Gleanings From Massekhet Pesahim

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Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of Requirements for Ordination

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New York, New York

March 15, 2012
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Text Immersion Thesis Summary

Process:

Over the past year I intensively studied *perek* ten of b. Pesahim (99b-121b) with Rashi and Rashbam's commentary, along with another ten *dapim* from earlier in the tractate and elsewhere in the Talmud. While the chapter's primary content relates to early rabbinic Passover observance and the origins of the Seder ritual, it is also rife with tangential themes ranging from demonology to extended midrashim on various biblical episodes. Immersing myself in the Gemara both strengthened my text skills as well as introduced me to a wealth of new knowledge about the Seder's symbols and liturgy. After completing most of *perek*, I then selected three topics of interest that emerged from the text to further research.

Paper 1:

The first paper explores the evolution of *Mah Nishtanah*, one of the key Haggadah passages that originates in m. Pesahim and is further developed in b. Pesahim and later Codes. Part one begins with a historical look at how the form and content of this text changed over the centuries, until it was codified in the version we know today. Part two considers what the rabbis' original intentions might have been for the use of this passage in the Passover observance in contrast to its contemporary use. A few key *sugyot* support the case that *Mah Nishtanah* was never meant to be a set script, but rather a set of sample questions that could be asked should spontaneous ones not arise naturally. Returning to the roots of the Four Questions may help us enrich our own Seders as well.

Paper 2:

The second paper looks at the mythology of matzah across the Bible and Rabbinic Literature. On the one hand, Deuteronomy 16:3 calls matzah לחם עני, a phrase whose meaning the rabbis debate at length. This "bread of affliction" or "bread of poverty" is associated with the Israelites' servitude and distress and symbolized by the matzah we break in half at the Seder. These associations are in tension, however, with other texts that present matzah as marker of God's redemption and our ancestors' exodus from Egypt. In comparing these two paradigms, we see that the symbolism of matzah is transformed over the course of the Seder ritual through our telling of the Passover story.

Paper 3:

The third paper examines פדיון הבן, the "Redemption of the First-Born Son" ritual. This life-cycle ceremony is not fully explicated anywhere in the Bible or Talmud, though clues as to its purpose and procedures are sprinkled throughout both. First I present excerpts from Exodus and Numbers that shed light on the original priestly rite, followed by a selection of Amoraic and Gaonic that provide us with liturgy from the Medieval period. One Gaonic *teshuvah* proves to be our most useful document in reconstructing the ritual's past; it presents the most complete record we have of a *Pidyon HaBen* ceremony, including a surprising speaking role for the mother of the child and lengthy personalized prayers by both parents and the *kohen*. The last section of this paper surveys contemporary responses of the major Jewish denominations to this ancient ritual.

The Evolution of *Mah Nishtanah*

A Night of Questions

"מה נשתנה הלילה הזה מכל הלילות - How is this night different from all other nights?" These six simple Hebrew words are probably the best known of the entire Seder, reflecting what the Passover ritual is all about. Phrased as an inquiry, *Mah Nishtanah* sets the stage for a night of questions and instructive dialogue, and underscores that the Seder meal is rife with symbolic irregularities when compared to a typical dinner or festival gathering. The opening line stresses the singularity of this occasion on which we mark the Exodus from Egypt, a night that was and remains for Jews unique among *all other nights* in history.

On the surface, *Mah Nishtanah* seems straightforward enough. Known colloquially as "The Four Questions" or ארבע קושיות, it lays out four different characteristics of the Seder that distinguish it from a regular dinner. The syntactic structure of "on all other nights… on this night…" highlights Passover oddities in language appropriate for learners of all ages. And due to the tradition of the youngest son (or daughter) singing this passage at the Seder, *Mah Nishtanah* is often one of the first, if not only, Jewish texts that a youngster learns by heart in religious school. As a result, we may even consider it an outright children's song, with its catchy tune and relatively easy Hebrew.

But there is much more to *Mah Nishtanah* than initially meets the eye—inconsistencies within the passage itself, and a long, relatively unknown history of rabbinic debate that led to the wording we know today. First and foremost, the title of this passage is somewhat of a misnomer, as *Mah Nishtanah* is not really comprised of

four discrete queries, but rather one introductory question and four statements, each providing a possible answer.[1] Some scholars even suggest that we might better translate the opening line as "How different is this night from all other nights!" rather than "Why is this night different from all other nights?"[2] What's more, a look at the origins of *Mah Nishtanah* in the Mishnah reveals that the statements we have today were not all initially penned by the Tannaim. In fact, it began as only 3 questions!

So how did our received Haggadah text come to be codified as such? What factors motivated the changes of content at each stage of its development? Likewise, what was the Sages' intended function for *Mah Nishtanah*? Finally, how does this original role compare with how we employ the text today? This paper seeks to explore these "Four Questions" about the famous "Four Questions."

[1] Nonetheless, for clarity's sake, I will typically refer to each of the *Mah Nishtanah* verses as one of the "questions."
[2] Kulp, Joshua. *The Schechter Haggadah: Art, History, and Commentary*. Jerusalem: The Schechter Institute of Jewish Studies, 2009, p. 196.

Part I: Form & Content

Biblical Underpinnings

Before jumping straight to the Mishnah's introduction of *Mah Nishtanah*, let us first take a look at the biblical antecedents to this rabbinic passage. While the Torah recounts the entire Exodus narrative and records a number of commandments governing the paschal sacrifice, eating of unleavened bread, and festival celebration, it does not actually mention the ritual we now know as "Seder." In the words of Rabbi Lawrence Hoffman, "The Bible knew Passover, but no Seder and no Haggadah to guide it."[3] Nonetheless, the Tannaim carefully selected biblical proof texts that buttressed their religious agenda and upon which they could begin scripting a special liturgy. In four different verses we read of the imperative that parents teach their children the story and significance of the Passover ritual, the core rabbinic value behind the Seder observance. These four citations, which later became the basis for the four archetypal sons,[4] set up a paradigm for the Seder dialogue that the rabbis would craft: [5]

Deuteronomy 6:20-21

כִּי-יִשְׁאָלְךָ בִנְךָ מָחָר, לֵאמֹר: מָה הָעֵדֹת, וְהַחֻקִּים וְהַמִּשְׁפָּטִים, אֲשֶׁר צִוָּה יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵינוּ,
אֶתְכֶם.
וְאָמַרְתָּ לְבִנְךָ, עֲבָדִים הָיִינוּ לְפַרְעֹה בְּמִצְרָיִם; וַיּוֹצִאֵנוּ יְהוָה מִמִּצְרַיִם, בְּיָד חֲזָקָה.

