteness. The aim was to kill every single Jew who fell within the power of the murderers. Every last one; not only long-standing resistors but the formerly most loyal of citizens; not only the devout but unbelievers who were merely descended from a single Jewish grandparent; not only parents but their children and babies. The methodology was to maximize suffering and humiliation of the victims in the course of using industrial methods of extermination.

What was it like to hear the promises of redemption while facing death in a ghetto or a concentration camp? Could you feel even a moment of uplift, or did you feel that the Redeemer had “hidden his face,” had stayed unaccountably silent, that the promise of Redemption in every generation had been infinitely empty?

Yet there were Jews in the camps who secretly wrote *Haggadot* from memory for their children, who abstained from eating *chametz*, who furtively ate an ingeniously sourced and baked piece of matzah or drank a cup of wine made of water and sugar.  

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47. On the orange at the seder plate, please see [Dispelling the Urban Myth of the Orange on the Seder Plate | Passover Haggadah by 18Doors](https://18doors.org/jewish-passover/the-orange-on-the-seder-plate/).  
On the eve of Passover, 1943, the German army entered the starving Warsaw ghetto to finish the killing of the remnant of its population. A fierce resistance met them, carried out by people who were starving, barely armed, and knowing that few – if any – would survive a battle in which they were overmatched in everything but spirit.

The government of Israel acknowledges the supernal courage of the ghetto fighters by marking Yom HaShoah one week after the anniversary of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising. The remnants of the destruction of the Jews in Christian Europe and the harried and discriminated-against Jews in the Islamic and African world came together after the Shoah to finally establish an independent homeland and haven. Did the Shoah prove that the Creator is non-existent or indifferent?

Did the creation of Israel show that the abandoned chosen people of God could only depend on themselves?

Or does the emergence of Israel in the direst of circumstances suggest some spiritual mission or destiny for the Jewish people that defies the logic of history?

A MOMENT IN THE HISTORY OF HAGGADOT

The “Bible” of Passover, the Haggadah, has many versions and sets of origins.

45. The Vintage of the Haggadah You Are Using

The Haggadah at its core must, within the Tradition, recall some core events like the Exodus, and deploy some key rituals like the matzot. The ancient writings – the Bible, the Mishnah, the Tosefta (a supplement to the Mishnah), the commentary in the Talmud – identify some requirements for the Haggadah. Many details, however, are left to the traditions of different Jewish communities or to individual families. The “Bible” of the Seder does not have a single widely accepted form; it is a Bible whose text itself can have seventy faces – rather than merely being open to seventy kinds of interpretation.

Through the centuries, and in our time more than ever, more and more Haggadot have been published: some decorated with original visual images, some with a plenitude of songs and prayers beyond the minimum, some with translations into Diaspora languages. There are “second Seder” Haggadot that take the service in a direction founded on Tradition but amounting to an imaginative midrash on it. For
example, one reframes the traditional questions as challenges to your own art through life: What is the nature of your own captivity? What would constitute liberations? One asks four Pesach-inspired questions. Rabbi Amichai Lau-Lavie’s “Sayder” reframes the four questions: What has happened in your life in the past year? What is your personal captivity? How do you propose to emerge from it? What will you do this coming year to help free others?

Others use the Traditional Haggadah as a jumping-off point for comedy or satire linked to their very particular times.

The particular Haggadah that you are holding at the family event might have a dimension of time of its own. Does it have wine stains from when your late grandfather used it? Is the translation from the holy tongue, Hebrew, into English, or the language of a country our ancestors lived in long ago, and from which they had to escape – or from where they were deported to be murdered? When you experience the “as if” connection with the Exodus, you can also experience the “as if” of your ancestors in later times as they prayed from a Haggadah and hoped for redemption – just like you, in your own time, in your own way.

46. The Vintage of the Hebrew You Are Reciting in the Haggadah

One of the miracles of the modern redemption of the Jewish people in Israel is the revival of Hebrew as the common language of a nation. Hebrew has always been the holy language of the Jewish people, the language of the Bible, the language of the Mishnah. Its cousin, Aramaic, appears in some of the scriptures, and in some prayers, like the Mourner’s Kaddish. In the Diaspora, however, Jews spoke many local languages and developed distinctive dialects like Yiddish and Ladino.

Would Moses of three millennia ago be able to understand the Hebrew spoken at a Seder in Israel? Or in the United States? Probably. Different versions of Hebrew have shifted in which vowels they use, in how some consonants are pronounced, in word order. But it seems likely that, at least after a short time to get acquainted with the shifts, our time travellers could communicate with each other. The ancient founders and the sages of later times would find in modern Hebrew so many phrases adopted from the sacred texts they knew well or even created.

The style of the Bible was to use a spare vocabulary, perhaps evocative of the folk stories on which it drew – but the authors, compilers, and editors were exquisitely sensitive to nuance in the use of language; the repetition of a word, a slight variation, a pun based on it, these were deployed with supreme skill in the service of the artistic enjoyment of language, the development of character, and the exploration of the most profound ideas. It has been said that English is a language of words, but Hebrew is a language of letters. Any and every detail can be a generator of meanings through multiple media and dimensions: a subtle change in an interpretation of a law, the starting point for creating a Midrashic story to supplement the original text, a clue to understanding a mystery about the human condition or the nature of the Creator.

THE PAST, PRESENT, AND FUTURE CONNECTED

In the Tradition, the past, present, and future on earth are in touch with each other.

The Talmud tells a tale of Moses asking God why there were intricate crowns on the letters of the Torah. The Creator transported him to the time of Rabbi Akiva, who used the markings to understand the teachings given to Moses. At a Seder, the Exodus foretold is re-enacted and re-experienced, and viewed as a promise of redemption in each generation for the future. When the Creator reveals his name to Moses at the burning bush, one interpretation is that this name means “Who was, is, and will be.”

But if the course of human events is integrated, rather than divided into past, present, and future, how is that consistent with the disruptive and creative impact of moments of human choice and the Creator’s interventions – like the Exodus story? In Pirke Avot, the Ethics of the Fathers, Rabbi Akiva is quoted as stating this paradox: “Everything is foreseen yet freedom of choice is granted.”

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50 Samuel Stern, “Creative Aggadah Continuing the Story of Moses in the Study Hall of Rabbi Akiva”
51 Everything is Seen – Ethics of Our Fathers: Avot 3:15 - Chabad.org
47. **A SWEET TIME CAN TURN BITTER – A BITTER TIME CAN BE REDEEMED**

A lettuce is often used on Seder plates. One interpretation: just as a young lettuce is sweet and an older one bitter, we remember that the sojourn in Egypt started as a relief and ended in affliction. The sojourn in Egypt was necessary, some say, because we cannot understand freedom without experiencing its opposite. Through the history of the Jewish people in exile or as a surviving presence in their homeland, Seders were celebrated in times of menace and persecution. Perhaps they were endurable because of the hope of a future redemption.

48. **A Historical Event Brought Back into the Holiday Cycle of the Jewish People**

The historical event of the Exodus – which in the Bible account began in part with a frustrated attempt by Israelites in Egypt to observe a three-day Jewish holiday – was folded back into the annual cycle of Jewish holidays.

49. **Exodus as the Chronicle of a Bondage Foretold**

The sojourn in Egypt is repeatedly pre-enacted in the Bible – a theme with variations, but a theme. A patriarch experiences hard times in Canaan, sojourns in Egypt or another land, the patriarch’s line of family succession is threatened, God intervenes – this is a return to Canaan.

In Genesis, the Creator warns Abraham that his people will be strangers in a strange land for four hundred years, but in the end, they will be redeemed. Abraham himself goes to Egypt to escape famine, and his succession is threatened by the Pharaoh’s dalliance with Sarah, but God inflicts plagues on Pharaoh, and Abraham and his family are freed and bestowed with gifts.

Isaac, the next in the line of the forefathers, has a somewhat similar venture in the kingdom of the Philistines; God specifically orders him not to go down to Egypt.

His son Jacob eventually seeks relief from famine in Egypt. When his son Joseph asks the Pharaoh permission to bury Jacob back in Canaan, it is granted. (The refusal of the later Pharoah to permit Moses’ people to celebrate their holiday stands in sharp contrast.)

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52 [The Mystery of the Maror « Pesach « Ohr Somayach](#)
Joseph is carried off by his slaveowners to Egypt, resists the temptation of Potiphar’s wife, and rises to become a trusted and wealthy prime minister; after the Exodus, his people carry riches with them, restitution for their centuries of forced labour. But they also carry with them the body of Joseph, and eventually return it for burial in the promised land.

The pre-enactments in the Bible might be to reassure the Israelites that their exiles and oppression were not random events, that history is not ultimately in the hands of tyrants, that the four hundred years in Egypt served a purpose – that of educating people in the supremacy of God, the non-deity of human rulers, and the value of freedom and of kindness to strangers.

In the New Testament, event after event is portrayed that is linked to a biblical model or passage – including Jesus’ own sojourn in Egypt. A whole tradition holds that the entire Jewish Bible is essentially a prefiguring of the story told in the Gospels.

50. A Time to Look Forward to the Messianic Age on Earth – and to the Resurrection of the Dead?

Isaiah, one of the earliest prophets, contemplates a time in the future of peace – swords will be beaten into ploughshares; the lion will lie down with the lamb (so in the Messianic age, we will definitely not return to animal sacrifices). God’s order will prevail here on earth.

The Exodus was not a return to Eden or to a time of the Messiah. It was a return to a real place in the real world, where you still have to work for a living, fight off your armed enemies, face your personal death, risk further conquest and exile.

It is said that the prospect of the Messianic age makes our past and present easier to accept. One day, all our mistakes, all our travails, even our disasters, will turn out to be steps on the path to peace and contentment. Modern studies of happiness say that we remember our past in narrative form; if the ending is happy, we recall the build-up to them as happy as well. At the Seder, we imagine an escape from history, the exiles and returns, our failures of human self-governance, into a time of peace and harmony. We drink the cup of Elijah at the Seder – the prophet who will return to usher in the Messianic age on earth.

So many Jews have been tormented, tortured, and killed because we believe that the Messiah still has not come. The Book of Matthew, so beautifully Jewish in its sensibility and style, recklessly has the Jews crying, “Let [Jesus’] blood be on our
heads and that of our children.” Matthew thought he was engaging in an intramural polemic, suggesting that one group of Jews, by rejecting the Messianic claim of Jesus, had brought on themselves the destruction of the Temple.

Maimonides was a twelfth-century philosopher, codifier of Jewish law, and physician. He attempted to distill thirteen principles of Jewish faith. One of the principles of faith was that of the resurrection of the dead to life in the Messianic age. Maimonides retained, however, the Jewish reverence for life in the here and now. In his letter on apostasy, he pleaded against unnecessary martyrdom—mouth an Islamic formula if you must do so to survive, practice your faith in private.

51. **A Re-Experience, Rather Than Mere Re-Enactment, of the Original Event**

The Seder uses a meal to symbolically recall the Exodus. It commands that these essential symbols be not only deployed but explained. The Tradition enjoins participants in the Exodus to feel as though they themselves took part in the original events. We recall the humiliation and pain of servitude, we recall the coming together of the people in preparation to march out, we recall the relief and exaltation of having crossed the Red Sea to the other side.

As a society, we are more aware of post-traumatic stress syndrome. In the mind of the sufferer, you relive a terrible event as though it were happening now. *The Seder is the opposite*: you relive a wondrous event as though it were now.

