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Why a Haggadah?

By JONATHAN SAFRAN FOER

I SPENT much of the last several years working on a new Haggadah — the guidebook for the prayers, rituals and songs of the Seder — and am often asked why I would want to take time away from my own writing to invest myself in such a project.

All my life, my parents have hosted the Seder on the first night of Passover. As our family expanded, and as our definition of family expanded, we moved the ritual dinner from our dining room to our more spacious, mildewed basement. One table became many table-like surfaces pushed awkwardly together. I always knew Passover was approaching when my father would ask me to take the net off the ping-pong table. All were covered in once matching, stained tablecloths.

At each setting was a Haggadah that my parents had assembled by photocopying favorite passages from other Haggadot and, when the Foers finally got Internet access, by printing online sources. Why is this night different from all others? Because on this night copyright doesn't apply.

In the absence of a stable homeland, Jews have made their home in books, and the Haggadah — whose core is the retelling of the Exodus from Egypt — has been translated more widely, and revised more often, than any other Jewish book. Everywhere Jews have wandered, there have been Haggadot — from the 14th-century Sarajevo Haggadah (which is said to have survived World War II under the floorboards of a mosque, and the siege of Sarajevo in a bank vault), to those made by Ethiopian Jews airlifted to Israel during Operation Moses.

But of the 7,000 known versions, not to mention the countless homemade editions, there is one that is used more than all others combined. Since 1932, the [Maxwell House Haggadah](#) — as in the coffee company — has dominated American Jewish ritual.

Having confirmed in the 1920s that the coffee bean is not a legume but a berry, and therefore kosher for Passover, Maxwell House tasked the [Joseph Jacobs](#) ad agency to make coffee, rather than tea, the drink of choice after Seders. If this sounds loony, note that Maxwell House coffee has always been particularly popular in Jewish homes.

The resulting Haggadah is one of the longest-running sales promotions in advertising history. At least 50 million copies have been distributed free at supermarkets, and they are exactly as inspiring as you would imagine them to be.

And yet, many people feel fondly toward the Maxwell House Haggadah, for the giddy comfort it evokes. We like it like we like Jewish jokes. The Maxwell House version, is, itself, a sort of Jewish joke — try mentioning it to a group of Jews without eliciting laughter. What's more, it's free, and, like the no-frills caffeine beverage it promotes, satisfies a most basic need.

The most legendary of all Seders — which is, in a postmodern twist, recounted in the Haggadah itself — took place around the beginning of the second century in Bnei Brak, among the greatest scholars of Jewish antiquity. It ended prematurely when students barged in to announce that it was time for the morning prayers. Even if they read the Haggadah from beginning to end, fulfilling every ritual and singing every verse of every song, they must have been spending most of their time doing something else: extrapolating, dissecting, discussing. The story of the Exodus is not meant to be merely recited, but wrestled with.

If the Maxwell House Haggadah never rose to meet the Seder's intellectual and spiritual demands, it adequately served the ritualistically literate Jews of a generation or two ago. But the actors no longer know the script. In a further sort of exodus, American Jews have moved: from poverty to affluence, tradition to modernity, acquaintance with a shared history to loss of collective memory.

Our grandparents were immigrants to America, but natives to Judaism. We are the opposite: fluent in “American Idol,” but unschooled in Jewish heroes. And so we act like immigrants around Judaism: cautious, rejecting, self-conscious, and feigning (or achieving) indifference. In the foreign country of our faith, our need for a good guidebook is urgent.

Though it means “the telling,” the Haggadah does not merely tell a story: it is our book of living memory. It is not enough to retell the story: we must make the most radical leap of empathy into it. “In every generation a person is obligated to view himself as if he were the one who went out of Egypt,” the Haggadah tells us. This leap has always been a daunting challenge, but is fraught for my generation in a way that it wasn't for the desperate assimilators of earlier generations — for now, in addition to a lack of education and knowledge of Jewish learning, there is also the taint of collective complacency.

The integration of Jews and Jewish themes into our pop culture is so prevalent that we have become intoxicated by the ersatz images of ourselves. I, too, love “Seinfeld,” but is there not a problem when the show is cited as a referent for one's Jewish identity? For many of us, being Jewish has become, above all things, funny. All that's left in the void of fluency and profundity is laughter.

About five years ago, I noticed a longing in myself. Perhaps it was inspired by fatherhood, or just growing older. Despite having been raised in an intellectual and self-consciously Jewish home, I knew almost nothing about what was supposedly my own belief system.

And worse, I felt satisfied with how little I knew. Sometimes I thought of my stance as a rejection, but you can't reject something that you don't understand and that was never yours. Sometimes I thought of it as an achievement, but there's no achievement in passive forfeiture.

Why did I take time away from my own writing to edit a new Haggadah? Because I wanted to take a step toward the conversation I could only barely hear through the closed door of my ignorance; a step toward a Judaism of question marks rather than quotation marks; toward the story of my people, my family and myself.

Like every child, my 6-year-old is a great lover of stories — Norse myths, Roald Dahl, recounted tales from my own childhood — but none more than those from the Bible. So between the bath and bed, my wife and I often read to him from children's versions of the Old Testament. He loves hearing those stories, because they're the greatest stories ever told. We love telling them for a different reason.

We helped him learn to sleep through the night, to use a fork, to read, to ride a bike, to say goodbye to us. But there is no more significant lesson than the one that is never learned but always studied, the noblest collective project of all, borrowed from one generation and lent to the next: how to seek oneself.

A few nights ago, after hearing about the death of Moses for the umpteenth time — how he took his last breaths overlooking a promised land that he would never enter — my son leaned his still wet head against my shoulder.

“Is something wrong?” I asked, closing the book.

He shook his head.

“Are you sure?”

Without looking up, he asked if Moses was a real person.

“I don't know,” I told him, “but we're related to him.”

Jonathan Safran Foer is a novelist and editor of “New American Haggadah.”

The Haggadah. The complete haggadah in Hebrew and English (printable). Instructional guides and a host of haggadah insights. Filter by Topic. Show all. The word Haggadah means "telling," as its primary purpose is to facilitate the retelling the story of the Exodus from Egypt. It also guides participants through the ritual-rich Seder meal, indicating when and how each rite is performed. 5 Comments. The Haggadah even reached a woman working in the management of the Broadway hit, who wrote to Cohen and Adler to tell them she loved their project. "This was a total DIY-thing that we fully intended would just be for ourselves and our friends, and then before we knew it, it was getting hit after hit. It really spiraled in an incredible way," Cohen said. Ultimately, they hope their Haggadah can get people excited both about American history and about Judaism.