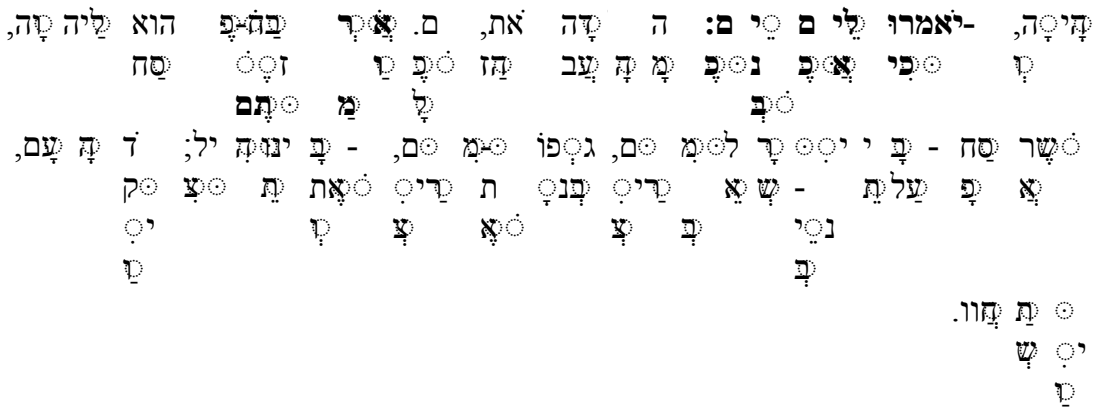
When, in the future, **your children ask you**, "What mean the decrees, laws, and rules that Adonai our God has enjoined upon you?" **you shall say to your**

[3] Hoffman, Lawrence A. "Peoplehood with Purpose." in *My People's Passover Haggadah, Vol. 1.* Edited by Lawrence A. Hoffman and David Arnow. Woodstock:

Jewish Lights, 2008, p. 51.
[4] See y. Pesahim 70b and *Mekhilta d'Rabbi Ishmael*, *Pisha* 18.
[5] I presented the verses and will comment on them not in their chronological biblical order, but rather according to the sequence which appears in most *Haggadot* in connection with the Four Sons.

children, "We were slaves to Pharaoh in Egypt and Adonai freed us from Egypt with a mighty hand."[6]

Exodus 12:26-27

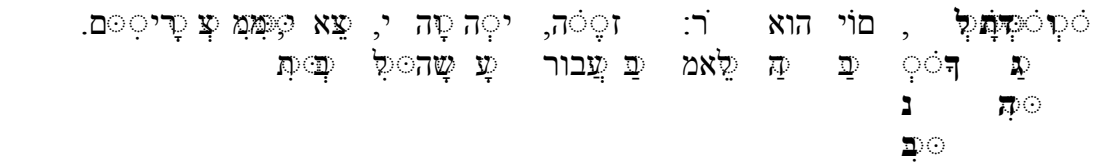


And when **your children ask you**, "What do you mean by this rite?" **you shall say,** "It is the Passover sacrifice to Adonai, because God passed over the houses of the Israelites in Egypt when God smote the Egyptians, but saved our houses." The people then bowed low in homage.

Exodus 13:14

And when, in time to come, **your son asks you**, saying, "What does this mean?" **you shall say to him**, "It was with a mighty hand that Adonai brought us out from Egypt, the house of bondage."

Exodus 13:8



And **you shall explain to your son** on that day, "It is because of what Adonai did for me when I went free from Egypt."

Although the four quotations are all similar in theme, each one touches on a slightly different aspect or example of this paternal responsibility. The verses from Exodus 12, for instance, appear in the context of an explanation of the paschal lamb, whereas those from Exodus 13 are spoken with regard to the laws of redeeming the first-born and eating unleavened bread. Taken together though, these four scriptural citations express one resounding message to the ancient Israelites: that future generations of

[6] I have adapted English translations, from the New JPS Tanakh (2000), trying to be more gender neutral with God language.

children will naturally be curious about Passover-related rituals, and that parents are obligated to instruct them as to the holiday's origins and customs. The bolded words in each of the above excerpts are intended to visually highlight this foundational question-answer pattern laid out by the Bible, which was adapted by the rabbis for use in the Haggadah. Moreover, it is in this last verse that we first encounter the Hebrew verb "להגיד," meaning "to tell," in connection with Passover. (The name of the special Seder *siddur* or guide, the הגדה, is derived from it.)

Mah Nishtanah* Introduced*: M. Pesahim

While the Bible offers three sample questions children might ask their parents about the Passover celebration,[7] the editors of the Mishnah first set the structure at the core of מה נשתנה. M. Pesahim 10:4 reads:

מזגו לו כוס שני וכאן הבן שואל
אם אין דעת בבן-אביו מלמדו מה נשתנה הלילה הזה מכל הלילות
שבכל הלילות אנו מטבלין פעם אחת הלילה הזה שתי פעמים
שבכל הלילות אנו אוכלין חמץ ומצה הלילה הזה כולו מצה
שבכל הלילות אנו אוכלין בשר צלי שלוק ומבושל הלילה הזה כולו צלי
לפי דעתו של בן אביו מלמדו

They mixed for him a second cup, and here the son asks.
If the son is not capable, the father teaches him, "How is this night different from all other nights?
On all nights we dip once; on this night, we dip twice.
On all nights we eat leavened or unleavened bread; on this night, only unleavened.
On all nights, we eat meat that is roasted, stewed or boiled; on this night, only roasted meat."
According to the son's capability, the father teaches him.

[7] See above quotations from Deuteronomy 6:20, Exodus 12:26, and Exodus 13:14.

Immediately we notice that this original version of *Mah Nishtanah* found in "the three Mishnah manuscripts [(Kaufman, Parma, Loewe)] generally considered to be the most reliable"[8] contain only three questions or verses, not the typical four to which we are accustomed. Moreover, the example about roasted meat obviously does not appear in modern Haggadot, leaving two of our current stanzas unaccounted for. So what is the origin of these three initial questions?

Though the later evolution of *Mah Nishtanah* has somewhat obscured the connection, the initial three verses correspond precisely with the three Seder items singled out by Rabban Gamliel in the subsequent mishnah.[9] We read in m. Pesahim 10:5:

> רבן גמליאל אומר, כל שלא אמר שלושה דברים אלו בפסח, לא יצא ידי חובתו;
> ואלו הן-פסח, מצה, ומרורים. פסח, על שם שפסח המקום על בתי אבותינו במצריים;
> מרורים, על שם שמיררו המצריים את חיי אבותינו במצריים; מצה, על שם שנגאלו.

> Rabban Gamliel says, "Whoever did not explain these three things on Passover has not fulfilled his obligation. And they are: *Pesah, Matzah,* and *Maror*. *Pesah*, because the Lord passed over the houses of our forefathers in Egypt. *Maror*, because the Egyptians embittered the lives of our forefathers in Egypt. *Matzah*, because they were redeemed."

These three food items—the paschal lamb, matzah, and bitter herbs—are elevated by Gamliel as the paramount Seder symbols, probably because they are the three foods specified by the Bible in connection with the Passover observance.[10] Thus, it should come as little surprise that when the editors of the Mishnah selected Seder symbols to focus on as teaching tools, these three would be chosen. Each of the Gamliel's three

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[8] Kulp, p. 198
[9] Tabory, Joseph. *JPS Commentary on the Haggadah.* Philadelphia: JPS, 2008, p. 14.
[10] In Exodus 12:8, God instructs the Israelites to eat the paschal sacrifice with unleavened bread and bitter herbs.

items is further elaborated on in the Talmud[11] and paired with an appropriate biblical proof text. Both of these *mishnayot* (the one which includes *Mah Nishtanah,* and Rabban Gamliel's which immediately follows) were likely intended by the rabbis as educational "set inductions" or "triggers" to the main Seder teaching or the telling of the Exodus story. Over time, though, as additional passages were added to the Seder's presentation, the two wound up drifting farther apart and becoming almost bookends to the *Maggid* section. Although *Mah Nishtanah* and Gamliel's teaching are now separated by several pages in the Haggadah, their juxtaposition in the Mishnah reminds us of their parallel content.