In “A Modern Jewish Credo,” I proposed a distillation of ten points that modern Jewish people might be able to converge around. The final one was this:

> We value life. We remember our persecutions, but we survive and hope because we not only have so much to mourn, but so much to celebrate: in the gift of our individual lives, in the continuity of our own community, in the potential of humankind, in the mystery and wonder of this universe.

The celebrations and the persecutions are paired. The Exodus was an escape from enslavement and attempted genocide. In Israel, the calendar proceeds from Yom HaShoah, the remembrance of the Holocaust, to Yom Haazmaut, the Day of Independence of the Jewish State.

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53 [Rav Dani Victor, “As If You Were There....Virtual Seders”](#)

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The Kabbalistic saying “this too is for the good” requires interpretation and limits. It can mean that in the long run, a setback might be a necessary step to a positive outcome. I am fired from this job; it forces me to retrain and eventually find something which better suits my talents and aspirations. Maybe, but I personally cannot believe that there can ever be a greater good that is somehow an offset to the murder of a single child.

The saying might mean “I have seen or witnessed this evil, but I will honour the memory of the victim, and I will be inspired by it to try to forestall some other evil and bring about some good.”

52. **The Third Seder of the Spiritual: An Experience Rather Than Mere Anticipation of the Future**

Let me quote at length from Yanki Tauber of Chabad, the Chassidic movement known widely as the “Lubavitchers.”

By the way, family tradition is that I am a direct descendant, male after male, of the Baal Shem Tov, the faith healer and visionary who is remembered as the founder. Am I really? The documentary history trails off when one of my ancestors – name unknown, maybe Rubenstein? – assumed a false identity to evade the twenty-five year draft of Jews into the army of the tsars. After several mutations, we wound up in Canada with the family name of Schwartz, with its seven consonants, only one vowel, and no provenance in legend.

But back to Yanki Tauber and to the future, not the past:

> If time surrendered only one of its frontiers on Passover but maintained its blockade of the future, we’d be only a half-free people, masters of our past but prisoners of the unknowable to-come.

That is why Passover has two parts. The “first days” with its seders and its living of history, and the “final days” with its messianic themes – days that herald the divine goodness and perfection which, the prophets promise us, is the end-goal of creation and the fulfillment of our present-day lives.

There is even a Chassidic custom, instituted by the Baal Shem Tov and further developed by the Rebbes of Chabad, to conduct a “mirror-seder” in the closing hours of the last day of Passover, complete with matzah and

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four cups of wine. These are hours, say the Chassidic masters, when time relinquishes its last hold upon our lives; when the future, too, can be remembered, and the Era of Moshiach tasted and digested as the Exodus is on the seder night.

53. A Re-Enactment of Greco-Roman Times

The formative era of Judaism was the captivity in Egypt. At other Jewish holidays, we recall other times in exile. The Purim tale is of the salvation of the menaced Jewish minority in Persia. Many Jews lived under Greek or Roman domination, and in that cultural milieu, during the critical centuries when they were salvaging and reviving the Tradition. When they looked at the forms of celebration for a free and thriving people, they found the Greco-Roman symposiums, where the attendees enjoyed their food and wine, and asked some standard questions to keep the conversation going. Many details you might otherwise puzzle over – what is all this about dipping vegetables or the *afikomen*? – make sense as soon as you realize that they were adopted from other cultures. But what is not adopted is just as important. The meal is centred around prayers, not self-indulgence. The foodfesting ends with the *afikomen*, rather than being extended indefinitely. Children are an essential part of the occasion, not excluded.

54. ...and of Jewish Diasporas from Many Other Lands

From ancient times, displaced Jews have found homes in all the continents of the world, many in places far beyond Israel and the Eastern Mediterranean. Families still accent the core ceremony with rituals and flavours experienced in their own Diaspora worlds.

Traditions in a temple can still bear the hallmark of the Judaism of the time when the founders first left Israel and arrived in another land. Linguists say that the Hebrew of the Jews of Yemen in some ways preserved features of the ancient language and in some ways was influenced by Arabic pronunciation. At a Yemenite Jewish Seder, the whole table is the plate; the charoset is called *doukah*, based on an ancient Hebrew word for grinding; the Exodus story might be retold in a lighthearted Arabic version called the *ma cha bar*.56

Modern Israel attempts to integrate different streams of ingathering into a national culture. In 2008, *Sigd* became an Israeli national holiday. It was originally

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56 Yemenite Seder Night – The Jerusalem Post
an Ethiopian Jewish holiday commemorating the revelation of the Torah through Moses and the yearning to return to Jerusalem.

More immediately connected to Passover is a holiday created by North African Jews called Mimouna. It is a festival day after the end of Passover. It involves eating newly permitted carbs, including a crepe called moufletta, in the company of friends and neighbours. In North Africa, that included welcoming Muslim neighbours to the celebrations. It is now a feature of Israeli life, including a huge outdoor festival in Jerusalem.

As with so many cases in Judaism, the practice is long established, but the origin and meaning are open to debate and interpretation. Does Mimouna refer to Maimonides, a towering sage and philosopher of the middle ages? Is it some variation on the Hebrew words for “I believe”? Was it adopted from some non-Christian, non-Jewish festival?

To what extent will the ongoing Diaspora in the rest of the world eventually follow these Israeli examples of holiday practices? Israeli Hebrew – which is heavily influenced by Sephardic (North African) rather than Ashkenazic pronunciations – is becoming the mainstream version through the modern Diasporas.

You can think of the story of Judaism as a whole in terms of not only exile and return, but a larger pattern of radiance and convergence.

At some point, traditional folk tales, rituals, and laws are pulled together into a verse in an official text, and these are eventually assembled into the Bible. Every verse, every word, every letter of the Bible then becomes a point that can radiate in many dimensions of human experience: legal debates and conclusions, mystical interpretations and ritual practices. Every word can be sung, and thereby experienced in the combination of musicality and spirituality that has always been central to Judaism. Sometimes, these emanations have to be pulled back together – as when various codifiers of halakha (Jewish law) tried to create manuals of practice for Jewish households, or when a rabbi gives a responsa, an authoritative opinion on a question of Jewish law.

At various times, parts of the Jewish communities in Israel were forced out. They landed, at least for a while, in other lands and often influenced their local communities just as they were influenced by them; many finally went to the newly born Israel in modern times. Israeli thought and culture can now radiate out in the remaining Jewish Diasporas and the wider world.
55.  Integrating the Modern Exodus from Ethiopia

A Jewish community, long in exile, yet faithful to the ancient laws and traditions, including observing Passover, always yearning to return home, often oppressed, now threatened with annihilation, decides to embark on a long and dangerous journey home. Some die along the way, from cruel bandits, illness, and starvation. Thousands return and build a new life in the promised land.

The story of the ancient Exodus from Egypt – and the modern Exodus from Ethiopia.

With the support of agents from the government of Israel, in various waves, with names like Operation Moses, tens of thousands of Jews made Aliyah. They were drawn by the yearning to return to their promised land; they were driven by the persecution of their government, the antisemitism of their neighbors, the violence of civil wars. Many had to engage in a dangerous trek to refugee camps set for them, secretly, in Sudan, as way stations to Israel.

The Koren Ethiopian Haggada: Journey To Freedom combines writings from the Ethiopian Diaspora with passages from the Bible and the more mainstream Haggadot.

I am teaching a summer program in Israel that I created to introduce Canadian law students to the Israeli legal system and its society.

Benny Aklum is a guest speaker. His father, who was threatened with execution by the government, wrote a letter to the outside world asking for help for his imperiled community. Benny survived the trek to Sudan and experienced the wonders and shocks of arriving in Israel and trying to integrate into its vibrant and fraught society. As a young man, he served as a combat soldier in Lebanon.

After his tour of duty, Benny has had enough. He leaves in pursuit of a more peaceful life in New York City. One day, he wakes up, looks out his window, and sees that something is missing in the skyline... the World Trade Center towers. “I decided that nowhere is safe,” he said, “but if I am going to be killed, it might as well be in my own home.” He returns – again – to Israel.

56.  A Time for Reassurance That the Creator Will Save Each Generation

The Seder prayer, Vehi Sheamda, proclaims that in every generation destroyers will come against Israel – and in every generation the Jewish people will survive.
How much of that can we still believe? Yes, in the catastrophes, a fragment of the people survived, but so many were brutalized or killed... in the Roman wars, in the Expulsion from Spain, in the Shoah. Are the Jewish people of today among the last generations – intimidated or enticed to assimilate in the Diaspora, physically destroyed in Israel?

There will be no more exiles and returns to the homeland. If the Jewish people survive, it will only be because the Jewish homeland abides.  

57.  The Seder Ceremony Recalls the Time of the Temples

The Seder ceremony preserves – sometimes in modified form – the Temple service for Passover. The shank bone reminds of the sacrifice of the lamb at the Temple during ancient Passover. The Seder includes a recitation of the Hallel prayer, a group of psalms that were recited at the Temple on Pesach. In the “Dayenu” prayer song, we recite the historical sequence from the Exodus that includes building the Tabernacle during the wandering and culminates with the construction of the Temple.

We at the Seder know that the first Temple was destroyed, and then the second.... In another song, “Had Gadya,” we imagine not a constructive sequence, but rather a chain of destruction that begins with the killing of a little goat and proceeds through a chain of ever-more-powerful predators, culminating with the angel of death – who is then killed by the Creator.

58.  The Seder Declines to Recall the Time of the Temple

Some communities hold that after the destruction of the Temple, they should not have lamb on the plate, but a substitute, such as a piece of roasted chicken. The rationale is that we should not forget the destruction of the Temple or mistake the current time for a Temple time.

The survival of the Jewish people after the destruction of the Second Temple has largely depended on finding substitutes for the role of the Temple. The Tradition

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57 Halkin Puts Everything in Its Place

58 What Does That Passover Seder Symbolism Really Mean?


60 Dayenu with English Hebrew and Transliteration | Passover Haggadah by Danielle & Misha Slutsky

61 Chad Gadya – Wikipedia
wrote down the *Mishnah* – the second Bible, based on teachings that Moses received at Mount Sinai that were not initially written down. Instead, the Tradition holds, these teachings were for many generations passed down from rabbis to their students. The *Mishnah* was supplemented by rabbinic commentaries, eventually compiled into the written books of the Talmud. The *Haggadot* that most Jews use draw extensively on the later rabbinic tradition.

59. Yet the Karaite Seders Decline to Recall the Later Traditions, and Focus on the Original Bible

In the last few centuries, new branches of Judaism have emerged. Their names include Conservative, Reform, and Reconstructionist. They tend to view sacred texts as not all inerrant or consistent with each other. Rather, scriptures – even if in some way inspired by the Creator – might also reflect the experiences, pressures, and beliefs of the human beings who inscribed them. These modern movements tend to be open to modifying Orthodox traditions that they view as out of step with modern life – such as requiring that men and women sit in separate sections of the synagogue, even if they are members of the same family.

The Karaite branch of Judaism, however, emerged about twelve centuries ago. It departed from the mainstream in a distinct way. Their view took the first Bible, the written one finished about two thousand years ago, as the preeminent authority. They view the *Mishnah* and rabbinic commentaries as one line of interpretation, worthy of study and consideration, but not on the same plane of importance.

There are surviving Karaite communities, both in Israel and in the Diaspora. Their *Haggadot* simply quote extensively the story of the Exodus as told in the Bible itself. The rabbinic additions – the prayers, commentaries, stories – are excluded.

The Karaites follow their own calendar, and their Passover does not only begin at a different time than that of the mainstream Tradition. It consists of two distinct holidays – a one-day Passover and a six-day Festival of Unleavened Bread.

