OVERLOOKING THE OBVIOUS: CONCEALED BIBLICAL NARRATIVES

A CLOSE READING OF THE EXODUS AND PASSOVER

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Stephen S. Pearce, PhD, Taube Scholar and Sr. Rabbi Emeritus
Congregation Emanu-El

The Hagadah, the home prayer book for the Passover Seder, a strange amalgamation of biblical, talmudic, and midrashic collections of legends, prayers, hymns, and songs, put into its present form in around the year 200, gives wing to our longing for redemption and freedom, at the same time that the language and the content seem mysterious, arcane, remote, and unintelligible. Unless you understand the subtext runs through the Haggadah, reading it is like reading an ancient manuscript without proper language skills or instruction manual. Have you ever wondered why the rabbis chose to focus on Pharaoh, the Egyptians, and the Israelites who lived almost two thousand years before them, especially when their deepest concerns were the Romans and not Egyptians, Caesar and not Pharaoh?

I—THE HISTORICITY OF THE EGYPTIAN EXPERIENCE

Ex 11:2 Tell the people that men and women alike are to ask their neighbors for articles of silver and gold."
Ex 12:11 This is how you are to eat it: with your cloak tucked into your belt, your sandals on your feet and your staff in your hand. Eat it in haste; it is the LORD’s Passover.
Ex 12:33 The Egyptians urged the people to hurry and leave the country. "For otherwise," they said, "we will all die!" 
34 So the people took their dough before the yeast was added, and carried it on their shoulders in kneading troughs wrapped in clothing. 35 The Israelites did as Moses instructed and asked the Egyptians for articles of silver and gold and for clothing. 36 The LORD had made the Egyptians favorably disposed toward the people, and they gave them what they asked for; so they plundered the Egyptians. 37 The Israelites journeyed from Raamses to Succoth. There were about six hundred thousand men on foot, besides women and children. 38 Many other people went up with them, as well as large droves of
livestock, both flocks and herds. 39 With the dough they had brought from Egypt, they baked cakes of unleavened bread. The dough was without yeast because they had been driven out of Egypt and did not have time to prepare food for themselves.
The census in Numbers 26 totals the male population at 603,500, a number that would render a total population of about 2,000,000 that sprang up from one family a few centuries prior. Imagine the logistics of moving such a hoard through the desert for 40 years. It is generally agreed that there is no historical basis for this number.

II—THE SYMBOLS OF THE PASSOVER

III—THE TRUE MEANING OF MATZAH AND KID
Gen 18:1-8 Abraham welcomed three men and served them unleavened bread and calf. The men partake and vanish.
Gen 19:1-3 Lot greeted two angels and prepared a feast and baked unleavened bread.
Ex 12: 1:11-12 God’s admonition to eat hurriedly the Passover offering before the first born are stricken (by the angel of death).
Judges 6:11 Visited by God, Gideon prepared a kid and unleavened bread.
Judges 13:2-24 After being visited by an angel who predicts the birth of Samson, Manoah and his wife prepare a meal of a kid and meal offering.
I Sam 28:3-25 Saul’s visit to the necromancer at Endor results in the woman hastily sacrificing a calf and making unleavened bread.

IV—THE THEOLOGY OF THE HAGGADAH
An only kid, an only kid
My father bought for two zuzim, an only kid and only kid.
There came a cat and ate the kid my father bought for two zuzim. Chad gadya, chad gadya.
Then came a dog and bit the cat that ate the kid my father bought for two zuzim. Chad gadya, chad gadya.
Then came a stick and beat the dog that bit the cat that ate the kid my father bought for two zuzim. Chad gadya, chad gadya.
Then came a fire and burnt the stick that beat the dog that bit the cat that ate the kid my father bought for two zuzim. Chad gadya, chad gadya.
Then came water and quenched the fire that burnt the stick that beat the dog that bit the cat that ate the kid my father bought for two zuzim. Chad gadya, chad gadya.
Then came an ox and drank the water that quenched the fire that burnt the stick that beat the dog that bit the cat that ate the kid my father bought for two zuzim. Chad gadya, chad gadya.
Then came a slaughterer and killed the ox that drank the water that quenched the fire that burnt the stick that beat the dog that bit the cat that ate the kid my father bought for two zuzim. Chad gadya, chad gadya.
Then came the angel of death who killed the shohet who killed the ox that drank the water that quenched the fire that burnt the stick that beat the dog that bit the cat that ate the kid my father bought for two zuzim. Chad gadya, chad gadya.
Then came the Holy One and killed the angel of death who killed the shohet who killed the ox that drank the water that quenched the fire that burnt the stick that beat the dog that bit the cat that ate the kid my father bought for two zuzim. Chad gadya, chad gadya.