It is interesting to note that the idea of formally discussing a meal's menu or proceedings as it is taking place was not a completely novel one at the time of the Tannaim. We know that at Greek and Roman banquets there was a custom of dinnertime conversation that often began with questions and answers about the food itself.[12] Plutarch (46-120 CE) outlined the rules for such symposium dialogue: "Questions should be easy, the problems known, the interrogations plain and familiar, not intricate and dark, so that they may neither vex the unlearned nor frighten them from the disquisition."[13] These guidelines resonate with our own Four Questions, which are relatively simplistic and not meant to "stump" Seder attendees, but rather draw attention to aspects of the meal and provide an opening for storytelling. Other examples of ancient food-related

[11] See b. Pesahim 116a.
[12] Kulp, p. 195.
[13] Plutarch, *Quaestiones Conviviales*, 614. Cited in Kulp, p. 195.

discourse are recorded in the works of late 2nd century Greek author Athenaeus, whose most famous work was *Deipnosophistae*, roughly meaning "dinner-table philosophers." [14]

Although there is much debate as to whether the rabbinic Seder was consciously modeled after the Greek Symposium model, it is clear that our Passover meal was at least partially influenced by it. [15] Thus Rabban Gamliel's teaching and *Mah Nishtanah* might both be considered hybrid products of Jewish religious education and the pervasive Greco-Roman culture around the turn of the millennium. "When the rabbis of the Mishnah wished to create a banquet meal to replace the sacrificial ritual lost when the Temple was destroyed, they did so in a form which was recognizable to them as the proper way for conducting a meal, all the while ensuring that they achieved their ultimate goal of studying Torah and recalling the Exodus."[16]

A 4th Question Added: Talmudic Expansion

By the time the Babylonian Talmud was compiled, some three centuries after the Mishnah's redaction, the *Mah Nishtanah* passage had already been significantly altered in several ways. B. Pesahim 116a reads:

מה נשתנה הלילה הזה מכל הלילות
שבכל הלילות אנו אוכלין חמץ ומצה הלילה הזה כולו מצה
שבכל הלילות אנו אוכלין שאר ירקות הלילה הזה מרור
שבכל הלילות אנו אוכלין בשר צלי שלוק ומבושל הלילה הזה כולו צלי
שבכל הלילות אין אנו חייבים לטבל אפילו פעם אחת הלילה הזה שתי פעמים

> How is this night different from all other nights?
> On all nights we eat leavened or unleavened bread; on this night, only unleavened.

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[14] Tabory, p. 14.
[15] Bokser, Baruch M. *The Origins of the Seder: The Passover Rite and Early Rabbinic Judaism*. New York: Jewish Theological Press, 2002, Chapter 5.
[16] Kulp, p. 196.

On all nights we eat all kinds of vegetables; on this night, bitter herbs.
On all nights, we eat meat that is roasted, stewed or boiled; on this night, only roasted meat.
On all nights we are not required to dip even once; on this night, we dip twice.

The most apparent of changes from the Mishnah's original form is the insertion of a fourth question about eating a variety of vegetables versus *maror*. (We will return to this momentarily.) In addition, we see that the order of the verses has changed, with the dipping example shifted to the end instead of the beginning. Finally, the wording of the dipping question has also been amended as a result of a debate recorded on the same page of the Gemara. We read there that Rava challenges, "Do we have to even dip once on other nights?" and suggests that the question instead begin " חייבין אנו שבכל הלילות אין לטבל אפילו פעם אחת - On all other nights we are not *obligated* to dip even once…" R. Safra responds that even on this night the extra dipping cannot be considered a religious requirement as it is for the sake of piquing the children's interest. Therefore he further amends the text, removing the verb "obligated," so it reads, " שבכל הלילות אין אנו מטבילין אפילו פעם אחת - On all other nights we do not dip even once."

In most subsequent manuscripts of the Haggadah, R. Safra's edit became the standard version of the dipping question, and the one with which we are familiar today. However, there are some exceptions: Another, shorter form of the question is preserved in some Geniza fragments and in the siddur of R. Saadiah Gaon. It reads, " שבכל הלילות אין אנו מטבילין והלילה הזה מטבלין - On all other nights we do not dip; on this night we dip."[17] The removal of "once" and "twice" may reflect a culinary trend in that era,

[17] Goldschmidt, E.D. הגדה של פסח ותולדותיה - *The Passover Haggadah: Its Sources and History* (Hebrew). Jerusalem: Bialik Institute, 1960, p. 77.

whereby dipping *hors d'oeuvres* at regular meals had ceased to be as prevalent. Y. Pesahim 70a offers yet another variant of the dipping question: " שבכל הלילות אנו מטבילין אותו עם הפת וכאן אנו מטבילין אותו בפני עצמו - On all other nights we dip with bread and tonight we dip it by itself."

While the Babylonian Talmud is transparent about how the dipping question came to be revised, it makes no internal reference to the addition of a fourth question about bitter herbs. Again, this verse did not appear in the Mishnah nor in early manuscripts of the Haggadah, so we can conclude that it was added by the Amoraim. But why? Wasn't there already a nice symmetry between Gamliel's three Seder items and the three original questions posed by the Mishnah? Daniel Goldschmidt notes that the wording of this question is somewhat puzzling and different from the others, for there clearly was no prohibition about eating other kinds of vegetables on Passover (as opposed to leavened bread).[18] He posits that the reason for this addition to *Mah Nishtanah* was a perceived lack of question about *maror* at the time. By Amoraic times (200-500 CE) other vegetables were being used for the first dipping and therefore the original dipping question had become dissociated from its original point of reference, i.e. the bitter herbs. According to this logic, the rabbis were actually motivated by consistency rather than innovation, essentially restoring the connection between *Mah Nishtanah* and Rabban Gamliel's teaching.

As noted above, b. Pesahim is also not explicit about reordering the questions from the original Mishnaic version. It appears as though the order of the initial three questions followed the sequence in which the foods would be eaten during the Seder

[18] Goldschmidt, p. 10.

meal. The initial dipping would take place first, then the breaking and eventual eating of matzah, and finally the two cooked dishes that were reminiscent of the *Pesah* and *Hagigah* offerings of Temple times.[19] In the Bavli though, the questions are rearranged with the example of "*Hametz u'matzah*" now leading, perhaps reflecting an increased emphasis on matzah as the essential Exodus reminder, rather than the former *pesah*. (The order continued to be changed back and forth in several subsequent versions of the Haggadah.) Professor Baruch Bokser argues that this shift was already taking place at the time of the Mishnah and Tosefta, as the rabbis began to adjust to the new post-Temple realty; he cites both Rabban Gamliel's teaching from the Mishnah as well as Tosefta Pesahim 2:22 which rules that *hazeret* (the preferred type of bitter herbs), matzah, and *pesah* are all required on the first night of Passover. This grouping of the three central Seder elements suggests that they were to be "equally important, and as a consequence the bitter herbs and unleavened bread do not fall into desuetude because a more important third element [the Passover offering] is missing."[20]

Reaching a (Near) Final Form: Gaonic Revision

This de-emphasis of the paschal offering continued in the Gaonic period[21] (750-1038 CE), when "a more or less official Haggadah had come into being—the project of powerful Jewish authorities in Babylonia."[22] With the Temple destroyed and ritual sacrifice long since ceased, it not only became increasingly illogical to speak of roast

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[19] The Talmud does not refer to the symbolic shank bone that is labeled on most Seder plates for *pesah,* but rather mentions several permutations of two cooked dishes in b. Pesahim 114b that remind us of the two types of sacrifice (the פסח and חגיגה).
[20] Bokser, p. 39.
[21] Tabory, p. 29.
[22] Hoffman, "Peoplehood with Purpose," p. 51.

meat on Passover, but potentially blasphemous, for fear of implying that people were continuing to make sacrifices without the sanctuary. Maimonides, in the *Mishneh Torah*, actually still lists the question about roast meat as part of *Mah Nishtanah* but then immediately instructs, "בזמן הזה אינו אומר: 'והלילה הזה כלו צלי' שאין לנו קרבן - At present, one does not recite [the question] 'on this night, only roasted,' for we do not have a sacrifice."[23] Nonetheless, it took several centuries for the rabbis to drop this verse of *Mah Nishtanah* in light of a new historical reality. Similarly, the wording of Rabban Gamliel's teaching about the *pesah* was eventually amended to read " פסח שהיו אבותינו אוכלין - The *pesah* which our ancestors used to eat" rather than the other two paragraphs which state "מצה\מרור זו\ה שאנו אוכלים - this matzah/maror which we eat."