60. ...and Samaritan Communities Still Enact Their Version of Temple Rituals Passover

An even more ancient branch of Judaism is the Samaritan version. Its community might have originally consisted of members of the Northern Kingdom, the “lost ten tribes,” that was destroyed over twenty-seven hundred years ago.
The Samaritans have their own version of the mainstream Bible. It is extremely similar but does depart in a few key places. One is identifying Mount Gezer as the appropriate location for the Temple. There are still Samaritan sacrifices of animals there at Pesach time – which, as with the Karaites, is different from that of mainstream Judaism.

Fractiousness between different Jewish communities – as well as within them – has been a challenge for Jewish survival from the most ancient times. The Talmud says that the Second Temple was destroyed because of “baseless hatred” between Jewish sects. The Romans carried out the actual burnings and slaughters, but the Talmud holds that a united people could have defended itself more ably.

We are still a small people. We are faced with multiple threats to our future—from the quiet death of demoralization and assimilation in the Diaspora to the physical destruction of the people of modern Israel. Anyone who genuinely wishes to embrace the Jewish past, present, and future as part of their own should be embraced. Ruth of the Bible – the grandmother of King David – was a Moabite who said, “Your people shall be my people.” In response to any Ruths of today, we should be saying “welcome home.”

61. The Seder Recalls We Were Nomads, Before Egypt, Before the Exodus

The Haggadah quotes from a passage from the Bible, Deuteronomy 26:5. The passage is a recitation that a celebrant must make in the Temple at the festival of the First Fruits – Shavuot. The recitation begins “arami oved avi” – which means – probably – “a wandering Aramean was my father.” The phrase recalls when the forefathers of the Israelites were nomads before the descent into Egypt and the Exodus. Some scholars believe the phrase itself, whatever its precise meaning, originated over three thousand years ago.

Wait a moment. Why does the Haggadah direct us to quote a recitation that the Israelites were ordered to make at the Temple during Shavuot – not Passover?

Because the recitation that begins with “arami oved avi” goes on to recall the Exodus story. The ancient Temple Shavuot ceremony, in a way, included its own mini-Seder. Then and now, Exodus anticipates Shavuot, Shavuot recalls Exodus; in our texts, prayers, rituals, we shuttle back and forth through time.

Wait another moment. What is that “maybe” in the translation of “arami oved avi”? The phrase in the original Hebrew is ambiguous in many ways, and its
meaning has been debated for thousands of years. Scholars are still trying to figure it out. Who is the “avi,” the father? Abraham? Joseph? The concept of “forefathers” generally?

The Haggadah offers a different – and probably mistaken – interpretation. It proposes that the “Aramean” was Laban, Joseph’s father-in-law, who extracted Joseph’s labour for twenty years. If Joseph had not fled, the history of the Israelites might have been brief and forgotten. Along the way, Joseph wrestled with the angel and took on the name “Israel” – which might mean something about struggling. In their long history, the Israelites questioned the ways of the Creator, fended off external enemies, argued among themselves – but so far, survived.

Rabbi Sachs proposes that the Haggadah’s interpretation, if technically mistaken, was in a way an inspired move. It fit the recitation more fully into the Passover story of captivity, threatened extinction, and ultimate flight. It assures us that Joseph’s own story anticipates the Exodus story, and that, time and time again, the Creator is with us.

Rabbi Sachs’s analysis is of our time. In it, he is able to distill the debate over the passage in the Tradition for thousands of years. He concludes: “I believe that we can face the future without fear because we have been here, we have been here before and we are not alone.” As I write, it is difficult to share Rabbi Sachs’s confidence. How much of the Tradition consists of interpretations that attribute an order and meaning to things that are at odds with reality?

After my father passed away, I created a musical theatre piece called Consoulation, and that is the question I was addressing.

62. ...and Anticipates the Third Temple?

In the Diaspora, we end the Seder service with the hope of celebration as free people in Jerusalem. In modern-day Israel, the prayer may be modified to culminate in “a rebuilt Jerusalem.” Some Jews are even now learning how to conduct traditional temple services in a rebuilt one. But is that ever possible in this world? Would it be just to destroy the holy places of Islam on the Temple Mount? Would it be anything but insane to risk the consequences?

Perhaps we can interpret the Tradition, drawing on... the Tradition. Just as we always do. Amos the prophet held forth that God wanted not sacrifice but acts of kindness. The Temple sacrifices required the death of innocent animals...
Jewish people survived attempt after attempt to extinguish them and insisted on the sacredness of life.

Can we imagine a modern sacred building in modern Israel in Jerusalem that is not a rebuilt Temple? Built of Jerusalem stone, a multiplex of synagogues, lecture and study halls, and performance spaces? Celebrating the vitality of the Jewish people in the Diaspora and in their modern state? A place for the ongoing celebration of Jewish life?

63. **Anticipation of the Messianic Age**

The rabbis did not agree on whether Tradition required four or five cups at the Seder. A fifth cup is poured in honour of the Prophet Elijah, and children open the door of the house to welcome him in to usher in the coming of the Messiah.

One dimension of the Messianic time is achieving an era of peace and reconciliation on earth among all living creatures in the material world. The swords will be beaten into ploughshares, the lion will lie down with the lambs.

The Tradition developed the idea of *Tikkun Olam*: our duty as fallible human beings, living in this broken world, to still try to bring radiance and harmony to a world so often disordered and fraught with suffering and injustice. The Passover Seder recalls a divine intervention to liberate the Israelites in captivity, but it also recalls the actions of the people of Israel in helping to free themselves. They overcame their fear and internal division, came together as a nation, and walked towards freedom... and the acceptance of the Covenant at Sinai, and eventually the promised land. What was promised, however, was not the Garden of Eden, not paradise – but a place on the fallen earth where they would have to struggle to survive as a people and be faithful to their mission from the Creator.

64. **A Time to Contemplate Resurrection?**

For many people, for many Jews, existential terror is not relieved by thinking of oneself as a link in an ongoing historical chain – at least not if each link dissolves into oblivion. Judaism eventually developed its own vague belief in some form of personal life after death – of the soul? Of eventual resurrection?

Other faiths that drew on Judaism – Christianity and Islam – may have become far more populous partly because they offered greater certainty and focus about individual life beyond the grave. Ancient Judaism, however, focussed on this life that we live here on earth, and on the lives of our descendants.
Perhaps, in part, Jewish reticence on the afterlife was a counterreaction to the morbid obsessiveness with death they saw in some neighbouring cultures, like that of the Pharoahs’ Egypt. Ordinary people might spend their short lives in misery building pyramids for their god-king tyrant.

Another factor: the Jewish Tradition accepted that their Creator cannot be fully understood by ordinary humans, and that there are mysteries which human beings cannot understand. These might include the life of the soul after it departs from the material world.

At the Seder, we celebrate a reprieve from death and the beginning of a new life of freedom. We recall generations past, educate the latest, contemplate a Messianic era in the world to come.

The Haggadah says little about this world to be.

Some Jews have imagined a life of the soul in a real beyond the material world.

Maimonides, the preeminent rabbi of the middle ages, proclaimed instead that an essential belief of Judaism is in the eventual physical resurrection of the dead.

Maimonides did have some precedents to draw upon. There are resurrection stories in the Jewish Bible. Elijah the prophet, for whom we pour an extra cup at the Seder, in one case brought back a woman’s son from the grave.

Elijah himself, by the way, had a unique approach to leaving the ordinary world and then returning. He did not die at all. He was carried alive in a chariot of fire into heaven. In the Tradition, we await his return, which will include ushering in the Messiah, the bringer of restored or renewed life for all; what better harbinger of restored and heightened life for all creatures on earth than the one man, Elijah, who experienced only life and then life?

You can find different views about life after death in the Jewish Tradition that continued to be developed long after biblical times. Judaism is among the most ancient of religions; its origins are more than three millennia ago. But it stays alive by always continuing to develop in light of practical experience, rational reflection – and beyond that, fresh bursts of spiritual imagination and faith.
In the *Haggadah*, the Pharaoh of the day is remembered in his stubbornness and tyranny. The midwives who sabotaged the order to kill Jewish boys, Shifra and Puah, are remembered by name. Their backstory is conjectured in various ways in the Tradition; some say they were Israelites, others that they were righteous gentiles. Sages of the Talmud are named and quoted. If you have attended a seder, you have heard of Ben Zoma.

Moses? Charlton Heston dominates the screen in the Hollywood epic – but Moses is not mentioned in the most widely used versions of the *Haggadah*. The Tradition was always anxious to insist that Moses was not himself divine; he was a human being, indeed the humblest of all men according to the Bible. At Sinai all the people of Israel heard the words of the Creator, and all chose to accept the commandments revealed there. The Israelites were a “stiff-necked people”; they resisted any yoke, even that placed upon them by the Creator. They tended to gripe and even rebel against their merely human leaders, including Moses. Moses was a servant of the Creator, not a god-king. The scriptures of the Jewish people did not describe its founding figures as saintly, let alone divine. They were flawed. They emerge from the pages, whether seen as fictional characters or figures of history, as more true-to-life, not less.

Joseph, who was wrested into Egypt as a slave and emerged as prime minister, is, along with Moses, the most influential figure in the Exodus story. He was cocky as a young man, but when he actually achieved power, he too was humble. He never forgot his father, Jacob, and honoured him to the end. He never forgot the betrayal and humiliation by his brothers, but in the end, he chose to reconcile with them.

The brothers were terrified when he revealed that he, the prime minister of Egypt, was their abandoned sibling. But he reassured them, “I am not in the place of the Creator.” Is there a more humble and more magnanimous quote in the Bible?

A man who triumphed over staggering betrayal and adversity, who saved his adopted people in Egypt and his own family from famine, who was trusted by the
God-King Pharoah... who never for a moment forgot that he was the mortal son of a mortal father, a brother, a member of his own small people.

When the Israelites return to the promised land, hundreds of years later, they carry with them the body of Joseph, a man who never forgot where he came from or the dust he was made of.

The Bible is replete with minor figures, bit players, who might be represented in one or two events and have a short quote or two attributed to them. Some of them no doubt did live in history; by “making it into the Bible,” they nonetheless achieved a kind of immortality.

We celebrate Seders among family and friends. We can try to register our friends and family members in our memory, record images or sounds electronically or through photographs. Every year around Passover, my son posts a picture of his grandfather, who emerged from five concentration camps, attending a Seder in Europe with his parents and his brother and sister, all of whom, against all the odds, also survived the Holocaust.

At the end of the Passover week, however, we participate in the Yizkor service. The leader of the service reads out the names of lost family members, and the congregation recalls them. And we pray that they have joined their forebears in the afterworld, in paradise... and we vow in their name to carry out acts of charity... and we wonder for our own sake about what form of endurance or remembrance lies in store for us beyond this life.

And then the Kaddish prayer returns to the continuity of the nation, to seeking justice for those martyred in the past and praying for a future in which persecutors are requited and the nation can hold its head high.... Does every generation of Jewish people at least have the solace of being part of a nation that is committed to remembering those who have come before?

Rabbi Sachs once wrote:

A society without memory is like a journey without a map. It’s all too easy to get lost. I, for one, cherish the richness of knowing that my life is a chapter in a book begun by my ancestors long ago, to which I will add my contribution before handing it on to my children. Life has meaning when it is part of a story, and the larger the story, the more our imaginative horizons grow. Besides, things remembered do not die. That’s as close as we get to immortality on earth.
66.  A Time to Remember the Role of Women in the Redemption

Women, said the sages, are generally exempted from the duty to carry “positive time-bound” religious commandments.

