



# Spin the Seder

## LESSONS IN LEADERSHIP



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Pesach Pack



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# LESSONS IN LEADERSHIP



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# Author of the Haggadah

## LEADING WITH CREATIVITY

“The idea of mesorah [tradition] is often mistaken as a mere historical record of Jewish practice. That misunderstanding, combined with both the absence of historical uniformity of normative practice, and the gradual evolution of halakhah [Jewish law], can be misconstrued as compromising the authenticity of mesorah. Authentic mesorah is rather an appreciation for, and application of, tradition as the guide by which new ideas, challenges and circumstances are navigated. Our precious mesorah has thereby been the cornerstone of not only the preservation, but also the development of our religious and spiritual heritage. Mesorah is the bridge between our past and our future.” — Responsum of Orthodox Union panel.

Our beloved Pesach Haggadah is a book that prompts many questions. Our first and primary question might be, “Where did the Haggadah come from?” It is one of the few enduring Jewish texts whose author is entirely unknown, and that has tended to bother Jews over the millennia. We are used to being very aware of who our contributors are, as the legitimacy of a Torah interpretation depends as much upon the piety of its author, as it does upon the insightfulness of the idea itself.

It is true that much of the Haggadah is lifted straight from the legal requirements of the seder night as set forth by the Torah and Talmud. The asking of the four questions and the need to expound the answer; the arrangement of the four cups of wine through the seder; the explanation of the symbolism behind matzah, maror and the Pascal offering — these are all direct imperatives from earlier sources.

Nonetheless, there are amazing, and at times puzzling, additions to the text, which can only be described as an original contribution from the mind of the author. This “creativity” begins with the very first lines of the *maggid*

section inviting all to join the seder, written in vernacular Aramaic instead of Hebrew, for which there is no prior source. It continues through the memorable parable of the four sons, the immortal song “*Dayeinu*,” and includes dozens of other additions.

Rest assured, our sages in every generation have extolled the brilliance of the Haggadah — indeed, more commentaries have been written on it than any other text in Jewish literature. Furthermore, those in the generations closest to its time of writing assumed that it would never have gained widespread acceptance in its time had its author not been someone of immaculate standing.

But there is something perfectly fitting about the anonymity of the Haggadah’s author. Perhaps the most ingenious feat of this text is its ability to balance the past with the future. It adheres to the necessary legal structure required for a “kosher” seder, while simultaneously presenting new and exciting interpretations to the story. And most importantly, it offers every family in history who has ever used a Haggadah with the ability to “stick to the script,” while providing endless opportunities to digress, meander onto tangents, and make applications to modern circumstances. In short, the author of the Haggadah has allowed us to partake in its ongoing authorship.

Precisely because we do not know who wrote the Haggadah, we are invited to enter the role as its co-authors. In doing so, we perpetuate an accurate sense of what Jewish mesorah, or “tradition,” actually means: not merely a recitation of what was, but a transmission of the spirit of our history into the future. While remaining true to the framework of the evening, we are not just given permission to engage in the conversation — it is demanded of us.



# For the Children

## LEADING WITH CURIOSITY

“Let there be no old folks in your house to give you wise counsel, and no young people to heed their advice.” — Abkhasian curse

21st century Western society stands at a crossroads with regards to deciding how to “empower” its youth. At the beginning of the 20th century they were often treated as exploited expendables with no rights, a form of cheap labour in the best of circumstances. Thankfully the post-WWII human rights movement saw to it that our most cherished and vulnerable members of society were given a voice and protection under the law. But by the 1990s we had gone to the other extreme, over-protecting our children from any hardship and afraid that too much discipline may cause them not to “like us.”

We have been bearing the fruits of those actions in the last decade, with the rise of safe spaces, trigger warnings, and student-led campus mobs determining university policies. Perhaps now more than ever, it is the young who feel they deserve to lecture the old, sometimes even correctly, on historical injustices carried out by previous generations. But this empowerment has its dark side. Youth may carry with it the polish of passion and idealism, but it lacks the meat and potatoes of wisdom and experience. We now turn to a 17-year-old well-intentioned girl for our cues on the technical details of the phenomenally complex field of environmental science.