The dropping of this question would have naturally reduced the number back down to three, but it seems that by this time the rabbis were loath to relinquish their four-verse framework. With four cups of wine, and four sons also mentioned in the Haggadah, "the number of four questions had become a canonic number, so the elimination of the question about roast meat required the addition of another question."[24] But the main Seder food items were all already referenced by the other questions, so the rabbis turned to another symbolic aspect of the Passover meal: reclining. It is not entirely certain when and by whom this new fourth question was added to *Mah Nishtanah*, but one sign pointing to the early Gaonic period is that reclining would not have been an anomaly during the Greco-Roman era, when the Mishnah and Palestinian Talmud were being written and redacted. By late Antiquity, "the custom of reclining at meals was no

[23] Maimonides, *Hilhot Hametz U'Matzah,* 8:2-3.
[24] Tabory, p. 29

longer prevalent, and it was preserved only as a halakhic requirement at the seder. In earlier times it could not have been marked as a unique feature of the seder, but in Gaonic times it was appropriate for an additional question."[25]

That said, we know that the custom of reclining was already a part of the Seder repertoire from m. Pesahim 10:1, which reads, "אפילו עני שבישראל, לא יאכל עד שיסב - Even a poor person of Israel should not eat until he has reclined." The prescription to recline is further elaborated on in b. Pesahim 108a, which lays out the specifics of this Seder tradition. We are taught here that the eating of matzah requires leaning, unlike, for instance, *maror*. Likewise, there is a debate in the Gemara about which of the four cups require leaning, what physical positions officially count as leaning, and who in the household should lean in the presence of others. Y. Pesahim 68b covers some of the same material but also makes explicit the spiritual significance of leaning on Passover:

> אמר רב לוי ולפי שדרך עבדים להיות אוכלין מעומד וכאן להיות אוכלין מסובין להודיע שיצאו מעבדות לחירות
>
> Rav Levi said: "Because it is the way of slaves to eat standing, and here we eat reclining to proclaim that they went forth from slavery to freedom."

What is so distinctive about the rabbis' Passover instructions in contrast to typical Greco-Roman banquets is that at the latter only the free male citizens would have been invited to recline, whereas at the Seder even the poor are outright required to do so. [26] Bokser emphasizes this democratic aspect of the Seder and points to it as one of the key

[25] Ibid., p. 30.
[26] Kulp, p. 177.

distinguishing characteristics between the Passover meal and the other ancient symposia to which it is often compared.[27]

So by the Gaonic era, we reach an approximation of our modern, 4-question version of *Mah Nishtanah*, found in the siddur of Rav Saadiah Gaon:[28]

מה נשתנה הלילה הזה מכל הלילות
שבכל הלילות אין אנו מטבילין והלילה הזה מטבילין
שבכל הלילות אנו אוכלין חמץ ומצה והלילה הזה כלו מצה
שבכל הלילות אנו אוכלין שאר ירקות והלילה הזה מרורים
שבכל הלילות אנו אוכלין בין יושבין ובין מסובין והלילה הזה מסובין

How is this night different from all other nights?
On all nights we do not dip; on this night, we dip.
On all nights we eat leavened or unleavened bread; on this night, only unleavened.
On all nights we eat all kinds of vegetables; on this night, bitter herbs.
On all nights we eat either sitting upright or reclining; on this night, reclining.

Here the content of the four questions is what we recognize from today, though the precise wording and order is still not the same. (A few exceptional *haggadot* found in the Cairo Genizah—such as TS H 152—preserved both the roast meat and leaning questions, rendering a total of five questions.[29])

The evolution of the passage's content is only half the story though. Of far greater mystery is the intended function of *Mah Nishtanah* by its original Mishnaic authors and how its role in the Seder has changed over the centuries as well. These questions are the subject of the second half of this paper.

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[27] Bokser, p. 62.
[28] הגדה של פסח, סידור סעדיה גאון
[29] Tabory, p. 30.

Part II: Intent & Implementation

The Rabbinic Imperative to Teach

M. Pesahim 10:4 does not merely provide us with the original template of *Mah Nishtanah*, but also offers some clues as to how the passage was possibly intended to be used (or not) during the Seder. Our mishnah opens, "They mix for him a second cup, and here the son asks. If the son is not capable, the father teaches him," and after laying out the text of *Mah Nishtanah,* closes "According to the son's capability the father instructs him." This translation already includes some interpretive decisions, but still retains some of the Hebrew's ambiguity: The son asks *what*? If he is unable to ask, then *how* does the father teach him? And what do the rabbis mean by the stipulations, "אם אין דעת בבן" - "if the son is incapable" and "לפי דעתו של בן" - "according to the son's capability"?

Let us respond to the last question first. The word "דעת" in rabbinic Hebrew has a wide range of meanings, including "knowledge," "mind," "temperament," and even "physical disposition."[30] There are many examples throughout the Mishnah and Talmuds of a minor's "דעת" being the determining factor as to whether or not he is responsible for a particular *mitzvah* or action. Generally speaking, if the child lacks דעת, then he is either exempt from the deed altogether or a father is obligated to complete it on his son's behalf, as is the case here in m. *Pesahim*. An extended example of this principle can be found in t. Hagigah 1:2, excerpted below:

>]יודע[לנענע חייב בלולב יודע להתעטף חייב בציצית יודע לדבר אביו מלמדו שמע ותורה ולשון קודש ואם לאו ראוי לו שלא בא לעולם יודע לשמור תפיליו אביו לוקח לו תפילין...

[30] Jastrow, Marcus. "דעת." *A Dictionary of the Targumim, the Talmud Babli and Yerushalmi, and the Midrashic Literature.* Jerusalem: חורב, 1903.

> If he knows how to shake, then he is obligated [to shake] the lulav. If he knows how to wrap himself he is obligated to [put on] *tzitzit*. If he knows how to speak, his father teaches him the *Shema* and Torah and the holy language [Hebrew]. If not, it would have been better had he never entered the world. If he knows how to guard his *tefillin*, his father should get him *tefillin*…

Each of the *mitzvot* mentioned in this *baraita* involves a separate set of skills or know-how, not all of which are related to how "smart" a child is. Rather, דעת appears to be primarily an indication of a youngster's age, developmental stage, and religious education. Thus it is clear that the m. *Pesahim* was not exclusively referring to the academic intelligence of a young man, but more likely his overall capacity to ask questions at the Seder—a combination of skills and knowledge, from sheer verbal abilities to some sense of what would have been novel at the Passover table as opposed to a regular holiday meal. Regardless of the son's ability to ask however, the Mishnah is clear that a father is nonetheless obligated to teach him. "The Mishnah [in *Pesahim*] therefore reflects the rabbinic concern that parents teach their children what they should know. The biblical model for the pedagogic dialogue is thus adapted to the standard rabbinic formulation that is designed to determine a child's involvement."[31] Essentially the rabbis have built in a contingency clause to ensure that even if a son cannot initiate this dialogue with questions, the Passover instruction will still occur.

A midrash from *Mekhilta d'Rabbi Shimon b. Yohai,* makes a similar point in response to the instruction in Exodus 13:8 to teach one's children about Passover:

> והגדת לבנך: **אף על פי שלא שאלך**. אין לי אלא בזמן שיש לו בן, בינו לעצמו ובינו לבין אחרים מנין? ת"ל והגדת לבנך. חייב אדם לעסוק בהלכות הפסח כל הלילה, אפלו בינו לבין בנו, אפלו בינו לבין עצמו, אפלו לבין תלמידו.