The Talmud specifically concluded, however, that women are still required during Passover to drink the four cups and to eat matzah.

An early Rabbu explained that women were included in the miracle.\(^{62}\)

The medieval commentator Rashi added that the Redemption was in the merit of the righteous women during the generations of the Captivity. The Israelite women as a group kept on having children in defiance of the Pharoah’s order that the newborn sons be killed. The midwives Shifra and Puah choose not to execute Pharoah’s murderous order; they tell Pharoah that Israelite women are so skilled that they deliver their children before midwives can even arrive.

In the biblical account, Moses saves his people, but a series of women save Moses. Moses’s mother Jochebed and sister Miriam protect him from Pharoah’s order to kill all the firstborn males. Pharoah’s daughter not only raises the basket with Moses from the river but also adopts him. Moses’ wife Zipporah saves him when he neglects to have his own son circumcised. Miriam, in her own right a prophet, teacher, a leader, the bringer of water in the desert, is now remembered in many Seders through newly added symbols: a “Cup of Miriam” is poured, or a food item added to the Seder plate in her honour.

67.  Anticipation of an Individual Afterlife in Heaven?

Biblical Judaism – perhaps in revolt against the Egyptian death cults – emphasizes life in the world, now and for your descendants. The rabbis eventually allowed that there might be an eternal life for the soul. But of this we say little or nothing at the Seder. Still, we do invite in Elijah, earlier carried into heaven by a whirlwind, not gone forever....

\(^{62}\) Pesachim 104a:14-108b:1
68. **Uniting and Transcending Time by Travelling through the Sacred Texts**

One approach to texts often found in Judaism feels like swirling around internet sites, copying and pasting a quote here and another there without stopping to review the context of each.

It is common for a Jewish commentator or creative artist to range over a series of sacred texts – the five books, the prophets, the psalms, the *Mishnah* – and invoke the instruction of a particular phrase to establish a larger point. The origin of the different scriptural passages may actually be more than a millennium apart; parts of the Torah are based on even earlier oral traditions dating back over three thousand years, and the writing of the Talmud was not completed until about a millennium and a half later.

In a moving passage, Machiavelli tells us that in his tumultuous times, in the evening, he opened the classic books and communed with the great minds of the past. In the Tradition, your past is never passed. An ancient text presents an instruction or a mystery. You engage with how, generation after generation, the scholars and the people contended with it. You live in a community spanning millennia and hope that it will endure until it resolves at a time and a place and in a way that is cosmically righteous and content.

The *Haggadah* is a compilation that flies freely through the three millennia of literary material. It picks, chooses, and refines materials from the Tradition without any scholarly fussing about the chronological order in which they were produced, the identity or purpose of the author, or the times and circumstances that influenced their production. The *Haggadah* does not provide citations, and it introduces quotes by simply saying “It is written.”

In recalling how the people of Israel grew numerous in Egypt, the *Haggadah* starts with a quote from Deuteronomy 25, Moses’ farewell speech. Phrases in the quote are then variously explained by quotes from Genesis – which begins at the time of Creation, long before the Exodus. It then produces two quotes from the Book of Ezekiel, who lived long after the Exodus, and reverses the order in which his pronouncements appear.

69. **The Something-teenth Anniversary of the Historical Exodus**

When we celebrate a Seder, what anniversary is it of the actual Exodus or the Exodus presented by the Tradition?
Historians continue to debate what the year of the Exodus was – that is, to the extent they agree that it actually happened. The method for arriving at a date includes consulting Egyptian documents and trying to figure out, as we do with the Bible, how much is historically accurate, how much mistaken, how much willful myth-making. Various Pharaohs are identified as the presiding tyrant, and estimates range from about 1450 BCE to 1280 BCE.

If you believe in objective historical reality – and not everyone seems to in this postmodernist age – then real events register in multiple ways. We might be able to arrive at a historic date, or a credible estimate for it, in historical accounts from different cultures, in archaeological artifacts, in the names recorded of people and places, in the norms of a society preserved in its culture, in the evolution of language, in the DNA patterns of peoples.

There are some counterintuitive elements of looking back on ancient history. You might think that we know less and less as time passes from the original events. But in some ways, we may actually know more and more as our scientific techniques improve and more evidence is unearthed.

Another thing we should remember – but often do not – is that the ancient cultures were highly sophisticated, and themselves drew on even more ancient cultures. We did not recently discover that the human condition is intrinsically terrifying, that different people understand and value events in different ways, that we are in search of practical wisdom in navigating life, not only science and technology. We have advanced in know-how, not so much in know-why or know-what-to-do. A hundred years, a thousand years from now, will human beings still be the same as us, or bio-engineered to be differently?

The Jewish Bible says that the Exodus was 480 years before the building of Solomon’s Temple. Some Traditional authorities then arrive at a date of 831 BCE. Another way of looking at the Seder, however, is to ask: How far are we from the Messianic age? The Tradition holds that a thousand years is like a day in the story of Creation, and the Messiah will arrive by the time of the equivalent Sabbath – in the year 6000 from the beginning of time. The Tradition gives the current date as the year 5783 in the Jewish calendar.

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63 The Date of the Exodus: A Guide to the Orthodox Perplexed – The Seferim Blog
70. Cosmic Time

The Passover Seder uses concrete symbols, rituals, and ordinary words to explore – or at least acknowledge – the most profound questions of how the world works and how it should. At the Seder, you are invited to think about a Creator, re-experience the intervention in human history of a transcendent power and intelligence, and contemplate what a world to come would look like.

We can imagine a world of pure rationality in all dimensions, including the moral. The operations of the material universe are knowable, as are the requirements for just interaction among all human beings. Why, then, focus on the history or mythology of one particular person or people? Is the Passover Seder an objectionably parochial exercise?

Science has taught us much. We know a great deal about how the material world operates. We might be around 14 billion years into cosmic history. We might be headed towards the explosion of the sun, the obliteration of all human striving and achievement, and the eventual cold death of the universe.

Science has also taught us that much is unknowable. There are events too far away and too long ago for us to observe now – and perhaps ever. There are limits to our practical ability to know the initial conditions of any physical state with precision, and so to predict the future.

Science has taught us that the universe we know has a history. So far, there has been no way to start with first principles and derive the actual masses and energies of particles.

We may know things we cannot understand. We are limited by our physical brains and by the concrete, real-world experiences and observations we use to build models that make immediate sense to us.

Human history has taught us that we are not expert moral scientists. There is no limit to the evil that human beings can inflict. We have learned some lessons about building institutions and norms that constrain our malice, but we have also proved that these can be unlearned.

I do not see religiosity coming to an end in our world. Maybe the Jewish religion will disappear, but everywhere I look, I see other religions arising in its place – including rigid and fanatic ideologies that purport to be the cutting edge of tolerance and enlightenment. They are right about being cutting edge.
Judaism is a religion of a particular people with a particular and mysteriously enduring arc through recorded history. It is a means for those who join in it to have a specific identity and a place in the wide world. When its children were permitted to flee from their physical and legal ghettos, they made enormous contributions to science and culture. But that is a second-hand reason for continuing the Tradition. Why expend so much energy, expose yourself to so much danger, when there are other, more generic paths to making the world a little better?

Perhaps – just perhaps – because in an intrinsically terrifying and incomprehensible universe, it gives you a place where, despite everything, you have a home. James Kugel has argued that the uncanny sense of human smallness in a hostile and threatening world is the origin of spirituality, or at least Jewish spirituality. I met him once; as a stranger, I called to say how much I appreciated his work. He invited me over and made me feel... at home.

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**PERFORMATIVE TIME: A TIME TO COMMEMORATE, NOT TO MOURN**

_Judaism reflects on the chaos and incomprehensibility of human experience and proposes a stylized way to understand our conditions and perform our lives. At the Seder, we are to experience the feeling of a supernal Redemption. What happens when a clash arises between feeling as commanded and our natural feelings as human beings?_

_The Shiva period after our closest family members pass away is ordinarily a week, enough time for the congregation of surviving family and our friends to comfort us through the initial shock. But the observance of Shiva is interrupted by the Sabbath and high-ranking holidays like Passover. Can we actually interrupt the feelings of loss while we fulfil a commandment to remember a national liberation?_

**71. And Yet a Time to Mourn amidst the Celebration**

The slaying of the firstborn was carried out by the Creator, not by the Israelites. An interpretation: the Pharaoh had ordered the murder of Israel’s newborn boys

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[^64]: [Passover (Pesach) – Jewish Holidays | shiva.com](http://shiva.com)
and the assimilation of their children. He was ordered to let free the Israelites, the firstborn children of the Creator, or else see the firstborn sons of Egypt slain. There is a logic to it, but not one based on individual justice.

The rabbis were discomfited by the apparent injustice to the innocent. One suggestion: the Pharaoh’s subjects remained passive when the Israelites were threatened with genocide, and so bore some guilt. The Bible does not, however, explicitly address the complicity of ordinary Egyptians, and in any event, the firstborn who were slain could have included little children who could not possibly have been to blame in any way.

At the Seder, we spill a drop of wine for every plague. One interpretation: the joy from our wine cups is diminished by remembrance of the slain.

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**PARTY TIME**

*The Bible views wine as a pathway to joy (Judges 9:13). So did surrounding cultures; King Ahasuerus was always partying in ancient Persia. In ancient Rome, wine flowed freely to the celebrants at symposiums – one of the models for the Jewish Seders.*

**72. Winefest**

Judaism avoids asceticism. The body and material world are to be embraced and enjoyed, not denigrated and rejected. We celebrate our life in the world, not demean and afflict it in comparison to an afterlife. The promised land was praised by Israelites as a land of not only milk and honey, but abundant vines.

Judaism has the occasional fast day, but it has many holidays that are about release from the routine burdens of life and instead celebration of leisure, freedom, and life’s pleasure. At the Seder, enjoyment of wine is commanded, more merely permitted. One interpretation: the relaxation of inhibitions that come from wine helps us to rise in our embrace of the spiritual dimension of the Exodus.

**73. Playtime**

We somehow think of religion as sternly and relentlessly serious. Not always – at least not in the Jewish Tradition. There is plenty of humour and satire in the Bible. Purim is built around the Book of Esther with all of its sly wit and slapstick.
“Dayenu” is funny, at least to me. The reader fights through Hebrew passages that are difficult and hard to understand, then escapes to a joyful and melodic chorus, repeated to the point of absurdity.

The hunt for the afikomen, the hidden matzah, is a game for children.

The rabbinical debate in the Haggadah over how many plagues there were can be read as sourly scholastic... or is it? Here’s another way to read it. The rabbis are riffing on the counting of the plagues, and are engaged in a game where the idea is to top one another in finding ways to multiply the number. The rules of the game are that you have to use quotes from scriptures to “justify” each round of excrescence.

One of the “four questions” in most Haggadot is “Why do we dip twice on this night?” You never actually find a specific answer in the rest of the text. Probably the dipping of herbs into salt water reflects Greek and Roman practices at festive banquets. Without a definitive explanation in the Haggadot, however, Jewish thinkers throughout the generations have been able to play the game – sometimes deadly earnestly, sometimes in a spirit of amusement – of “explain this.” “This” might be a mysterious or quirky passage in the Bible, or in the Talmud in the prayerbook, or it might be a ritual going back to time immemorial whose specific historic origin or initial purpose or meaning is forgotten.