Reason may dictate that we should not hand the reigns over so quickly to our youth. Any parent giving the car keys to their 17-year-old for the first time knows that. And yet, the prior model of “do not speak unless spoken to” seems to be a bad dream of a bygone era. What could serve as a model for healthy empowerment that would give younger people a sense of their own potential while grounding them in the humility of their obvious lack of experience? The answer, of course, is the Pesach seder.

The seder experience is unquestionably presided over by the elders of the family. They tell the stories and orchestrate the careful dance of removing seder plates and apportioning out bitter herbs. But if you look carefully, the night is led by the children. It is the children who set the pace and tone of the evening with their questions. It is their attention that we are ultimately trying to captivate. This dynamic is the paradigm of validating the dignity of the child without having to upend the rightful pecking order of the adults.

If we allow children to lead with their questions, then we implicitly send two messages: first, that their curiosities are important, that their quest for knowledge is worthwhile. And second, that in order to get answers they should ask the wiser and more experienced people in the room. There is no need to pretend that children have all the answers, and children naturally want someone to look up to. But they also want to feel like someone is paying attention.

The 16th century scholar known as the Maharal of Prague asked, why do we call the wise son “wise”? Surely wisdom is something that can only be acquired through life experience, so how is it possible for any child to be wise? He answers that by the nature of the child’s question, we can tell that one day he will *become* wise. The wise son does not merely ask what is obvious to ask, like the simple son who questions only the strange customs being performed in front of him. Rather, his questions touch on the abstract nature of all the commandments. From such a healthy desire to seek knowledge, he is guaranteed to achieve wisdom.

Our children do not need, nor are expected, to have the answers. We must give them the dignity of leading with questions. Let us hope we can respond wisely.





# Rabbi Elazar ben Azariah

## LEADING WITH FLEXIBILITY

Rabbi Elazar ben Azariah's cameo appearance is one of the more perplexing entries into the Haggadah patchwork. Originally appearing in the Babylonian Talmud, this discussion about whether the Exodus should be mentioned at night seems to have no connection at all to Pesach. Obviously, on the night of the seder we are obligated to speak about the Exodus; the dispute mentioned here is referring to whether we must also recount the Exodus every other night of the year. So why bring it in the Haggadah?

Even more puzzling is that Rabbi Elazar's praise for Ben Zoma's Biblical insight is for naught. In Talmudic procedure, we always follow the majority, which means that legally we do not even rule according to Ben Zoma's insight. Not only is it irrelevant to the seder, it's also incorrect. What on earth is it doing here?

The solution to this riddle may be hidden within the story of Rabbi Elazar ben Azariah himself. At the tender age of 17, he was already recognised as one of the leading scholars of the Jewish people. Amidst a crisis of leadership he was appointed as the successor to Rabban Gamliel to be the head of the Jewish high court. Although his lineage bolstered his prestige (he was a direct descendent of Ezra the Scribe), his youth and inexperience cast significant doubt on his leadership abilities. However, upon accepting the position his beard miraculously turned grey so that he would be regarded as someone befitting his knowledge and position.

Rabbi Elazar's leadership style was one of respectful progressivism. As a scholar and member of a distinguished family he admired the greatness of past leaders. But his youth allowed him the innovation and flexibility to

embrace new ideas. Under his direction, rather than confine legal proceedings only to the small group of rabbinic experts, he literally flung open the doors of the study hall, and judged everyone's opinion based on the merit of their arguments.

Hence Rabbi Elazar ben Azariah describes himself as "like a man of 70," venerated in wisdom and tradition. Nevertheless he possessed the open-mindedness to give credence to the lone opinion of Ben Zoma, who urged his contemporaries to fill their mouths with stories of the Exodus both day and night.

Ostensibly Rabbi Elazar ben Azariah's statement in support of Ben Zoma's opinion has been brought to emphasise the importance of speaking about the Exodus from Egypt. As in the previous paragraph of the four rabbis sitting in B'nei Barak, the affection for this origin story should grip us so fully that we no longer aware of the difference between night and day.