[31] Bokser, p. 69.

> "And you shall tell your children." Even if he does not ask you. [We know] this is only the case if he has a son, but what about [telling] to himself or [telling] between himself and others? Thus the text comes to teach us "tell your children." A man is obligated to engage in [teaching] the laws of *Pesach* all night, whether it is between him and his son, between him and himself, or between him and his students.

Here too, our tradition insists that a father's obligation to teach supersedes his son's ability to invite such instruction. We find almost the same exact teaching in t. Pesahim 10:2, but the Talmud's explanation is slightly nuanced. In b. Pesahim 116a, we read:

> ת"ר חכם בנו שואלו ואם אינו חכם אשתו שואלתו ואם לאו הוא שואל לעצמו ואפילו שני תלמידי חכמים שיודעין בהלכות הפסח שואלין זה לזה : מה נשתנה הלילה הזה מכל הלילות...

> Our Sages taught: If his son is intelligent,[32] he asks him, but if he is not intelligent, his wife asks him. And if not, he asks himself. Even two students of the wise that know all the laws of Passover should ask one another: How is this night different from all other nights…

In this text, commenting directly on m. Pesahim 10:4, we see that the primary verb is not to "teach" or "tell," but rather to "ask." Here the instruction still seems to be the ultimate goal, but the formal asking of a question is depicted as a necessary first step. The Talmud emphasizes that in lieu of a capable relative to make inquiry, even two scholars should ask one another questions. "In the Bavli, the toseftan halakhah has been transformed into a rhetorical requirement that a question must be asked at the seder. This requirement must be fulfilled even if a person has to ask himself!"[33]

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[32] The Talmud now uses the word חכם, which we tend to translate as "wise" because of its association with the first of the 4 sons. However, the meaning is essentially the same as the earlier concept of דעת.

[33] Kulp, p. 195.

***Mah Nishtanah*: Required Script or Optional Supplement?**

It is clear from the Talmud that the custom of asking and answering questions was an essential part of the rabbis' conception of the Passover Seder. Yet we cannot be sure that verses of *Mah Nishtanah* were actually meant to be the questions asked by the son, father, or aforementioned scholars. According to the punctuation added by most publishers to the Mishnah, it seems that the words "מה נשתנה הלילה הזה מכל הלילות" constitute a literal quotation of what the father might begin teaching his son should his son not ask a question first. Read this way, *Mah Nishtanah* would have served as a sample script for explanation, available to the parent should the youngster be incapable of inquiring on his own. "A careful reading suggests that originally children were expected to ask their own spontaneous questions, and only if they failed to do so were parents expected to use the *Mah Nishtanah* as a prompt to point out differences between the Seder and all other nights."[34] Had a child naturally chimed in with original questions, we can surmise that the father might never have resorted to reciting the *Mah Nishtanah* at all.

Both Rashi and Rashbam's comments on b. Pesahim 116a support this reading. In response to the "And here the son asks his father," Rashi suggests that the son might ask his father, "What is different—מה נשתנה—that we are now mixing a second cup of wine before eating?" In this comment, Rashi implies that the words *Mah Nishtanah* may indeed have been spoken, but as a kind of stock phrase introducing an unrehearsed question, one born of natural curiosity about the Seder's structure or content. Rashbam characteristically quotes Rashi, but clarifies that this is what the son should do provided

[34] Arnow, David. "Passover for the Early Rabbis." in *My People's Passover Haggadah, Vol. 1.* Edited by Lawrence A. Hoffman and David Arnow. Woodstock: Jewish Lights, 2008, p. 17.

that he is חכם. Rashbam also adds a gleaning from Rashi's teacher, R. Yaakov ben Yakar, that a son should question at the Seder as did the daughters of Zelophechad in Numbers 27. It is not entirely clear what this reference is intended to mean, though it seems that ben Yakar was invoking the story to point out how the daughters questioned Moses intensively about the fairness of the inheritance law upon their father's death. Perhaps he was even suggesting that just as the daughters of Zelophechad challenged the law or historical conventions, that children at the Seder might question the very rabbinic conventions that constitute this ritual. It is also impossible to overlook the irony of ben Yakar invoking these five biblical daughters in the context of a Seder that speaks of four rabbinic sons!

Two incidents recounted in the Bavli offer strong evidence for Rashi and Rashbam's interpretation of *Mah Nishtanah's* purpose. The first is an incident recounted about the young scholar Abaye in b. Pesahim 115b:

> אביי הוה יתיב קמיה דרבה חזא דקא מדלי תכא מקמיה אמר להו עדיין לא קא אכלינן אתו קא מעקרי תכא מיקמן אמר ליה רבה **פטרתן מלומר מה נשתנה**:

> Abaye was sitting before Rabbah and saw the tray [portable table] removed from before him. He [Abaye] said to him [Rabbah], "We have not yet eaten, yet the tray is being uprooted from before us." Rabbah said to him, "**You have exempted us from saying *Mah Nishtanah*.**"

This vignette provides us with a perfect example of an organic question that a young person might ask when watching the unusual proceedings of a Passover Seder. While the Gemara does not explicitly record Abaye's comment in question form, we can see that his comment was intended to inquire about significance of this strange action. Rabbah's reply to the young student reinforces the assumption that *Mah Nishtanah* had become a kind of standard back-up—able to be used in the absence of questions like Abaye's, but

easily dispensed with should it not be a necessary trigger to the Seder's dialogue. "So originally, any son able to understand his role would pose random questions. Any query would do. If none emerged, the father explained the Haggadah's basic lesson."[35]

A second, similarly themed story appears on the next page. B. Pesahim 116a recounts:

> אמר ליה רב נחמן לדרו עבדיה: עבדא דמפיק ליה מריה לחירות ויהיב ליה כספא ודהבא מאי בעי למימר ליה? אמר ליה: בעי לאודויי ולשבוחי. א"ל: **פטרתן מלומר מה נשתנה**. פתח ואמר עבדים היינו:

> Rav Nachman said to Daru, his slave: [In the case of] a slave whose master has set him free and given him silver and gold, what should he [the slave] say to him [his master]? He [Daru] said to him [Rav Nachman]: He should thank and praise him. He [Rav Nachman] said to him [Daru]: **You have exempted us from saying *Mah Nishtanah*.** He [Rav Nachman] began [the telling of the Exodus narrative,] saying, "We were slaves…"

Here again we read of unscripted Seder dialogue leading to a pronouncement that the group is exempt from formally reciting the *Mah Nishtanah* text. In this instance, it is notably not a son, nor even a young scholar who provides the opening for a lesson, but rather a servant. This narrative may be even more illustrative than the first as to how and where *Mah Nishtanah* might have been used, as it concludes with Rav Nachman launching straight into the Seder teaching with the words *Avadim Hayinu* (typically thought of today as the "answer" or response to the Four Questions).

Both of these Talmudic snapshots support the hypothesis that *Mah Nishtanah* was never intended to be a fixed text in the *Haggadah* liturgy, but rather an available supplement to families should their Seder dialogue not be self-sufficient. Not all commentators agreed with Rashi and Rashbam however. The later Tosafists read these incidents differently and reinforced a stricter structure to the Seder than did their

[35] Hoffman, *My People's Passover Haggadah, Vol. 1*, p. 154.

predecessors. In their comments on b. *Pesahim* 115b, they insisted that Abaye's question did not exempt the group from saying *Mah Nishtanah* but rather would have merely introduced its recitation. Rabbi Daniel Landes succinctly summarizes these two interpretive positions. According to Tosafot, "the surprise of the child must lead to *Mah Nishtanah* itself," whereas "*Rashbam* sees the *Mah Nishtanah* as nothing but a particular formalized presentation of questions, inferior to the 'real' questions of what actually is happening."[36] The stance of the Tosafists marks a decisive historical shift toward a fixed Seder liturgy, a process that we know unfolded over centuries with all of our religious texts, including the regular *siddur*.