One rabbinical explanation for the double dipping: the brothers who sold Joseph into slavery dipped his coat of many colours in sheep’s blood to back up their story to their father, Jacob, that he had been killed. Centuries later, the Israelites in Egypt dipped a fabric into an animal’s blood to mark their doorposts on the night before the Exodus, so they would be spared the slaying of the firstborn.

Another explanation: the Shulchan Aruch, one of the most influential codifications of day-to-day Jewish law, proposed that the “double dipping” was merely to excite the curiosity of the children at the Seder.65

74. A Foodfest

The satirical television show SCTV once carried a skit about a Passover Seder. A Catholic priest is invited by his friend and is shocked by the display of intra-family resentments among the adults, the aggressive serving of food by the baba (grandmother), the children yelling and throwing things around. He tries to switch

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65 “Double Dipping: Dealing with Differences”
the focus to a higher plane by asking his friend whether Judaism is more a religion or more a way of life. The friend says, “It’s a way of eating.”

The Temple sacrifices were dedications to the Creator, but in the end the food was consumed by the priests or the people. Food is a universal need and source of potential pleasure; as in all matters, Judaism tried to give its consumption a measure of structure, meaning, and moderation. The kosher codes made eating – a routine part of daily life, if you are fortunate – an occasion for prayer and the embrace of the Creator’s commandment.

The Seder is concentrically structured around food: nibbles (the bitter herbs, Hillel’s sandwich, and so on), the main course, nibbles (the afikomen). Daily meals are to be appreciated and sanctified, but Shabbat dinner and the Seders – these are meals among meals.

75. As Though I Were a Rich Man...

The Bible says that before departing, the people were provided riches by their neighbours. What was that all about? Restitution for living off the slave labour of the Israelites for generations? Providing the Israelites some sense of material security so they could focus on their spiritual missions – of serving the Creator and returning to their homeland? In Fiddler on the Roof, Tevye wishes he were a rich man above all so he would have the leisure to study the holy books with the wise.

In the wilderness, the people lapsed into building a golden calf with their riches. Chastened, while still wandering in the desert, they constructed a portable tabernacle. After they arrived home, they would build the first Temple.

During the Seder, we celebrate as though we were prosperous people at leisure: reclining, enjoying cups of wine and a meal.

How can you celebrate a Passover Seder, and the ensuing days of limited labour, if you are desperately poor? At the beginning of the Seder, we hold up a piece of matzah and say it is the bread of the poverty of our ancestors in Egypt. We then invite all who are hungry to come and eat. “All who are needy come and participate in the Passover ritual.”

A paradox of Diaspora Judaism: it can be expensive to be Traditional. Most of us descended, wholly or in part, from generations of the desperately poor, who held on to the Tradition in the midst of deprivation that extended at times into starvation. Now: how do you pay for kosher foods, educate your children in the
Tradition, maintain a synagogue with a highly educated rabbi? Judaism cannot survive anywhere, true to itself, as a lifestyle restricted to the prosperous. Another paradox: the highest birth rate among Jews is among the ultra-Traditional, who tend to live materially spare lifestyles. A paradox within the paradox: some of these communities are supported by the state of Israel – and its hardworking taxpayers – or wealthy donors who have succeeded in secular pursuits.

The Seder itself is a democratic institution. It can be carried out in the spirit intended with a minimal expenditure of materials. What it requires is the devotion of time.

76. As Though We Were Lucky as Well

In the Tradition, four was an unlucky number. Yet the Passover Seder is full of fours: the four cups of wine, the four questions, the four sons, the four forms of redemption promised by the Creator (take you out from Egypt, save you, redeem you, take you as my own people). True, there are only three matzahs, but one of them is broken, so that is actually four. The sages said that the Passover celebration is such an auspicious time that we can embrace four-ness, not only tolerate it.

Seven is a sacred number in the Tradition: seven days for creation, the holiness of the seventh days, and – in Temple times and in Israel – seven days of Passover.

ABSTINENCE TIME

We practice some self-restraint at Passover to commemorate the past or to purify and intensify the present.

77. Fast Time, Slow Time

Fasting – it makes the time go slow. Through Passover, we are on a partial fast. We cannot eat leavened bread. In the Ashkenazi (Eastern European) Jewish Tradition, the rabbis also banned a category of foods called kitniyot. The precise meaning of the word is not clear, but it means legumes and other foods that were viewed as somehow “bean-ish.” Apparently the rabbis banning it were concerned

66 “The Significance of the Number Four on Passover”
that these materials might be confused with forbidden grains, such as oats, that can rise on their own, without added yeast.

Too fussy? There is a Talmudic principle of “building a fence around the Torah.” Better to draw the boundaries well outside the forbidden.

Other branches of Judaism – like those who had sojourned in Spain, or in Islamic lands – were never kitniyot-negative. I used to joke that I had converted to Sephardism so as to enjoy the greater food latitude. (The Seinfeld series had an episode about a man who converted to Judaism for the jokes.)

In 2016, the American Conservative Jewish movement repealed the 800-year-old ban. They considered it divisive.

While interpretations can multiply and some seem extravagant, there is often a core of plain meaning in a commandment that can survive translations of all kinds – wandering through many lands, over the course of centuries, conversion of sacred texts and prayers into Jewish languages besides Hebrew or the languages of surrounding communities.

You cannot eat chametz, leavened bread. The Bible is clear on that. The ban is carried out in Tradition with sweeping enthusiasm. You must search every corner of your house before Pesach on a search-and-destroy mission for crumbs of chametz. Your surrounding time and space must be chametz-free, not just you.

An interpretation: chametz, leavened bread, is a symbol of the non-essential in our lives – material things we do not need, grudges and resentments we bear, obsessions with rank or fame.

78. Chametz as a Symbol for Urgency in Doing Good in the Time We Have

The Hebrew words for matzot (the plural of matzah) and mitzvot (the plural of mitzvah, a religious requirement) are the same (leaving aside the vowel dots, which Hebrew writers often did – the Creator likely did not use vowel points when the ten commandments were inscribed). The rabbis warn against delaying a mitzvah; but what is chametz but a delayed piece of bread? Chametz is a symbol of procrastinating, making excuses, for using the limited and therefore precious time we have in our lives to do right, do good, and enjoy.67

67 Going Chametz-Free Means Valuing Time – Atlanta Jewish Times
79. A Time of Purity

The Jewish Tradition identified physical states – of your body and its surroundings – in which you were in the proper condition to transcend your materiality and engage with a transcendent Creator.

At the Passover Seder, you have removed the *chametz* from your home. Then, at the beginning of the Seder, you wash your hands. This is not merely a matter of physical safety before eating – it is a reminder of Temple times. The washing of hands before entering the Temple precincts was a required symbol of purity before entering a sacred space. Judaism celebrates the sacredness of life; that is why you wash your hands after attending a funeral. You may be considered ritually impure because other things – illness, events associated with being a woman or man – have heightened your feelings of being a physical being, and it is not the right time for the highest level of spiritual encounters.

The Talmudic tractate on Passover is mostly about the intense search to remove all traces of unleavened bread from your home prior to the Seder. By noon of the Seder evening, you have removed all the *chametz* from your home and business. It is not enough to merely abstain from consumption. Your home is the living extension of the Temple, and has been cleansed in the same way as your hands.

The Tradition is founded on *halakha* – a comprehensive set of legal norms that define your day-to-day life, not only the subjects dealt with in our secular system by civil and criminal laws. The idea of observance is to bring a holy order and coherence to the chaos and routines of life, recognizing that it is not always possible or practicable to remove every last bit of *chametz*. You might have missed a small quantity, or you might need to have it on your business premises. So there are ways to legally “deem” a state of purity that is unachievable and unredeemed practice. You legally disown any *chametz* you have not found, and eliminate or temporarily sell your *chametz* to a non-Jewish third party.

**PASSEOVER AS A TIME FOR SECOND CHANCES**

*The Tradition makes many demands on people. By way of balance, it provides outlets for rectification, atonement, and redemption.*
The First Chance, Rather Than the “Second Chance” Seder

It is ancient times, and you cannot participate in the Passover ceremony because you are in a state of ritual impurity – say, because you have been tending to the body of a deceased person, itself a holy act. This question was put directly to the Creator in the wilderness, and the answer was that there would be another opportunity allowed, one month later: the Seder Sheni, or the Second Seder.68

The commandments of Judaism are sweeping and demand much of the mind and spirit. But the Tradition allows for many kinds of second chances even when it is your own fault you missed the first one.

In the Exodus story, at various times, Moses and his people fail. Moses has to go up and down Mount Sinai a second time before he can pass on the tablets.

PASSEOVER AND THE TIMELESS REALM OF MATHEMATICS

Gematria Time

In Hebrew, all letters are also numbers. In the tradition of Gematria, we look to discover profound connections among words – and their underlying concepts – by finding which ones have the same numerical value.

Still don’t believe me that Passover is all about time? Consider this: the four questions keep asking about “halayla ha-zeh,” or “this night” – and those words have the same numerical value as the Hebrew word for time.

Gematria is not about real connections, you might respond – or so might I – but about the exercise of imagination in accordance with some rules, rather like creative art as opposed to mathematics or science. Or is it a combination of the imagination and intellectual rigour that is an essential aspect of Judaism? In the Tradition, we do accept facts; the forbears, the prophets, are all fallible and flawed; our people could be willful and idolatrous. We also accept that certain words are inscribed, and we must start with them, rather than replace them. And we accept that there are rules of logic. And then... are we engaged in wishful thinking, in human imagination, or sometimes resonating with a higher reality?

68 If You Missed It the First Time | Reform Judaism
A TIME FOR FREEDOM

82. Freedom Time

The Seder refers to the Pesach as zman heirutenu, meaning “festival of freedom.” Rabbi Jonathan Sacks pointed out that there is another Hebrew word for freedom, but heirut sounds like a similar word for “engrave.” It is not the freedom that is externally imposed, that you obey from fear. It is a freedom that you have internalized and adopted because you have studied and understood it. An engraving, like an engraving on the tablets of the ten commandments, is an integral part of the material, not a surface structure added on like ink on paper.69

The Passover was a liberation from tyranny. The acceptance of the laws at Sinai was an act of embracing a code for living humanely as well as vibrantly. “Choose life,” said the Creator in urging the people to embrace the revealed laws.

But the Israelites were always a “stiff-necked” people – a people who resisted a yoke. They argued with each other, they argued with the Almighty. Abraham, the first Jew, negotiated with the Creator for a reduction of the number of righteous people needed in Sodom to avoid destruction. Moses grew fed up with being ordered what to do by the Creator, even if it meant speaking to a rock.

HERE AND NOW

83. “The Present Time”: This Year in Jerusalem:

“Next year in Jerusalem,” we in the Diaspora say at the end of the Seder.

The Jewish state became independent in 1948. In the War of Independence, however, it lost in the bitter fight over the Old City, which contains the Temple Mount and the Western Wall. Israelis were denied access to their most sacred site, and gravestones were used as pavestones. When the city was recaptured, an immediate decision was made not to disturb the religious status quo, including the administration of the Dome of the Rock by Islamic authorities based in Jordan.

69 Covenant & Conversation | Ki Tissa | The Birth of a New Freedom | Rabbi Sacks
There is no realistic or just hope for removing the Islamic places, and for myself, I do not believe we should build a new structure purporting to be the Third Temple – at least not until the Messiah comes, and he has waited too long for me to expect him to suddenly arrive. The repository of Revelation and its living continuation is in the Jewish people, not in marble.

