

Some Thoughts About the Haggadah

by C. Peter R. Gossels

Let us consider why we gather every year to celebrate Passover at a Seder ordered by a Haggadah.

It all started when God called out to Moses from the burning bush described in Exodus 3:3, saying that God had “marked the plight of My people in Egypt”, adding that God would come “down to rescue them from the Egyptians and to bring them out of that land to a good and spacious land, a land flowing with milk (from goats) and honey (from dates), the region of the Canaanites ...”

Having fled the Egyptian army, walked through the Red Sea and danced with Miriam, the women, and their timbrels, our ancestors soon learned that the freedom they had found in the Sinai Desert was filled with danger, for they lacked the laws and institutions that protect people from anarchy, such as we see in many places of the world today. Just think of the anarchy that our ancestors experienced while Moses was on Mount Sinai receiving God’s laws contained in the Torah, as some of their fellows below built a golden calf for worship, cast from the gold they had taken from Egypt. These incidents are not recalled in our Haggadah.

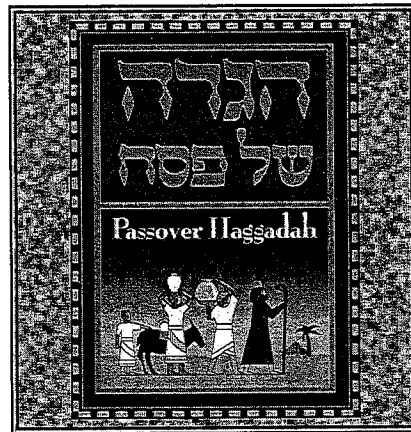
Nor does the Haggadah mention the fact that our ancestors did not find a land flowing with milk and honey when their next generation finally invaded Canaan 40 years later. What they found, instead, was a land riven by strife and almost constant war. They were, in fact, surrounded there by enemies as modern Israel is today.

The misery inflicted on our ancestors by the Amalekites, the Philistines, the Assyrians, the Babylonians, the Persians, the Egyptians, the Romans, the Crusaders, the Inquisition, the Nazis and others too numerous to mention, surpass anything and everything that our forebears suffered at the hands of Pharaoh.

Our Haggadah says not a word about any of this, nor about anything else that has happened to the Jewish people since they left Egypt more than 3300 years ago, ex-

cept for a few recent references to the Holocaust and the plight of Soviet *refuseniks*

So why do we gather together and read our Haggadah at this time each year, recalling the cruelties that Pharaoh inflicted on our ancestors so long ago? Passover was originally a family meal eaten each Spring featuring the sacrifice of a lamb (Exodus 12:11-14). It was not until 622 B.C.E., however, that King Josiah ordered that a lamb be sacrificed at the Temple in Jerusalem on the 14th day of Nisan each



year to thank God for the deliverance of our ancestors from Egypt. This event became an annual pilgrimage festival (along with Shavuot and Succot) until the destruction of the Temple in 70 CE.

After the end of the sacrificial system of celebrating Passover, the Rabbis, who composed the Mishnah, the Talmud and other tractates to preserve and reinterpret Jewish practices, devoted an entire book of the Talmud (Pesachim) to Passover, but it was not until the ninth century CE that the Rabbis composed a separate liturgical guide to help Jews all over the world celebrate Passover.

This guide did not come “from Sinai”, but was composed by Rabbis living a thousand years ago for a subjugated people, who could not conceive of liberating themselves, much less the land of Israel. It was called the Haggadah, meaning the “telling”, which meant that it was a guide to help parents fulfill the mitzvah of telling the story of God’s redemption of our an-

cestors from Egyptian bondage to their children (Exodus 13:8).

But, why do we continue to observe the dictates of our mediaeval Haggadah, which is content to thank God for helping our ancestors escape to the desert of Sinai, but ignores the history of our people during the 3300 years since that time? I submit that the rabbis, who composed and edited the Haggadah, did not want to endanger their lives and those of their congregants by criticizing their oppressors. So, they used the ancient story of our liberation from Egypt of the Pharaohs as a metaphor for their hope that the Messiah would come soon to lead the Jewish people of the Diaspora out of the land where they were oppressed to the land of Israel where they would live in peace under the aegis of God’s laws. Who could argue with such a hope and prayer? Even their oppressors could share this hope, because it represented no threat to them.

And we, who enjoy the freedom to go to Jerusalem any time we want, thanks to the bravery and sacrifices of the Israeli people, choose to live in the United States of America, a country whose constitution and government has protected us for more than 300 years and allowed us to prosper like no Jewish community since Abraham. Instead of dwelling only on ancient stories of how our ancestors fled their oppressors to a “freedom” that few of us would exchange for the freedom we enjoy in the United States today, I wonder whether the time has not come to celebrate the freedom that we now enjoy, 3300 years after God promised to lead us to a land flowing with milk and honey, which many of us believe to be America.

Hasn’t the time come, I wonder, for us to compose a new Haggadah that acknowledges our duty to God, as a free people, to share the fruits of our well-being with those less fortunate than we, instead of praying for a Messiah to solve our problems and lead us back to Jerusalem.

Let us sing a new song to God for the freedom we enjoy today.