Even earlier than the Tosafists though, we have evidence that *Mah Nishtanah* was being used increasingly as a set passage. Rav Saadiah Gaon (9th century, Babylonia) writes in his siddur: "If there is a child who knows how to ask, he stands up and asks, מה דבר הלילה הזה [what is this night?] and the sage in the group answers him accordingly. And if there is no child who knows how to ask, behold the sage is the one who asks and he is the one who answers. And this is the question: מה נשתנה הלילה הזה מכל הלילות …"[37] One of Saadiah's colleagues, Rav Natronai Gaon, goes even a step further and instructs, "The one who blesses [over the wine] says, '*Mah Nishtanah*.' "[38] Whether or not there was a capable child present to ask other questions, it seems by the time of the Gaonim, it was the sage or service leader who most frequently recited the fixed passage.

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[36] Landes, Daniel. Halakhic Commentary in *My People's Passover Haggadah, Vol. 1*, p. 155.

[37] הגדה של פסח, סידור סעדיה גאון

[38] אוצר הגאונים, מסכת פסחים

Maimonides' Mishneh Torah further exemplifies this move towards ritual regulation, and with it we reach another chapter in the chronicle of *Mah Nishtanah*. As in the writings of his French and German contemporaries, it is clear from Rambam's code that *Mah Nishtanah* was by now a standard text recited during the Seder. *Hilhot Hametz U'Matzah* 8:2 instructs, " ומוזגין הכוס השני וכאן הבן שואל. ואומר הקורא מה נשתנה הלילה הזה מכל הלילות - They mix the second cup and here the son asks. Then the reader [of the *Haggadah*] says *Mah Nishtanah Ha Laila Hazeh*." While this language is very similar to that of the Talmud, there are a couple of substantial differences. First, Maimonides omits the Mishnaic phrase "אם אין דעת בבן אביו מלמדו," emphasizing even more the ideal of the son asking questions, regardless of his capability. Another significant divergence from the *b. Pesahim* is that here it is the leader of the Seder (and not the son or father) who recites *Mah Nishtanah.* This is a striking change from the traditional father-son paradigm set up by the Mishnah.

Hoffman interprets this reassignment of responsibility as a kind of insurance clause by Rambam: "Eventually… most authorities held that the actual *Mah Nishtanah* text was necessary, even if other questions were asked. Maimonides (among others) makes sure that happens by instructing the leader, not the son, to say it, lest the son ask something novel and forget to say the necessary text."[39] Landes offers another way of reading Rambam's new role assignment: "The child asks her or his own question because its genuineness is prized. The leader then reads the formal questions teaching this child the types of queries she or he may decide to ask one day." He adds, "Eliciting from

[39] Hoffman, *My People's Passover Haggadah, Vol. 1*, p. 154.

children a genuine question and teaching them how to probe further are two educational tasks of a parent."[40]

Dr. Alyssa Gray points out that we may in fact be misreading Maimonides, or at the very least, that there are variant manuscripts of *Hilhot Hametz U'Matzah*. One alternative reads, "הבן שואל ואומר מה נשתנה לקורא - the son asks and says *to* the reader [Seder leader] *Mah Nishtanah*."[41] This subtle shift of one letter (from הקורא to לקורא) would radically alter the choreography, more closely mirroring what happens at most Seders today—that a child recites *Mah Nishtanah* rather than being called on to ask spontaneous questions. A third possibility for how this might have played out in Maimonides' time would have been for the child to first recite the Four Questions and then for the Seder leader or participants to echo certain sections or read them a second time in entirety.[42] In either case, this alternative manuscript of Rambam may have been the basis for children starting to ask the four questions instead of a parent or teacher.

Professor Joshua Kulp rejects the hypothesis that a textual misreading led to the tradition of a child reciting *Mah Nishtanah*, and offers a simpler explanation of this cultural evolution:

> The switch to the recitation by the child was almost inevitable. When we combine two key factors: 1) the preference for the child to ask a question; 2) the mandated recitation of *Mah Nishtanah*, the likely result is the custom we have today, namely, a child recites the *Mah Nishtanah* […] The popularity of this custom attests to its 'catchiness'—there was no need for it to be anchored in a properly understood textual tradition."[43]

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[40] Landes, p. 155.
[41] Gray, Alyssa. Medieval Commentary in *My People's Passover Haggadah, Vol. 1.* Edited by Lawrence A. Hoffman and David Arnow. Woodstock: Jewish Lights, 2008, p. 52.
[42] Touger, Eliyahu. *Maimonides Mishneh Torah, Hilhot Hametz U'Matzah: A New Translation with Commentaries and Notes*. Jerusalem: Moznaim, 1988.
[43] Kulp, p. 198.

Although the reason and precise timing for this tradition may remain unproven, we know that the custom of a child chanting *Mah Nishtanah* is now ubiquitous and much beloved.

Conclusion

Professor Baruch Bokser writes, "The seder constitutes one of the most effective products of early rabbinic Judaism. It provides examples of the central rabbinic institutions of prayer, blessings, study, acts of loving kindness, and fellowship. Each activity was an act of piety and available to all Jews, not just the wealthy, or adults, or intellectuals."[44] Indeed, the Passover Seder remains one of the ritual masterpieces of the Sages. It is pedagogically compelling for Jews of all ages and backgrounds, with its many multi-sensory components, and groundbreaking democratic nature. However, what is not captured in this quotation is the fact that the Haggadah as we know it today is the result of a centuries-long evolution in Jewish thought and religious practice. It did not just appear overnight, nor does any one rabbinic text provide a complete blueprint.

Though the rabbis of the Mishnah and Talmud did give us the foundations for this ritual meal, the individual elements that comprise the Seder continued to be shaped by both rabbinic authorities and the overall Jewish population through Medieval and Modern times. This, we have seen, was certainly the case with *Mah Nishtanah*. Some edits, such as removing the question about roast meat, were the result of historical events coupled with theological concerns by the rabbis. Others, like the addition of a question about leaning or the editing of the dipping question, reflected a change in the surrounding secular culture. More modifications, particularly to the way in which this passage was

[44] Bokser, p. 99.

recited, seem to have been a response to the shifting concerns and capabilities of the Jewish community.

We can surmise from the texts surveyed here that originally *Mah Nishtanah* was a convenient supplement for fathers to use should their sons be unable to produce spontaneous questions at the Seder. By the time of the Talmud, this passage had likely become more of a fixture in the Seder liturgy, potentially recited by a father, scholar, or even wife, should the son not be capable of asking his own, spontaneous questions. Finally, by the time we reach the Gaonim, it is clear that *Mah Nishtanah* had become a relatively standard part of the Seder liturgy, and was usually recited by the Seder leader or sage among the group. Eventually, the recitation of this set text eclipsed the Mishnah's ideal of impromptu conversation, though somehow—perhaps due to a misreading of Rambam or a genuine desire to return to rabbinic roots—the tradition reemerged for children to be the one asking questions at the Seder table.