Neither is there a need for the entire modern city of Jerusalem to be under the authority of the Jewish state. The question for me is a practical one: how to achieve a just and lasting peace for both sides. The Exodus was a courageous act of self-assertion on the way to reconquest of the promised land; it was also the path to a Revelation that required justice for the outsider. The modern state of Israel accepted an even more diminished scope than the 1967 borders; no matter what the challenges, if it finally is accepted in return, and can live safely with borders close to those of 1967, then “Dayenu” – it would be enough.

Perhaps the greatest moment in the Talmud is the story of Aknai’s oven. The rabbis decline to accept the authority of immediate miracles over the exercise of their own judgment in interpreting halakha. After a voice from heaven tells them to accept a minority opinion, they explain that the Torah is in the hearts of the people, not in heaven. The Exodus and the Revolution can live on if the Jewish people survive; they cannot and will not survive outside of a homeland, even though it might be smaller than the expanses of Solomon’s kingdom, or even David’s. The Creator told the Jewish people from the start that they were not chosen for the mission because they were the largest of nations, but rather the smallest. Even a small candle can burn bright and send light in all directions. Another time in the Jewish calendar, Hanukkah, is about the miracle of a single Temple menorah burning longer than anyone expected.

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**BEYOND WORDLY TIME**

*In Judaism, concepts are explored through specific people, things, and events – not by building fragile or delusional castles of abstractions. Aspects of the Seder can be understood as evoking a sense of the timeless.*

**84. The Matzah as a Symbol of Escaping from Materiality and Time**

The matzah, unleavened bread, has been interpreted as a symbol of poverty and affliction. Rabbi Judah Loew ben Bezalel, the Maharal of Prague (born 1512),
however, saw it differently. The redemption by the Creator in Exodus was a divine intervention that transcended materiality and time. The matzah is unadorned, simple, as immaterial as can be. It must be baked as quickly as any bread can be – essentially, in no time. In the Kabbalistic tradition, all the components of the Seder plate embody an element of the ten *Sefriote*, the attributes of the Creator. The three matzot represent the intellectual emanations.\(^{70}\)

### 85. The Name of the Creator and the Transcendence of Time

When the Creator speaks to Moses at the burning bush, the Creator explains that the deity of the forefathers is actually the Creator of the universe. To Moses is revealed the sacred name of the Creator – which means something like “was and is and will be.” That does not mean “merely” a being who persists throughout the time we humans experience. The bush burns but is not consumed. The Creator is beyond all things created, including time itself.

The name and whom it represents is so sacred that we do not pronounce it out loud when we read the *Haggadah* or any other sacred texts. We substitute another word, such as “Adonai,” meaning “my Lord.”

### 86. Swimming in Ancient Hebrew, the Language of Was/Is/Will Be

We are not sure how to pronounce the four-letter name revealed by the Creator in the encounter at the burning bush. The Tradition held that the name was too holy to be spoken out loud. Ancient Hebrew was not written using vowel points, so we do not have those visual symbols as an additional clue. The prohibition in the ten commandments on making idols – visible and palpable representations of the Creator – perhaps makes it fitting in the case of the sacred name that the vowel points were not written down.

In the middle ages, the Masoretes – phenomenally dedicated and meticulous biblical scholars – added vowel points to their editions of the Bible. They proceeded on the basis of their understanding of the original pronunciation. In the case of the sacred name, however, they inserted the vowel points for a different word – Adonai (our Master) – a word that can refer to the Creator but is not the sacred name itself.

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\(^{70}\) *Kabbalistic Seder Plate | Passover Haggadah by Evan Feist*
Remember the trope marks, the squiggles that tell you how to sing the words? Those come from the Masoretes too.

And now we come to a feature of ancient Hebrew, the language of the biblical quotes in the *Haggadah*. Unlike most languages, its verbs did not have clear-cut tenses. In English, the way we construct verb phrases signals past, present, and future. With ancient Hebrew, David Boris has written:

[The Creator] sits perched outside of time. He created time just like he created the other three dimensions. In fact, in modern physics we learn that time is just another physical dimension. Perhaps [the Creator] perceives the flow of time like this current. He sees the joy of some, and the confusion and fear of others who are carried along in its flow. He knows our trajectories, seeing clearly the wild eddies in our paths: the cancer diagnosis, the fall and the broken femur, or the handsome kindly stranger who “randomly” sits down next to us on the city bus, and ends up being our spouse. Our paths are changed forever. None of it surprises Him. Of course, the analogy falls way short. God does not just see and know our trajectories; he is intimately involved in creating them. Perhaps he is more like the author who writes the story, or the painter who paints the mural, or the weaver who makes the tapestry, with each of us a single string.

But how does such a being communicate with us? How does an eternal being reveal to us anything of his nature and essence? What would a language look like if your reference frame did not experience time as we know it?

In Hebrew [the Creator] has created a language that intrinsically expresses the concept of timelessness.\(^1\)

This lack of tense is perfect for expressing God’s name: ויהי (called the tetragrammaton and sometimes transliterated “Yahweh” in English texts). There is truly power in this ambiguity in Hebrew. First let me give one potential translation of its meaning: היה (Hi yah) is the verb that means “to be” or “to exist.” Adding a leading yod י normally indicate a 3rd person masculine imperfect form. The addition of a waw ו can stand for a u class vowel (and then it is called a Shureq). This would make God’s name a Pual form (an intensive passive form). So one possible translation is: “He

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\(^1\) David Boris, “Hebrew Tenses: Language of an Eternal Being – No Past, Present, and Future”
87. Dreamtime

The rabbis stayed up all Bnei Brak discussing the Exodus. But we spend a large part of our lives asleep, and while asleep, we dream.

Like Moses, Joseph – Joseph the Dreamer – is a pivotal figure in the Israelite story in Egypt. Like Moses, he yielded great power and used it to help preserve his people.

Joseph is never mentioned by name in the Haggadah. The sages, however, found many implied references to him in the Seder. The first dipping of vegetables, they said, recalls that Joseph’s jealous brothers dipped his coat of many colours in the blood of a goat. They did so to support their story that he had been killed, rather than sold by them into slavery. (The second dipping was to recall that the Israelites smeared the blood of the blood of a sacrificed lamb on their doorframes to avoid the visiting of the final plague on their households.)

The word Karpas, say the sages – the parsley or other vegetable that we dip in salt water – had an ancient meaning of “fine linen,” to remind us of Joseph’s coat of many colours.

Joseph’s gift for making accurate predictions based on dreams initially almost got him killed. Later, it helped him emerge from an Egyptian prison and, as prime minister, to anticipate a time of famine and encourage saving up the stores that would enable people to survive it. Eventually his family would come to Egypt to escape the starvation in Canaan, and there Joseph would reconcile with them. The sages say that the four cups of wine at the Seder recall a passage from Genesis that uses the phrase “cup of wine” four times in depicting Joseph’s interpretation of a fellow prisoner in Egypt.

Theodor Herzl once had a dream in which he would be a modern-day Moses, saving people and leading them to the promised land. Herzl is often quoted as saying, “If you will it, it is no dream.” His action plan and advocacy for a Jewish state were crucial to its establishment. Like Moses, he died before the dream became a reality, but he is a revered figure in modern Israel – a major city is

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named after him, and he is buried on a mountain named after him, at the site of Israel’s national military cemetery.

Joseph never forgot the people or land of his birth. His people never forgot him. When the Israelites returned to Egypt, they carried Joseph’s body back with them.

During Passover, the Song of Songs is recited in synagogues. The book is a collection of poems about the erotic love between a woman and a man. The rabbis admitted it into the biblical canon and interpreted it as an allegory for the love between the Creator and the people of Israel. A large part of the poem can be a woman’s recollection of a dream about her fraught nighttime search to locate and reunite with her lover.

A TIME FOR COMMUNITY

The Passover begins with the Jewish people coming together as families, as a community. To this day, many Jewish prayers and ceremonies require a minyan, a group of at least ten congregants. Seders are first and foremost an event in which members of an older generation share the collective story with the younger ones.

88. The Haggadah Begins in Aramaic

This is the bread of poverty that our forefathers ate in the land of Egypt. Let whoever is hungry come and eat; let whoever is needy come and celebrate the Passover. This year [we are] here; next year [may we be] in the land of Israel. This year [we are] slaves; next year [may we be] free.

Rabbi Soloveitchik spoke of the “lonely man of faith”: the individual who feels existentially isolated, confined within the walls of a single personality, character, and experience of life, yearning for there to be a sense and meaning in their life, yearning to have a connection with other human beings and with their shared Creator. Some prayers in Judaism can only be said when there is a minyan, a quorum of ten.

At the time of Passover, we are enjoined to reach out not only to our own family and friends, but also to others who may be isolated and forgotten.

Why Aramaic, and not Hebrew?

In the last few centuries before the destruction of the Temple, Aramaic became a vernacular language for many Israelites, whether in their homeland or in the
Diaspora. Some scholars say that the “bread of poverty” invocation is in Aramaic rather than Hebrew because a family holding a Seder wished to avoid inadvertently welcoming in evil spirits, who could understand an invitation in Hebrew but not Aramaic.73 I would offer another possible explanation: in many times and places, many ordinary Jews (rather than scholars) spoke Aramaic; a genuine welcome to all might therefore be framed in a familiar language. A prayer that almost every Jew knows is the Kaddish; it must be recited on the death of a close family member. It is recited in Aramaic rather than Hebrew – perhaps originally to maintain its accessibility? At the Seder, almost every family sings the folk song “Ha Gadya” – which culminates, after a series of slayings, in the Creator’s finally killing the angel of death himself.

89. ...or a Time of Infinite Loneliness?

I am not sure whether we always remember, in organizing our own Seders in our homes, those who may be all on their own that evening. The Israeli documentary Incoming Call is about a phone-in help line. One of the calls is from a man all alone on the Seder night, his daughter far away in America, no other family to join with. He is painfully surrounded by households who are celebrating in community. He notices that the woman receiving the call has chosen to spend her own Passover receiving calls from strangers. She says that they can spend some time being alone together. By the end of their silent and then more vocal conversation, the man is cheered enough to enjoy hearing the sounds from his neighbours.

90. The Third Seder of the Secular – Community without the Creator

In the middle of the twentieth century, associations of secular and left-leaning Jews would organize a “third Seder.” It would be a public celebration bringing together secular Jews. It was animated by music and entertainment rooted in the Yiddish-speaking culture of Eastern Europe. Many Jews who had escaped and survived oppression became socialists; they believed the Creator had not intervened to secure justice, or even physical survival, for their people. Some adopted left-wing doctrines with a religious rigidity and fervour. My father’s father was just as poor in Canada as he had been in Odessa before he fled in 1925; he suffered from economic insecurity and harsh working conditions his whole life here. His own experience of Stalin’s Russia, however, caused him to

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73 “Why the Beginning of the Haggadah Is in Aramaic”
object strenuously to the socialist faith whenever he heard it espoused by some of his fellow Jewish immigrants. The captivity in Egypt instilled in Judaism a need both to protect the stranger, the widow, and the orphan, and also to fear governmental tyranny.

**A CELEBRATION OF MIRACLES**

*In the Exodus story, the Creator intervenes in history through a series of miracles, from appearing from flame that burns but is never consumed through the plagues to the parting of the Red Sea – and beyond that to providing sustenance for the people of Israel in the desert.*

91. **A Time to Commemorate Miracles**

On the first day of Passover (or two days in the Diaspora), we remember miracles. The Creator intervenes in history, overrides the ordinary operation of the laws of physics. We remember the ten plagues and the sparing of the Israelites from the last and harshest plague, the slaying of the firstborn.