The role of Elijah, a central figure in the Hagadah, is poorly understood. To many Jews, Elijah sips from his cup during the course of the Seder, a patently false notion. In truth, the cup named for Elijah is on the Seder table because of an unresolved dispute. The Talmud Yerushalmi (Pesachim 10a) teaches that each of the four cups of wine is consumed at the Seder because of four different expressions for redemption that are found in Exodus (6:6-8): I will hotzeti—bring you out from under the burdens of Egypt, and I will hitzalti—save you from their bondage, and I will gaalti—redeem you with an outstretched arm and with great judgments. And I will laqachti—take you to Me as a people. These promises are followed by a fifth expression of redemption in the next verse, hayvaytee—I will carry you up to the land (Ex 6:9). The rabbis debated whether or not a fifth cup for this last redemptive word should be consumed at the Seder. How did they solve the problem? Elijah’s role in Israelite history earned the naming of the fifth cup for this prophet. What is his job?

V—THE THEOLOGY OF THE ISRAELITES
The tension between drawing too close and being too far from the divine is exquisitely demonstrated by Schopenhauer (Parerga und Paralipomena, vol. 2, XXXI, section 396) what he called porcupines in winter in response to the
question: what do porcupines do in the bitter cold? If they huddle too close, they injure one another with their spines, but if they keep too much distance from one another, they freeze. May this tension be applied to drawing too close to God?

1. So Jacob named the place Peniel, meaning ‘I have seen a divine being face to face, yet my life was preserved’” (Gen 32:31).

2. Jews have always struggled to depict an incomprehensible and unknowable God in a concrete way. Vaera, this week’s Torah portion, embodies this tension: “God spoke to Moses and said to him, ‘I am Adonai. I appeared to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob as El Shaddai, but I did not make Myself known to them by My name Yahweh’” (Ex. 6:2-3).

3. “When I come to the Israelites and say to them ‘The God of your fathers has sent me to you,’ and they ask me, ‘What is His name?’ what shall I say to them?” (Exodus 3:13) God’s puzzling response, “Tell them that Ehyeh-Asher-Ehyeh sent me to you.”

4. Moses, Aaron, and the seventy elders who “saw the God of Israel: (and) under His feet there was the likeness of a pavement of sapphire, like the very sky for purity” (Exodus 24:10).

5. “Oh, let me behold Your Presence” (Exodus 33:18).

6. “I will make all my goodness pass before you…and you will see My back; but My face must not be seen…you cannot see My face, for man may not see Me and live” (Exodus 33:18-23).

7. “The Lord spoke to Moses face to face, as an individual would speak to a friend” (Exodus 33:11).

8. “Moses and Aaron then went inside the Tent of Meeting. When they came out, they blessed the people; and the Presence of the Lord appeared to all the people” (Lev 9:23).

9. ”When a prophet of the Lord arises among You, I make Myself known to him in a vision, I speak with him in a dream. Not so with My servant Moses; he is trusted throughout My household. With him I speak mouth to mouth, plainly and not in riddles, and he beholds the likeness of the Lord….. “(Num 12: 6–8).

10.“…you (Moses) saw no shape when the Lord your God spoke to you at Horeb out of the fire…” (Deuteronomy 4:15).

11.“Face to face the Lord spoke to you (Moses) at that time to convey the Lord’s words to you…” (Deuteronomy 5:4).

12.“Never again did there arise in Israel a prophet like Moses, whom the Lord singled out, face to face…” (Deuteronomy 34:10).
13. "The Lord spoke to you out of the fire; you heard the sound of words but perceived no shape—nothing but a voice (Deut 4:12)."

14. "With him [Moses] I speak mouth to mouth, plainly and not in riddles, and he beholds the likeness of the Lord (Numbers 12:8)."

15. The prophets are those who hear and speak the words of God. Heinrich Graetz notes the difference between seeing and hearing: "To the pagan, the divine appears within nature as something observable to the eye. He becomes conscious of it as something seen. In contrast, to the Jew who knows that the divine exists beyond, outside of, and prior to nature, God reveals Himself through a demonstration of His will, through the medium of the ear. The human subject becomes conscious of the divine through hearing and obeying. Paganism sees its god, Judaism hears Him; that is, it hears the commandments of His will."