But with the additional context of Rabbi Elazar's history we can also perceive subtle points being drawn from this paragraph. It is teaching us that in the course of the quest for truth, even a minority opinion can illuminate a new perspective. Even an "elder" can defer to such an opinion. And in the dialogue of minds that we recreate with every Seder, if we exclude even one voice from the conversation, then we may perhaps have missed a gem.



# Jacob

## LEADING WITH PURPOSE

World history is a rollercoaster of ups and downs and Jewish history is no different. The Haggadah does not begin with the exodus but rather traces us back to where it all began. Context is key, and anyone who has been involved in Jewish study will have heard of our Patriarchs and Matriarchs, our founding fathers and mothers. Life was not easy for them by any means. They broke new ground, they challenged everything they knew and everyone around them.

Focussing in on Jacob, the final of the three Patriarchs, we find that he had a lifetime of struggles.

Jacob dreamt of a ladder connecting heaven and earth with angels passing between these two worlds. The occurrence of this rather unusual dream was after he had left home and was on the way to live with the treacherous Laban. Many things have been written about what this dream can teach us, but a consistent

theme is the joining of our world with what the heavens represent. Jewish texts have always emphasised the value in living 'before God' in every part of our lives. As Jacob was going to live alongside his idolatrous relatives and busy himself shepherding, this dream was directing him to take God, spirituality and Torah values with him. Godliness can be present in everything, and core to our mission is elevating all aspects of our lives.

Jacob was given an additional name – Yisrael/ Israel, representing his triumphant battles with negative forces present in the world. Our world is by its very nature a fractured and imperfect place, but that is exactly how God chose for it to be. We are 'Bnei Yisrael', the children of this quality of 'Israel', grappling with our challenges, just like Jacob did, and seeing the Divine significance in all that we do and are.

What challenges have you had to face in your life, and did you change because of them?



# Pharaoh

## LEADING WITH IRONY

Jewish history is replete with irony. One of these ironies is that the truest enemies of the Jewish people were among the greatest teachers of the keys to our people's survival. Haman of the Purim story taught that when a poisonous indiscriminate hatred of one group of people can lead one to plot and carry out the complete annihilation of that group, we will have glimpsed that if this hatred were replaced with passionate indiscriminate love for others, 'oh what a world it would be!'

Another enemy of the Jewish people was Bala'am the prophet. Bala'am set out to curse the Jewish people, but instead of curses, he expressed words of blessing. What is incredible about the Bala'am narrative is that what unfolds in the episode is only known to us, the readers of the story in the Torah. The episode was not reported to the Jewish people until after it occurred. The Israelites were completely unaware that God was intervening and befuddling Bala'am's genocidal plan.

Bala'am praised the Jewish people's humility, modesty, and other wonderful traits. Internally, the Jews often saw themselves as weak, incapable, and promoted a lackluster spirit filled with complaints and frustration, yet here was Bala'am reminding the Jewish people of their greatness and of their special qualities. Perhaps it is not coincidental that our sages identify Bala'am as one of Pharaoh's key advisors - one who argued most strongly for a coordinated campaign of mass enslavement against the Israelites.

Pharaoh too played a role in teaching the Jewish people about our unique traits. He criticized and rebuked the Jewish people for being stubborn and refusing to adhere to his decrees whose purpose was to control the rapidly growing Jewish population in Egypt.

The trait of stubbornness or the better known title of the Jewish people being a "stiff-necked people" has proven to be a core factor in Jewish survival and refusal to give in, give up, and lose hope.

Pharaoh also enabled the Jewish people to gain experience for the future exiles of how to maintain our national identity as a minority population in a foreign land. The pressures, seduction, and schemes Pharaoh and his citizens instituted to draw the Jewish people toward assimilation and integration into Egyptian society largely failed and the Jewish people adhered to their faith, heritage, and identity. For the rest of history, we have been able to thrive and maintain our values and worldview no matter the context.

At the Seder we speak about the empires and dictators of each period in our people's history who threatened to annihilate and assimilate us, but with God's assistance we continued to survive and in many cases thrive. Our enemies have ironically taught us numerous lessons and reminders about our most salient traits as a people, those aspects of the Jewish people which have illuminated the world for thousands of years!