While the rabbis envisioned a more fluid Seder dialogue, as "the Haggadah developed, we lost the Mishnah's delicate balance: *keva* (fixity) completely overwhelmed *kavannah* (spontaneity)."[45] We know this was the case with Jewish liturgy in general over time, and yet there seems to be something more at play here than the propensity of the rabbis to standardize religious practice. One of the patterns we might notice across these texts is that every few hundred years, the typical reciter of *Mah Nishtanah* became one more step removed from the child himself. While it had ideally been the son who asked, we see that for some centuries it was usually the father who said this passage, and finally the Seder leader or sage of the group. This trajectory surely has parallels to

[45] Arnow, p. 19.

modern trends in Jewish education. It was once a given that every parent would personally educate his or her children about Judaism through a combination of modeling and direct explanation. Today most families outsource their children's Jewish education completely, often without any reinforcement at home, so it is only the professional Jewish educators (like the rabbis or sages of yore) who are filling this void.

In light of all this, I can't help but wonder: How many modern Jews are capable of asking thoughtful, spontaneous questions about Jewish ritual? Are we now an entire generation of parents and children incapable of fulfilling the Mishnah's ideal, and thus require a fixed script? And do we prefer it that way? It is nearly impossible to determine whether it was the codification of *Mah Nishtanah* in the Haggadah that let us off the hook or if it was our need for it that led to the script becoming set in the first place. Hoffman, among others, would probably argue that both premises are true. "As an author shapes a book, so Jews who keep a Seder determine the shape that Seder takes… What is not so appreciated, however, is that the direction of influence works both ways. As much as Jews shape their Seder, the Seder shapes the Jews who keep it. Religious ritual, generally, does that."[46]

There is no turning back time, nor would we necessarily want to relinquish the rich sourcebook into which our Haggadah has developed. Yet there are a variety of ways we may help restore the balance of *keva* and *kavannah* without compromising the integrity of the Passover liturgy. Such attempts to revive the role of spontaneous questions at the Seder date back to the Talmud itself. In b. *Pesahim* 108b, we read of Rabbi Akiva giving children roasted nuts and grain at the Seder to keep them awake and

[46] Hoffman, Lawrence A. "Peoplehood with Purpose," p. 49.

invoke questions, and of R. Eliezer grabbing or snatching matzah away from the youngsters in order to pique their curiosity. (This latter example may have been a pre-cursor to the contemporary custom of hiding the *afikoman* from the children for them to find.) Flash forward two millennia, and we might point to Susannah Heschel's conspicuous placement of an orange on her Seder plate as another trigger for genuine inquiry and meaningful dialogue.[47]

Especially with children around, almost any silly act or object would suffice to spice things up and follow in the footsteps of our Mishnaic forefathers. Some ideas I have encountered in recent years: making Passover trivia cards to randomly pull out of a hat and challenge the group with throughout the night; playing a giant game of Seder bingo as the meal unfolds; and inviting attendees to wear costumes for the evening. We need not come up with our own, entirely novel ideas though. Many Jewish educational companies have created resources to help us add some spontaneity back into our Seders, from Noam Zion's interactive Haggadot[48] to kits with Ten Plagues finger puppets or *Had Gadya* masks. (My family has amassed quite a collection of colorful and curious props over the years!) In addition to these more tangible items, we might consider adding some new questions to the Seder liturgy either as rhetorical food-for-thought or, ideally, as a true conversation trigger. Such examples might include: From what *mitzrayim* ("narrow straits") have I been liberated this past year? Which peoples in the world remain enslaved this Passover, and what can we do to help free them? How do I hope this night will be different for me a year from now? Every group will have its own comfort level

[47] Heschel's orange was not merely an arbitrary act to engender questions, but innovative symbolism to specifically honor those marginalized segments of the Jewish community, such as the LGBTQ populations.
[48] See *A Different Night* and *A Night to Remember*, edited by Noam Zion.

for sharing, but the idea is to replace some of the rote reading which the ritual has all too often become, and reclaim some of the original spirit of the Mishnah. With a little effort and inspiration from our past, we can ensure that the Seder will continue to be a night different from all other nights.

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Matzah: Bread of Affliction or Redemption?

The Taste of Freedom

In her famous children's song "I Am a Latke," Debbie Friedman sings the praises of the special foods we eat on each of the Jewish holidays: hallah on Shabbat, blintzes on Shavuot, and of course, latkes on Hanukkah. As the lyrics playfully reflect, every *hag* has an accompanying symbolic cuisine, rooted in either the agricultural season or the story behind the festival's origins. But with all due respect to the potato pancake, it is probably Passover's central dish, matzah, which evokes the most memories of both ancestral tales and modern family gatherings. Made merely of flour and water, there is so much to this food that is comprised of so little! Indeed, matzah's bland physical characteristics—flat, brittle, and relatively tasteless—belie the rich and multivalent tradition that surrounds this Passover symbol.

We first hear about מצות (the Hebrew plural for *matzah*) in Genesis 19:3, when Lot serves unleavened bread to the two angels who visit him. As a result, there are some *midrashim* that suggest the angelic visits to Lot as well as to Abraham and Sarah—where we read more generally of the matriarch baking עוגות or bready cakes—took place during the holiday of Passover.[49] These projections, of course, are entirely anachronistic; the festival itself is only established in the Book of Exodus, when matzah is formally introduced as part of the redemption narrative and God's later instructions to commemorate the occasion annually. In fact, *Pesah* is actually called חג המצות[50] and once

[49] See *Bereishit Rabbah Vayeira* 48:12 and Rashi's comment on Genesis 18:10.
[50] See Exodus 23:15, 34:18; Leviticus 23:6; Deuteronomy 16:16; 2 Chronicles 8:13, 30:13, 21, and 35:17.

even just המצות[51] in the *Tanakh.* More specifically, we read of the command to eat matzah during the week of Passover ten separate times in the Bible, [52] and in a few instances, the Israelites are told to have it together with bitter herbs (*merorim*) and the paschal offering:

Exodus 12:8

וְאָכְלוּ אֶת-הַבָּשָׂר, בַּלַּיְלָה הַזֶּה: צְלִי-אֵשׁ וּמַצּוֹת, עַל-מְרֹרִים יֹאכְלֻהוּ.

And they shall eat the flesh [of the paschal lamb] on that night: roast with fire and unleavened bread; with bitter herbs they shall eat it.

Numbers 9:11

בַּחֹדֶשׁ הַשֵּׁנִי בְּאַרְבָּעָה עָשָׂר יוֹם בֵּין הָעַרְבַּיִם יַעֲשׂוּ אֹתוֹ: עַל-מַצּוֹת וּמְרֹרִים יֹאכְלֻהוּ.

In the second month, on the fourteenth day, at dusk they shall do it: with unleavened bread and bitter herbs they shall eat it [the paschal lamb].

Despite matzah's prominent place in the Tanakh, we can presume that up until the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem, the *pesah* (paschal offering) was actually the paramount Passover food item, and that matzah served as a mere side dish like the bitter herbs. Nearly all of the Mishnaic material about the holiday relates to the selection, slaughtering, and eating of the paschal lamb, with only a few references to matzah sprinkled throughout the tractate. Although these laws were essentially impossible to observe by the time they were written down, it is clear that the Tannaim were especially concerned with preserving the protocols for such sacrifices. During the Amoraic and Gaonic periods, however, matzah's status slowly climbed as the Sages developed particular guidelines for observance of the festival that were further removed from the

[51] See Exodus 12:17.
[52] See Exodus 12:8, 15, 18, 20; 13:6, 7; Numbers 9:11, 28:17; Deuteronomy 16:3, 8.

original *pesah* rite. Whereas the paschal lamb would remain a petrified symbol, matzah could still be baked and eaten in real time each Passover, helping to reenact a portion of the Exodus story.