16. “The Lord spoke to you out of the fire; you heard the sound of the words but perceived no shape—nothing but a voice….since you saw no shape when the Lord your God spoke to you at Horeb out of the fire—not to act wickedly and make for yourselves a sculptured image in any likeness whatever: the form of a man or a woman, the form of any beast on the earth, the form of any winged bird that flies in the sky, the form of anything that creeps on the ground, the form of any fish that is in the waters below the earth. And when you look up to the sky and behold the sun and the moon and the stars, the whole heavenly host, you must not be lured into bowing down to them or serving them. These the Lord your God allotted to other peoples everywhere under the heaven, but you the Lord took and brought out of Egypt, that iron blast furnace to be His very own people, as is now the case (Deut 4:12, 15-20).

17. "Our wish is to see our King, for hearing is not the same as seeing." Again God defers to them, instructing Moses to tell them: "Let them be ready for the third day; for on the third day the Lord will come down in sight of all the people, on Mount Sinai (19:11)." Ismar Schorsch comments: "Still, I would argue that in chapter 19 of Exodus the prevailing sensory image is one of sound. "On the third day, as morning dawned, there was thunder, and lightning, and a very loud blast of the horn Fire and smoke engulfed the mountain as the blare of the horn grew ever louder, signifying God's presence. But the people kept their distance. To see God would be to perish. (19:16; Mechilta, ed. by H.S. Horovitz, pp. 210-11))." CK
18. "In the year that King Uzziah died, I beheld my Lord seated on a high and lofty throne; and the skirts of His robe filled the Temple (Isa 6:11)."

19. Medieval commentary, *Pesikta d’Rav Kahana* (12:25): When the Holy One spoke, each and every person in Israel could say, “The Divine Word is addressing me.” Rabbi Yosi ben Hanina said, “Do not be surprised by this idea, for when manna came down to feed Israel, each person tasted it according to his capacity. For infants, it was like mother’s milk, for the young, it was like bread with oil and honey, and for the old, it was like a honey cracker. What is true about the manna is also true about the Divine Word. Therefore, the Holy One said, “Do not be misled if you hear many voices. Know that I am the One God for each of you.”

20. As a child, African American James McBride, author of *The Color of Water*, struggled to understand God. His Jewish mother tried to help him, saying, “God’s not black. He’s not white. He’s a spirit.” But that description did not satisfy young James who persisted: “What’s a spirit?” She fumbled for a definition, “A spirit’s a spirit.” “What color is God’s spirit?” the boy persevered. “It doesn’t have a color,” she said. “God is the color of water. Water doesn’t have a color.”

**VI—EGYPT: THE METAPHOR FOR ROME**

--The encoded Haggadah offered a safe way of addressing Roman rule. In modern times, African American slaves in the United States created powerful Negro spirituals like “Let My People Go,” utilizing the Egyptian paradigm to express in safety their hope for freedom and redemption. In the wake of Lincoln’s death, Black Americans repeatedly referred to their martyred president as “their Moses, father, and benefactor.” Frederick Douglas cited the example in a post-assassination speech on June 1, 1985 of a black woman weeping outside the gates of the White House. When asked the cause of her distress, she commented: “We have lost our Moses.” Thereupon she was assured that “the Lord will send you another,” and she replied: “That may be, but ah! We had him,”

--A leading protagonist of the period was Rabbi Akiva who organized the Bar Kochba rebellion against Rome in the year 132, a rebellion that initially was so successful that the zealots set up their own government and minted
their own coins. Being mindful of Akiva’s political activities makes the Haggadah more comprehensible:
“Rabbi Eliezer, Rabbi Joshua, Rabbi Eleazar ben Azariah, Rabbi Akiva, and Rabbi Tarfon once reclined together in Bene Berak, telling about the departure from Egypt all night, until their disciples came to them and said: ‘Masters, the time has come to read the morning S’hma.’”

Why the rabbis were conducting an all-night private Seder that resulted in their neglect to join their students for morning prayer? It was with lines from the Torah like this one from Exodus that provided comfort and encouragement: “That was for the Lord a night of watching . . . one of vigil for all the children of Israel throughout the generations” (Ex. 12:42).

VII—PSYCHOLOGICAL WARFARE
Cleverly chosen plagues had psychological impact on the Egyptians by magnifying their anxieties. The Torah is quite direct in describing the purpose of the plagues: "I will mete out punishments to all the gods of Egypt, I the Lord (Ex 12:12)," and "The Lord executed judgment on their gods (Num 33:4)." Thus, the intent of the plagues was to assail intrinsic features of the Egyptian pantheon by making a mockery of their gods and rendering them powerless. The ultimate lesson for Pharaoh was that God's power supersedes that of the impotent Egyptian gods,

1. For successful agriculture, Egypt depended on the annual deposits of silt left by the Nile's receding floodwaters. Two plagues, blood and frogs, were chosen to mock Hapi, the Egyptian Nile God, and Osiris, the Egyptian God who dispensed fertility though the annual inundation. Transformed to blood, a symbol for death, the dependable Nile could not be called upon for its important agricultural task.

