

Abstract Ancestors

It always helps to know what you're saying, especially if you want to get into the spirit of things. Most American Jews who attend a Passover Seder these days say the Haggadah in English, which makes sense if your Hebrew is rather limited. In ancient times, the common language, the *lingua franca*, in Israel and the surrounding countries was Aramaic. Nonetheless, the Haggadah was said in Hebrew, because most Jewish people understood it reasonably well even though they didn't speak it at home or on the street. And yet, the very first paragraph of the Haggadah, the preamble to the Seder, was said in Aramaic. Apparently, it was important that people understand it perfectly. So let's take a close look at it. What is so critical about it?

According to the ancient tradition, we hold up a piece of broken matzah, and we say, "This is the poor bread our ancestors ate in Egypt. All that are hungry may come and eat. All that are needy may step inside (*veyifsach*, Rashi, Ex. 12:11). Now we're slaves, next year we'll be free. Now we're here. Next year we'll be in the land of Israel."

What's going on here? Are we really issuing an invitation to the hungry and the indigent to come sit at our Seder table? Does it make sense to invite them after we've locked the door, turned the deadbolt and put the chain on for extra security? This doesn't seem like a very sincere invitation.

Let us imagine for a moment that a hundred years from now a Jewish father is telling his young children about the Holocaust. "It's important for you to know, kids," he says, "that about two hundred years ago the Nazis tried to exterminate our people. Six million of our people were murdered. Your great-great-grandfather, seven generations ago, who was living in Poland, was deported to a concentration camp, and he almost died. But he survived and rebuilt his life, and that is why we are here today."

The children stare at their father with appropriately grave and respectful

looks but not exactly engaged. And then the father remembers something. “Wait a minute, kids,” he says. “Stay right here. I’ll be right back.”

He climbs up to the attic and returns a few minutes later with an old box. He brushes the dust off the box. The children lean forward, intrigued. He opens the box and pulls out a coarse striped garment, stiff and stained, discolored with age, worn through in many places. A yellow star is sewn onto the front.

“Look, kids,” he says. “This is the actual garment your grandfather wore in the concentration camp. See these bloodstains, these sweat stains? They are the blood and sweat of our ancestor.”

The children reverently touch the fabric.

“What does this yellow star mean?” one of them asks.

“What happened to him?” asks another. “He must have cried a lot.”

The abstract ancestor has become real to them, and they suddenly care about what happened to him.

On the night of Passover, as we gather around the Seder table with our families and our guests, we remind ourselves of the enormous tragedy that befell our people in the land of Egypt. At first, we were welcomed with honor and respect, but as the years passed and the first generations died out, the Egyptians turned against us, and little by little they withdrew our rights and privileges until we were trapped in a bondage that lasted numerous years. It was a terrible time for our ancestors, a time of hunger and hardship, a time of persecution, abuse and abject terror. And then God forced the Egyptians to set them free, and they went forth to their destiny as a great and independence nation that would enrich the world with its genius and passion.

It is a wonderful story, but is that all it is? A story about some abstract ancestors that lived thousands of years ago? Or is it a story about our grandparents, our flesh and blood, whose seed we carry in our genes? And if so, how do we make them real in our minds and in the minds of the children whose eager faces look to us for inspiration? How do we give them

substance so that we can care about them and share in their suffering and their joy?

Unfortunately, we do not have the ragged garments they wore when they labored under the whips of the Egyptian taskmasters. We do not have traces of their blood, sweat and tears. But we do have an ancient artifact that connects us directly with them in a concrete manner. We have a replica of the distinctive food they ate when they rested from their labors. We have the matzah. And we have a description of the kind of people they were.

So we hold up the broken piece of dry matzah, the food that they ate during those long years of subjugation, and we declare, “This is the poor bread our ancestors ate in Egypt.” And the rest of the preamble is a quote of what they used to say, in the style of the ancient Hebrew writers who did not use identifiers and quotation marks. Even though our ancestors were tired and hungry, even though they had only a meager piece of matzah to keep body and soul together, they cared for each other. “All who are hungry, come share my bread,” they called out to their friends and neighbors. “Don’t despair. We will get through this. We may be slaves now, but next year we’ll be free.”

That is why the ancient Jews said the preamble in the language they spoke. It is not so critical that we understand every jot and tittle of the Haggadah. But it is critical that we understand who our ancestors were. It is critical that they come to life in our imaginations and the imaginations of the children. These people were our living, breathing grandparents. They suffered hunger and privation yet remained kind and generous and supportive of each other. Ever hopeful, their spirits yearned for freedom in the darkest hours of their captivity. These were our gallant ancestors. And this is what happened to them.

Now let us begin the Seder.