On the last day of Passover (two days in the Diaspora), we remember the miracle of the parting of the Red Sea.

These interventions in human history were not simply one-way impositions. The Creator could call upon Moses to lead his people to freedom, but Moses had to decide whether to take up the mission.

Pharoah could witness wonders and plagues, but he still had to decide whether to let the Israelites go. Over the course of the first set of plagues, says the Bible, Pharoah’s heart “is hardened” or “hardens itself,” and the Pharoah persists in his refusal to let the Israelite people go.

After the sixth plague, the Creator – active verb – hardens the Pharoah’s heart. Was the Creator then responsible for the Pharoah’s stubbornness? Or did the Creator merely stiffen the ability of the Pharoah to follow his genuine inclinations in the face of God’s shows of force?

The Jewish Tradition is not only about an agreed-upon set of answers, but also about a shared set of puzzlements.
92. **A Time to Wonder Why There Are Miracles No More**

Many Jews have agreed that the age of miracles has ended. No more would the natural course of the day be suspended so Joshua and his army would have more time to win a battle. No more would the Creator direct prophets to preach his message.

Some belief that there will be a new age of miracles – when the Messiah comes. Some believe that there never was an age of miracles. The biblical accounts, they conclude, are mythology, not history.

Some believe that the miracles never ended. The Chassidic movement in Judaism portrayed the Baal Shem Tov, the founder of the movement, as capable of working miraculous cures of the ill, even carrying out resurrections.

Just as the sacred texts can be interpreted in various ways, so can the facts of history. There was no miraculous intervention during the Shoah, and that has left many Jews agnostic or unbelievers. The state of Israel became independent a few years after; was it the product of the self-reliance of the remains of an abandoned people?

Or somehow a miracle?

93. **A Time to Explain Away Miracles**

As Guildenstern (in *Hamlet*) says in a different context, “there has been much throwing about of brains” over the years to this effect: “I can provide a scientific explanation for how a miracle depicted in Exodus might have in some way occurred as a natural event.” The plagues might have been incidents to volcanic eruptions; the sea might have been parted by a strong wind over shallow waters.

When we talk about whether to take “the Bible” literally, we should be clear that the Jewish Bible consists of twenty-four books (more if you remember that the minor prophets consists of twelve books itself).

The letters of Nehemiah contained in the Book of Ezra are first-person attempts by someone who was a major player in historical events – the return of the Babylonian exiles to Jerusalem – to describe them factually.

Some might read even the earliest stories, in Genesis, as attempts at history. My guess is that the original authors (and readers) understood them differently: as a
way of conveying fundamental truths using the language and style of folk tales. They understood that they were not strictly historical accounts.

The stories about King David in the Book of Samuel read to me like Shakespeare’s history plays – which are docudramas. The biblical authors certainly took actual historical events as fixed points but felt free to add speeches and dialogues to go along with them. The authors relied on various sources, such as official chronicles and historical accounts, oral histories, official inscriptions at monuments, and place names.

A strain in the Tradition, still fervently believed by many, is that Moses wrote down the five books of the Bible, including Exodus. Yet the five books themselves do not make that precise claim. The books, in my view, drew on many sources and had many authors, editors, and preservers. Whatever their origin, I have come to appreciate that they deserve to be treasured and studied for all of human history, by Jews and non-Jews, by believers, agnostics, and atheists.

In The First Historians, The Hebrew Bible and History, Baruch Halpern has argued – persuasively – that the authors of the Bible generally acted in good faith to stick the facts as they understood them, however inconvenient or embarrassing to their nation or its leaders. All the leading individuals depicted are fraught with their own failings and failures as well as virtues and achievements.

As the “First Historians,” in Halpern’s phrase, the biblical authors sought not merely to chronicle events, but also to identify the connections among them. They wished to understand and convey how one event ultimately caused others, sometimes at great distances in time and space.

The account in Exodus is a wondrously artful piece of literature. It explores many dimensions of meaning at the same time; it is extremely compact in its expression, yet generates never-ending resonances of thoughts and feelings; its narratives and vocabulary allude in exquisitely precise and subtle ways to other parts of the Bible, particularly Genesis.

As Erich Auerbach pointed out in his famous book Mimesis, the style of the Bible reflects an urgency and seriousness that separates itself and transcends many other forms of literatures, even great works like Homer’s. The Bible concerns itself with the ultimate causes of the natural world and human history and with the ultimate meanings of our individual lives and that of our nations.
To the extent that some of the Exodus miracles might be rooted in natural events, this does not prove that the whole story is literally true in all details as depicted. But it does reinforce the strong possibility – I would say strong probability – that the Exodus account has a foundation in actual human events. Whether a Creator intervened in those events – or at least inspired the authors of the biblical accounts – is a matter of faith, not scholarship. It is not open to question that by preserving the account of the event and keeping it fresh in memory, the Jewish people have maintained themselves as a distinct people and contributed in myriad and wondrous ways to human history, including its progress towards freedom and equality.

THE END OF THE SEDER WEEK

The final day (or in the Diaspora, two days) of the Passover holiday has a holiness and identity of its own.

94. The Final Days of Pesach: Every Ending Is a New Beginning

The last days of Passover, say the Tradition, recall the crossing of the Red Sea by the fleeing Israelites. Pharaoh has resiled from releasing them to freedom, and his army is chasing them through the wilderness until they have their backs against the sea. The despairing Israelites ask whether there are not graves enough in Egypt – what is the point of dying instead in the wilderness? Could this be the end of the story?

The Creator instructs Moses to raise his staff; the sea parts; the Israelites pass through to the other side; when the Egyptians pursue, Moses raises his staff again, and the sea closes in on the pursuers and drowns them.

Miriam leads the people in singing the triumphant Song of the Sea, praising the Creator for their salvation. The version of Hebrew in the song is probably older than the Exodus story. The song itself may have originated over three thousand years ago.

Some scholars argue that the Song of the Sea was originally a stand-alone piece, passed on orally from generation to generation. Long after, the sea-crossing story was invented to match the song. Perhaps, though, the narrative story was also based on actual historical events.
Historians often do not reach any kind of consensus on such matters. The archaic Hebrew of the Song of the Sea, some argue, is not because it is especially old, but because the author wanted to make it sound especially old. The biblical narrative of the crossing of the sea might have drawn on the Song of the Sea – but maybe both the narrative and the Song are based on the memory of the same actual event in history.

The Tradition, however, takes the five books of Moses as a coherent whole, and seeks ingenious ways to interpret away any seeming contradictions. Other parts of the Bible may have different authors, including human ones, but the Tradition supposes that anything and everything in its text is divinely revealed or inspired by a single consistent intelligence. The task of humans includes interpreting and applying the sacred sources so that altogether they have the supreme wisdom, consistency, and truthfulness worthy of its ultimate source, the Creator.

Does the Exodus story end happily ever after with the crossing of the sea? Not exactly. Out of the fire... into the frying pan, the desolate desert of Sinai. For forty years, the people must find water, rely on manna from heaven for food, overcome their internal divisions and fears, and then... one more river to cross, the Jordan, into the promised land... where the struggles have never ended. Israel, then and now, was not the Garden of Eden or Paradise. Every generation who lives in exile takes years to return, and the returnees find there is never a lasting peace. For that to happen, Elijah must return to announce the coming of the Messiah....

In the meantime, the story, including the perils and struggles, continues.

We hope.

In the progress through the calendar, we look forward to the next holidays, as we commemorate what we have suffered, gained, and learned along the way to now.

Individuals are born, join the march, leave, but the people of Israel march on and on.... We pray that we will continue to march on through human history until all of humanity, indeed all of creation, is finally united and we know an era when the living have peace, not only the departed.

95. The Last Seder?

The Last Supper, in Christian tradition, was a Seder, the last one in the course of one sojourn on earth for one individual. In that tradition, however, it is also a step
towards a new beginning – one in which all of humankind are offered redemption through the sacrifice of the son of the Creator.

In the Jewish Tradition, the Messiah is still awaited. Many of us in modern times doubt that there is any prospect of a Messiah and wonder how much longer the people from whom he is to spring, the Jewish people, the people of the house of David, can still survive.

A society without memory is like a journey without a map. It’s all too easy to get lost. I, for one, cherish the richness of knowing that my life is a chapter in a book begun by my ancestors long ago, to which I will add my contribution before handing it on to my children. Life has meaning when it is part of a story, and the larger the story, the more our imaginative horizons grow. Besides, things remembered do not die. That’s as close as we get to immortality on earth.

Am I writing one of the final pages of the book?

THE SEDER AS THE JOURNEY OF A SOUL

In the tradition of Kabbalah, the Jewish mystic tradition, the Seder is not only the retelling of a communal event in history but an opportunity for the individual soul to free and elevate itself.

96. The Seder as the Journey of the Individual Soul from Captivity to Enlightenment

The Kabbalistic tradition holds that the Seder can involve the travel of the individual soul from captivity towards freedom. On the night of the first Seder, says the mystical tradition, the divine energy that infused the Liberation of the Israelites from Egypt radiates and can help us liberate ourselves. The voyage of the psyche is mapped onto the story of the Jewish people in Exodus. The soul can move from captivity – self-absorption, selfishness, fear – to a liberated state imbued by a feeling of love and unity; from the wish to take to the wish to give.74

74 Eitan Yardeni, The Kabbalistic Meaning of Passover; The Real Meaning of Passover | Pesach Lattin | The Blogs (timesofisrael.com)
THE JEWISH APPROACH TO PUNCTUALITY

Is there a dimension of Jewish culture which involves rebelling against the ticking of the clock?

97. **Jewish Standard Time**

There is a joke in many Jewish communities that we operate on “Jewish Standard time” – which means late-ish. There may be many Seder gatherings where the guests filter in gradually rather than being assembled by the theoretically announced start time. Some Jewish commentators have denounced this tendency as an unredeemed flaw in our social fabric and have demanded that we exhibit the respect for others implicit in punctuality.

The most ancient Jewish traditions date back to a time when few were capable of knowing the time of day with any specificity. Indeed, an attribute of the Creator in some of the older Tradition is an ability to be aware of a time – such as midnight – with absolute precision. The Jewish liturgy and ritual were adjusted to the varying lengths of the day between sunrise and sunset, rather than fixed to a constant clock-based schedule.

Another contributing factor might be that through much of history, many Jews have worked in occupations in which action is tied to variations in the length of the day, the change in weather throughout it, and the passage through the seasons, rather than in factory jobs or in professions following a precise clock-based appointment schedule.

My guess is that there is a long Jewish tendency to question authority of all kinds. The Exodus involved a rebellion against the Pharoah, but before and after that, the Israelites challenged, resented, and resisted the authority of their own leaders. Abraham was prepared not only to smash idols, but to argue with the Creator over the justice of collective punishments. Job and Koheleth secured permanent places for themselves as the lead characters in books full of questions about the Creator’s justice. The prophets often excoriated their own priests, wealthy class, and kings. Ancient Israelites often lived under foreign occupation in their own land or as forced exiles in the lands of others; authority would often be seen as a menace, rather than a fount of order or justice. For most of the past two millennia, most Jews have lived as members of a small and frequently oppressed minority in the Diaspora. In many ways, for many reasons, the Jews have been a
stiff-necked people – meaning a people who resist the imposition of yokes around their necks.

Clock-bound schedules are a form of authority. They tell us where we must be and exactly when. The schedules represent the demands and expectations of others. The clock, in whatever form, steadily reminds us of a forced march through time and towards ageing, the loss of people we treasure, the end of the march itself.