2. The hieroglyphic symbol of a frog represents the number 100,000 and abundant blessings. The frog goddess Heqt, a woman with a frog's head, was responsible for fecundity and recognized for her assistance to women in labor. In the plague of frogs, she was portrayed as uncontrollable, not dependable.

3. The plague of darkness was also an assault against the Egyptian pantheon. The sun god Re or Amon-Re, the chief Egyptian divinity and progenitor of cosmic order was preeminent because this god was the source of heat, light and creativity. Thus, the plague of darkness humiliated the Egyptians. The Egyptian deity Apophis is portrayed as a monstrous serpent that symbolized darkness and all that is terrible. Darkness indicated that Apophis and its demonic powers of chaos had prevailed in the daily struggle between light and darkness.
4. The striking down of the first-born was the ultimate weapon in Moses' psychological arsenal. In the royal palace, Pharaoh was viewed as the incarnation of god on earth. The slaying of the first-born sealed the fate of Pharaoh's son, the next incarnation of the god. This act of deicide, ultimate act of killing their god, drove a stake into the heart of Egyptian cosmology. Whereas the ultimate lesson for Pharaoh was that God's power supersedes that of the impotent Egyptian gods, the plagues struck at the very heart of Egyptian life.

5. Ex 14:4—This is one of ten occasions when God hardened Pharaoh’s heart; in addition there are ten instances when Pharaoh hardened his own heart. In all of these citations, the hardened heart symbolizes moral failure, obstinacy in the face of human suffering, and predisposition to cruelty. Mysteriously, this is never mentioned even once in the Haggadah. Biblical scholar Nahum M. Sarna suggests that the hardening of the heart “connotes the willful suppression of the capacity for reflection, self-examination, and unbiased judgments about good and evil.” Hardening of the heart is synonymous with moral atrophy. Thus, when God judges an individual, He “probes the heart” (I Sam. 16:7). In contrast to Pharaoh, whose heart was hardened when viewing the plight of the Israelites, Solomon prayed for a lev shomayah, a discerning heart, to judge Your people, to distinguish between good and bad (I Kings 3:9).”

The notion that the heart is the center of moral behavior is not exclusively an Israelite concept. Egyptians tomb paintings picture the weighing of the heart after death. In these paintings, a feather, the hieroglyph for truth, is depicted being weighed against the heart of the dead man. His heart must be empty of evil in order to balance the feather against it.

Thoth, the ibis-headed scribe-god, is portrayed writing down the verdict while nearby a demon called “Eater of Hearts” waits expectantly for the defendant’s heart to be thrown to him if a negative verdict is rendered. In the many instances in which Pharaoh’s heart is hardened and therefore not weightless, the biblical author portrayed the Egyptian ruler never receiving the reward of eternal life.

VIII—AFTERWORD: EVERYTHING WORTH HAPPENING HAPPENS IN THE DESERT
There are three regions in each of our souls, There is Egypt, there is the Desert, and there is the Promised Land. Many of us have glimpsed our Egypt, Or perhaps some are still there, Wearing chains,
Bearing the burdens of fear, insecurity, 
Doubt, and weakness, 
Mustering the strength to clamber up…
  Still fewer of us have glimpsed our Promised Land, 
  Our destiny, 
  Fulfillment of dreams, 
  Our fruitfulness, our blossoming, 
  Our purpose.
We talk of Egypt often…
Every holiday, every prayer service, 
Mentions we once were slaves, 
Recalls our hardships under Pharaoh.
  We talk of the Promised Land often, 
  Every holiday, every prayer service, 
  Longs for Israel, 
  For the Voice to come forth from Zion, 
  We turn to the east, 
  Reminisce Jerusalem.
But rarely do we talk of, or pray about, the Desert…
Yet that is the region in which most of us are, 
Pushing forward in the wilderness, 
Dragging our footsteps across that forty year stretch 
Of pristine, barren, moonscape. 
  It is there we encounter truth, 
  It is there we encounter miracle, 
We are nomads still, 
At the shore of some sparkling oasis, 
And we sing our nomad song…  --Rabbi Zoe Klein