What aspect of the Jewish people do you appreciate and identify with the most?



# Moses

## LEADING WITH HUMILITY

The Dayeinu text is though provoking and powerful. We are asked to recognise and appreciate the good fortune in each step of the journey from Egypt to Israel. This recognition is directed towards God and despite Moses being present significantly in the Torah, in the Haggadah he is basically absent. Given his almost total centrality to the exodus story, this is somewhat surprising. Where did Moses go?!

Moses knew about his abilities and unique connection to God but he didn't become arrogant. He was not self-righteous. Humility in the eyes of the Torah does not mean the denial of who we are or what our strengths may be, but rather the recognition that those gifts come from God. On that basis no one is any more special than anyone else. Moses was not better than everyone just because he had profound prophecy and spirituality.

Moses was hesitant to lead as he wanted to ensure he was the best option for the Jewish people. The sages point out that his

conversation with God at the burning bush dragged on for an entire week - so hesitant was he to accept the mantle of leadership! He always made space for others and for God. Indeed, on one of the few occasions his leadership was challenged, his response was typical: 'If only the entire nation were prophets [like me]!'

The Haggadah is a night to experience the forging of the Jewish people, each of us as individuals and together as a nation. Other occasions will require highlighting special personalities, but at our core, the Jewish people has a direct covenant with God and this is our focus on seder night. This incredible connection with the Creator, this gift we have, can only be properly recognised and understood when we take a step back from our busy lives and reflect and dwell upon it. Humility is an essential step to creating the space to bring God into our lives.

What do you think Moses would say about his absence from the Haggadah?

### Points to ponder:

- Moses argued with God about his suitability for the role as leader.
- Moses is referred to in the Torah as the most humble of men.





# Miriam

## LEADING WITH FAITH

After recounting the bulk of the Exodus experience, we turn to song. The Hallel prayer is a fixture of Jewish festivals and it represents our wonder and excitement for what God has done for us. It is often said that music is the voice of the soul, and here too on Seder night we break forth into song to help express the re-enactment of this incredible and wondrous event.

The Torah tells us that the Jews sang at the shores of the Red sea, as they finally felt free from their Egyptian oppressors. We are told that the women initiated this, led by Miriam. Not only did they use their voices, but they had

been mindful and hopeful enough to bring with them musical instruments as they *expected* to reach this point of redemption and joy.

Miriam casts an interesting figure throughout the Exodus story. She insists her parents continue to have children, despite the decree from Pharaoh to kill all Jewish new-born males. From this courageous insistence, Moses is born. She boldly approaches Batya, the daughter of Pharaoh, to ensure Moses is raised properly. As noted above she was clearly a leader amongst the Jewish people and in her merit the Jews had a constant supply of water in the desert.

### Points for the table to ponder:

- What were the Jews thinking and feeling when they crossed the Red sea and saw the Egyptians drown?
- Is there a time when it's appropriate to take things for granted?
- When we stop daily to appreciate all the good that we have, however small, we start to look at the world differently. We see joy and happiness as opposed to sorrow and discontent.
- If we choose to be grateful to others for what they do, even if it is part of their job, we both strengthen our relationships and find them more enjoyable.

We start off as babies seeing the world revolving purely around ourselves. As we grow up it can sometimes be difficult to admit the roles that others play for us, and even harder to say thank you. Often, we don't like to feel dependent on others or vulnerable to having needs. This can cause us to de-emphasise recognising small acts of goodness.

Jewish texts discuss the fundamental significance of being grateful for everything we have. Living with this mindset, as opposed to just paying lip service to it, has the capacity to change us as people. If we can shift perspective, drop any sense of entitlement or taking things

for granted, we open up a whole world of opportunity to feel great and blessed about every little thing that comes our way.

It is understandable to see vulnerability or reliance on others as a weakness, but this feeling can be harnessed to help us grow. When we accept and embrace our deficiencies, we actually increase our potential to thrive as we recognise how much we gain when we partner with others, and with God. From this vantage point we are then able to embrace God in a deep and powerful way as the source of all that goodness in the world.