The lateishness represents a balance between the fellow-feeling we have for our friends and family and communities – to work with them to be in the same places at the same time – and the spirit of defiance against all compulsion that has suffused our history from the outset.

Being a little late during the festival of freedom... perhaps that is not only excusable, but true to our traditions and the nature of the celebration itself?

EGG TIME

Judaism uses concrete words, things, and stories to explore the most profound and abstract ideas. Just as it is always interpreting and reinterpreting words from scripture, so too does it find new meanings and dimensions in things as humble as the egg on a Seder plate.

The poet Robert Blake wrote: “To see a World in a Grain of Sand And a Heaven in a Wild Flower, Hold Infinity in the palm of your hand And Eternity in an hour.”

The Seder plate has an egg on it. Why? How many dimensions of time are embodied in that one small object?

98. The Egg as a Symbol of the Patriarchs

At the burning bush, Moses learns the real name of the Creator, the “I am that I am,” evoked by the four-letter name that evokes “was, am, will be.” Moses is told that this Creator, who will deliver the people of Israel from bondage, is the same being the Israelites knew as the deity of their people, of their forefathers Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Both of these names – the four-letter name, the formula for the deity of the forefathers – appear in the Haggadah.

The Talmud says that the forefathers were all born and all died on the Passover. To enter and leave the earth on the same calendar day, said the sages, was an
The egg is a symbol of mourning, and, so says Rabbi Israel Isserlin, its presence on the Passover plate commemorates the forefathers.

To reach his explanation, we make a long journey through time. The chain of transmission begins with the memory (likely by oral transmission, from generation to generation) of the founding fathers of a tribe or the tribes of Israel; it continues through the written Bible and its account of Exodus; the trail picks up with Talmudic commentaries separated from the earlier Exodus and our time by over a millennium; we hear how Rabbi Isserlin, living in Austria five hundred years ago, pulled together these threads of Tradition to explain the Seder egg; I read of the story from Heinrich Guggenheimer, a Swiss-born American mathematician, who published his magisterial study of the history of the *Haggadah* in 1995....

### 99. The Egg as Symbol of Mourning for the Temple

As I mentioned earlier, the egg might be a substitute for a second sacrifice offered in Temple times at Passover. Yet others say it is a symbol of mourning for the destruction of the Temple. The tradition is that you eat hard-boiled eggs before the fast on Tisha B’Av, the holy day on which we mourn for the destruction of the Temples. The tradition is that both Temples were destroyed on that same calendar day. But what does an egg have to do with mourning losses? Some say that the shape of the egg, with no beginning and ending, just going around and around, represents the circle of life, which goes on and on from generation to generation.

Heinrich Guggenheimer suggests that we present a hard-boiled egg as the first food to a mourner, as it shows our compassion for the mourner’s grief, which is endless. I wonder about that; Judaism tries to give a shape and form to grief, so that it is experienced – in community, in solemnity – but also limited; it is considered inappropriate to continue the limitations of a mourner beyond the year of the loss.

Another explanation of eggs and mourning: a hard-boiled egg is produced by warming in a boiling froth, but it is served and eaten after it has been removed from the warmth, and it has cooled and become still.

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75 Heinrich Guggenheimer, *The Scholar’s Haggadah*, 338, citing Rabbi Israel Isserlin, and from Rabbi Yehoshua in the tractate Rosh Hashanna, the latter drawing on Exodus 23:26.
100. **The Egg as a Symbol of Jewish Resilience**

As hard-boiled eggs harden the more they are cooked, so can we become stronger through adversity. The Bible account in Exodus is that under duress in Egypt, the people of Israel multiplied and became a great nation. In the story from Exodus retold in the *Haggadah*, the midwives, Puah and Shifra, told the Pharaoh that the women of Israel were so strong that they delivered their babies before the midwives could even arrive.

There is a wonderfully absurdist story in the Talmud in which the rabbis debate a group of gentile philosophers about interpretations of black eggs and white cheese, and how that relates to the distribution of time in the Jewish calendar, and on the meaning of the past, present, and future.\(^76\)

In *Start-Up Nation*, the authors explain how Israel became a hub of creative energy in areas such as high tech. Part of the story is *davka* – a Hebrew term that can mean “just the opposite” – turning a minus into a plus. Our young people have to do army service to protect our basic existence? *Davka*, they learn timework and responsibility, and these can be applied to start-up business. We have no natural resources? *Davka*, we must learn to create products based on our imagination and intellect, not merely shipping commodities. Our neighbours will not trade with us? *Davka*, we must create products that have worldwide demand and are not expensive to transport. We are always threatened with war, and we remember horrific losses when we could not defend ourselves; *davka*, if we lose some money and time on a start-up project, that’s not so bad compared to the existential threats.

The Exodus story, we have seen, can be interpreted as a lesson in suffering oppression that taught the people a hatred for tyranny, a love of freedom, and a concern for the oppressed and the outcast.

101. **The Egg as a Symbol of Invisible Potential for Life and Growth**

You would not know, just to look at it, that a simple white egg can turn into a bird that can soar. And so, some say, an egg is a symbol of how the present day, however still or ordinary it may appear, might be the prelude to a time and to a life that is so vibrant we can barely imagine it – how we might someday experience the Messianic age.

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\(^76\) Yosef Y. Jacobson, “Black Eggs & White Cheese: The Secret of Jewish Resilience”
102. The Multiple Egg Interpretations Illustrate How the Jewish Tradition Is Able to Renew Itself

You can find more egg interpretations in the Tradition, and perhaps we have not seen the last.

Modern science teaches us that millions of years ago, almost all the dinosaurs were wiped out after a catastrophe. Almost all. It turns out that birds, the ones we see today, are all descended from a kind of dinosaur that survived. Go to a museum and see the skeleton of an extinct dinosaur. When you live, look for a bird in flight. Maybe you will get a fresh perspective on the symbolism of an egg?

In the Tradition, we are always – as the prophet from Galilee put it – pouring new wine into old bottles. Facts are facts – and letters in the sacred text are letters, and traditions are traditions – but we can always find a way to give them a fresh understanding, a new meaning.

I wrote a song called “Broken Glass” about why the husband steps on a glass at the conclusion of a Jewish wedding. A reminder of past destructions? You could say that shattered glass could instead be a positive symbol of an irreversible change. Or you could say that the broken glass is just because, the way we might love someone just because.

DIGESTING THE INTEGRATION OF TIME: THE HILLEL SANDWICH

The Tradition requires the eating of bitter herbs – to remind us of our oppression before the Deliverance from Egypt. Yet they are wrapped up in a matzah sandwich, which may be topped with a sweet confection called charoset, made with wine and chopped nuts. All of which has something to say about... time and texts and interpretations.

103. The Tradition Stylizes and Sanctifies Eating in Many Ways

The sacred texts – starting with the Bible – tell you what and how to eat. The commandments infuse the chaos, pains, and pleasures of life with some structure, routine, and meaning. For many who follow the Tradition, they imbue day-to-day life with meaning and sanctity.
In one incident, the instructions actually become the meal. The prophet Ezekiel is directed to write down the Creator’s instruction on a scroll and then eat it. He reports that the meal was as sweet as honey.

With the Hillel Sandwich, the original biblical text can be interpreted in different ways. The Bible says that at the Passover celebration, you must eat the lamb, matzah, and bitter herbs – but in sequence, or all together at the same time?77

The standard *Haggadot* cite the famous Rabbi Hillel as instructing us to make the sandwich. He argued on grammatical grounds that the Bible contemplates one single food combo.

A later Talmud sage, a not-as-famous Rabbi Hillel, argued that it was wrong to make the sandwich. After the Temple was destroyed, we cannot eat a piece of a lamb sacrificed at the Temple. We can still eat matzah, though, and we should do depart from the clear-cut performance of a simple mitzvah.

Other say that the charoset is a substitute for the lamb from the Temple. In practice, many substitute horseradish for bitter herbs; over the centuries, many Jews – who were often impoverished – found the latter to be too expensive, even if obtainable.

The mixing of foods has been defended as a health measure. The preservation of health is an overriding requirement in Jewish law. Eating bitter herbs on their own, it has been suggested, can be dangerous as well as unpleasant.

There is a modern science about the sequencing of food. How we experience one item can depend greatly on whether it is eaten before, with, or after something else. If you drink red wine, fish tastes too fishy. Red wine goes well with chicken, though, and maybe that is why we tend to have both at Passover Seders. And maybe it is the sheer unpleasantness of raw bitters that underlie tempering them with the bland – matzah – and counterbalancing them with the sweet, charoseth.

Yet there are spiritual explanations for the sandwich as well. We eat it towards the end of the first part of the Seder, after we have re-experienced both our captivity and our deliverance. Does the sandwich provide a way of integrating the narrative into a single moment?

Or perhaps it tells us something about our lives. One commentary puts it this way:

77 “Shlomo and the Quest for the Hillel Sandwich”
In the view from within Egypt, this world is a mess of fragments. It’s called “The Passover Challenged Perspective.” Plain materialism. Where mitzvahs are a mishmash of dos and don’ts, Jews are a collection of irreconcilable riffraff, daily life is a cacophony of hassles and, well, just stuff.

Once we blast off far enough to escape materialism’s gravitational pull, we look back down and see a whole new perspective: It’s all a single landscape.

From up there looking down, mitzvahs are multiple expressions of a single spiritual path, Jews are multiple faces to a single soul, all the artifacts of today’s journey harmonize together as a symphony with a single conductor playing a single melody.

When we make ourselves into a temple for the Divine, the bitter, the sweet and the tasteless responsibilities of life wrap together in a single sandwich.78

TIME TO SUM IT ALL UP

104. Jewish Integrated Time (JIT)

Rabbi Soloveichik, in his book Halakhic Man, proposed that there is a Jewish understanding of time. A natural way of thinking about time is simply this: the past is gone, the future is unknown, and all we really have is the fleeting present. The Traditional Jewish experience of time, he proposes in contrast, is one in which the past, present, and future can intertwine and interact. In Halakhic Man, he presents this view in the context of repentance. The meaning of a past act might change in light of the reflection, regret, and determination to change the future in light of it.

So, I would say, the Kabbalistic saying “this too is for the better” might be viewed in a better way than as the naïve belief that everything works out for the best. A worthier interpretation is that given a past event, even an evil and destructive one, we can try to find a way to learn from it, be inspired by it to do better, and actively work towards improving ourselves and the world around us.

More generally, when we study the Traditional texts or sing them, when we live in accordance with the teachings as they have been interpreted through time, we

78 “Korech – The Hillel Sandwich”
bring to life the past and illuminate its meaning. Our present is not only guided by the past but inspired by our hope for a wondrous future, including at last the time of the Messiah. Through our actions, we can help make that dream a reality.

The material world is demarcated into time zones, with the starting longitude running through Greenwich, England. We live in zones like Eastern Standard Time (EST).

But what if we think of the Seder as taking placing in JIT, Jewish Integrated Time? It is a time zone where our ancestors dwelt, where we live, where future generations will live, where – we believe or we can wistfully imagine – we are warmed by a transcendent spirit whose name, revealed to Moses at the burning bush, evokes the fusion of the past, present, and future on earth and in a dimension beyond it.

*The opening invocation of the Seder – to the lonely, to the isolated – can be understood as welcoming a communal event in the here and now which remembers and celebrates the past, present, and future of an entire people – and more than that, a people who have been, are now, and always will be challenged to connect with a universal presence beyond time.*