# Rachel

## LEADING WITH HOPE

Rachel is known in the mystical sources as the 'mother of Israel'. This notion draws on the tradition based on a prophecy in the book of Jeremiah describing the eternal cry of Rachel the wife of Jacob and mother of Joseph and Benjamin. Rachel's cry is over her "sons", a metaphor for the entirety of the Jewish people who were sent into multiple exiles out of the Land of Israel. Rachel's cry is a prayer and hope that all of her children will return to their "borders", the home of the Jewish people. Until that day comes and her hopes are realised, Jeremiah explained, she refuses to be comforted.

The backstory to this prayer of Rachel traces the narrative of Jacob's return from his stay with Laban, the father of Rachel and Leah, his two wives. Rachel faced infertility for years before Joseph was born, in contrast to her sister Leah who was the mother of six out of the twelve sons of Jacob. Finally, Rachel gave birth to her second son Benjamin, but tragically passed away in childbirth. As fate would have it, Rachel was not buried in the Cave of the Patriarchs in Hebron, but in a gravesite of her own near the city of Bethlehem. Today, Rachel's burial place is known simply as 'Rachel's Tomb' and

thousands of people flock to this site every year to pray and connect.

The prophecy of Jeremiah is unique for another reason and herein lies the powerful message of the night of Pesach. Jeremiah would become known as the "prophet of doom". He was a prophet during the years leading up to the destruction of the first Temple and the subsequent Babylonian exile. Yet, hidden within the gloomy chapters of Jeremiah's prophecies, the passage containing Rachel's eternal cry of hope and optimism heralds a message of redemption despite the darkness of exile.

The Pesach experience requires us to rewind the clock of history to the darkest moments of our collective memory. How did our ancestors hang on and find the strength to have hope when all else seemed lost? Rachel is the paradigm of Jewish history for never giving up on the children of Israel and their final redemption. Pesach beckons us to embrace optimism even when the current realities couldn't be further away.

How do you stay positive and hopeful in the face of uncertainty and instability?



# Amram & Yocheved

## LEADING WITH EMPOWERMENT

Amram and Yocheved were the parents of three incredible Jewish leaders: Miriam, Aaron, and Moses. Despite winning the 'child' lottery, they did not enjoy a rosy family life. By all accounts, Yocheved gave birth to the children at an advanced age, Amram balanced a life of public service, and to boot the harsh enslavement of the Jewish people had only just begun. In the aftermath of Pharaoh's decree to slaughter the Jewish first born males, Amram and Yocheved decided not to bring any more children into the world. Despite the implications of the decision, the fear was real, and perhaps more than anything, Amram and Yocheved were trying to be the best parents they could be to Miriam and Aaron by shielding them from the pains and difficulties of the time.

As with Amram and Yocheved, there was no guidebook for successful parenting in the midst of an oppressive enslavement. Yet, we see how each of their children flourished and accomplished incredible achievements in their lives. One characteristic that links all three of their children is the trait of caring for others. Miriam from the youngest age ran after the basket of her baby brother to keep a close eye on where he would end up. This concern would not end there, as we see her play a role in assisting other Jewish women through the process of delivering babies under stressful

and dangerous circumstances. Aaron served as the kohen gadol, the head priest who wore a breastplate bearing the symbols of the unified twelve tribes of Israel, a sign that the nation's hopes and desires were on his mind and heart at all times. And finally Moses - the paradigm of concern for the safety and security of others: striking the Egyptian who had been beating a Jewish slave, dispersing the crowds harassing Tzipora at the well in Midian, and standing up to Pharaoh to pave the path of rescuing the Jewish people from Egypt.

Yocheved and Amram did a great job as parents, but there is something more for us to gain from this narrative. What makes the parent-child relationship paradigm of Amram and Yocheved and their three children unique is that it incorporated more than just a top-down model of parenting. There were open lines of communication where humility ruled the conversation and children respectfully challenging their parents' position or actions was welcome. One moment in particular was when Miriam challenged her father's decision to separate from Yocheved and not bring any more children into a cruel world. On an objective level, Amram was right, but he was open to listening to his child. As a result, what happened next put the wheels in motion to enter the next state of Jewish history.



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