Meanwhile, matzah's association with the original paschal sacrifice became formally reinforced by a teaching of Rabban Gamliel from m. Pesahim 10:5:

> רבן גמליאל היה אומר: כל שלא אמר שלשה דברים אלו בפסח, לא יצא ידי חובתו. ואלו הן: פסח, מצה, ומרור. פסח, על שום שפסח המקום על בתי אבותינו במצרים. מצה, על שום שנגאלו אבותינו ממצרים. מרור, על שום שמררו המצרים את חיי אבותינו במצרים.
>
> Rabban Gamliel used to say: Anyone who does not mention these three items on Passover has not fulfilled his obligation. And they are: *Pesah* (the paschal offering), Matzah, and *Merorim* (bitter herbs). *Pesah,* because God passed over the houses of our ancestors in Egypt; Matzah, because our ancestors were redeemed in Egypt; Bitter Herbs, because the Egyptians embittered the lives of our ancestors in Egypt.

We recognize this text from its central place in the Haggadah, recited shortly before the meal commences with the eating of two out of these three items. Beyond just preserving the Bible's culinary trifecta, Rabban Gamliel's dictum elevated matzah's stature by referring to the three foods in seeming equivalence. Bokser explains, "By requiring that all three items be verbalized, Gamliel in effect equates them. This contributes to the larger effort of making the unleavened bread and bitter herbs as important as the sacrifice, which was shown in Mishnah 10:3, Tosefta Pesahim 2:22, and Mishnah 10:4."[53] What's more, Rabban Gamliel's teaching begins to concretize a formal mythology around each of the three Seder items.

[53] Bokser, Baruch M. *The Origins of the Seder: The Passover Rite and Early Rabbinic Judaism*. New York: Jewish Theological Press, 2002, p. 42.

It is noteworthy that Rabban Gamliel's explanations for both the paschal offering and bitter herbs include a clever Hebrew word play or element of etymology, whereas his reason for eating matzah at the Seder is contrastingly vague and lacks the same syntactic structure. Especially if one does not know the detailed Exodus account, God's redeeming of Israel does not immediately have a clear and direct connection to the eating of unleavened bread. Even when the Gemara (and later, Haggadah) develops these three interpretations and adds scriptural proof texts, there still seems to be a slight dissonance between the Tanna's initial rationale for eating matzah and the reasoning offered by the Haggadah. B. Pesahim 116 a-b records Rabban Gamliel's teaching together with these biblical verses:

> רבן גמליאל היה אומר: כל שלא אמר שלשה דברים אלו בפסח לא יצא ידי חובתו. ואלו הן: פסח, מצה, ומרור. פסח - על שום שפסח המקום על בתי אבותינו במצרים, שנאמר)שמות יב("ואמרתם זבח פסח הוא ליי אשר פסח על בתי בני ישראל במצרים בנגפו את מצרים ואת בתינו הציל. ויקד העם וישתחוו." מצה - על שום שנגאלו אבותינו ממצרים, שנאמר)שמות יב("ויאפו את הבצק אשר הוציאו ממצרים עגת מצות כי לא חמץ כי גרשו ממצרים ולא יכלו להתמהמה וגם צדה לא עשו להם." מרור - על שום שמררו המצריים את חיי אבותינו במצרים, שנאמר)שמות א(וימררו את חייהם בעבדה קשה בחמר ובלבנים ובכל עבדה בשדה את כל עבדתם אשר עבדו בהם בפרך."

> Rabban Gamliel used to say: Anyone who does not mention these three items on Passover has not fulfilled his obligation. And they are: *Pesah* (the paschal offering), Matzah, and *Merorim* (bitter herbs). *Pesah,* because God passed over the houses of our ancestors in Egypt; as it is said, "And you shall say 'it is a Passover sacrifice to Adonai, who passed over the houses of the children of Israel in Egypt when smiting the Egyptians, and saved our houses. And the people bowed down and prostrated themselves" (Exodus 12:27). Matzah, because our ancestors were redeemed in Egypt; as it is said, **"And they baked the dough which they brought out from Egypt into unleavened cakes, because it did not rise, because they were expelled from Egypt and they could not delay and they also had not made preparations for themselves" (Exodus 12:39).** Bitter Herbs, because the Egyptians embittered the lives of our ancestors in Egypt; as it is said, "And they embittered their lives with hard labor, with mortar and brick, and with all manner of labor in the field, all their labor which enslaved them with rigor" (Exodus 1:14).

While Exodus 12:39 clearly refers to the experience of fleeing Egypt and accounts for the origins of matzah, it does not explicitly reference "redemption" or otherwise employ the Hebrew root **ג-א-ל** as we might have expected based on Rabban Gamliel's other two examples. Tabory emphasizes that "this biblical prooftext is not really appropriate for there is no clear-cut relationship between the [Mishnah's] explanation, 'for they were redeemed,' and the biblical verse, which just points out that they had been driven out of Egypt before they managed to bake leavened bread." [54]

Sometime after the Talmud was codified, the rabbis further reworked Rabban Gamliel's statement to conform with the Seder's pervasive question-answer pattern. They edited each of the three foods explanations to begin "…**על שום ש**- ?**על שום מה**" ("What is it for? It is because… "). Finally, the Haggadah added a few lines to the Mishnah's explanation of matzah in an apparent attempt to better link Rabban Gamliel's original rationale about redemption and the scripture citations added by the Amoraim. In modern *Haggadot* we see that the Talmud's explanation has been amended to read:

> מצה זו שאנו אוכילים על שום מה? על שום שלא הפסיק בצקם של אבותינו להחמיץ עד שנגלה עליהם מלך מלכי המלכים הקדוש ברוך הוא וגאלם שנאמר...
>
> This matzah which we eat, what is its reason? **It is because the dough which our ancestors prepared did not have sufficient time to rise before the King, King of all Kings, the Holy One, Blessed be God, was revealed to them and redeemed them**; as it is said…

The text then continues with the quote from Exodus 12:39 which appears in the above Gemara excerpt, emphasizing the rush out of Egypt and bread which did not have time to rise. Despite Tabory and others' arguments about their tenuous connection, the linking of

[54] Tabory, Joseph. *JPS Commentary on the Haggadah.* Philadelphia: JPS, 2008, p. 31.

matzah with this verse did successfully solidify the association between our ancestors' baking and eating of matzah with the process of Divine deliverance. It was matzah, we might imagine, that represented the first taste of freedom for the biblical Israelites, and which serves today as a reminder of that miraculous liberation. Just as our tradition instructs that we should each see ourselves as having personally gone out of Egypt, so too must we each partake in this symbolic food of our ancestors as we celebrate having escaped servitude.

Matzah's connotation of the themes of freedom and redemption is strengthened by the rabbis' injunction that we must recline while eating it at the Seder. In b. Pesahim 108a, we read:

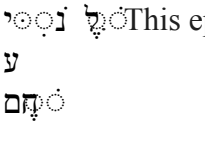
> ואפילו עני שבישראל לא יאכל עד שיסב. איתמר: מצה - צריך הסיבה, מרור - אין צריך הסיבה.
>
> Even a poor Israelite should not eat until he has reclined. It was stated: Matzah requires reclining; *maror* does not require reclining.

Leaning or reclining is one of the major Seder customs that demonstrates our freedom and distinguishes the festival night from a regular meal, as articulated by the *Mah Nishtanah* passage. In addition to leaning while drinking the four cups, we read in this Gemara that we are to recline while eating matzah as well. Although matzah and bitter herbs are both obligatory foods at the Seder, the rabbis ultimately only mandate that we eat the former in such a symbolic position. One reason for this might be that the *maror* corresponds with the bitterness of slavery while the matzah marks that moment at which the Israelites were finally liberated. Alternatively, this ruling might be due to the matzah's closer association with—and at times even supplanting of—the paschal sacrifice, which would have been eating while reclining. In either case, the Talmud's

instruction that we recline while eating this unleavened bread further fuels our understanding of matzah as a symbol of freedom.

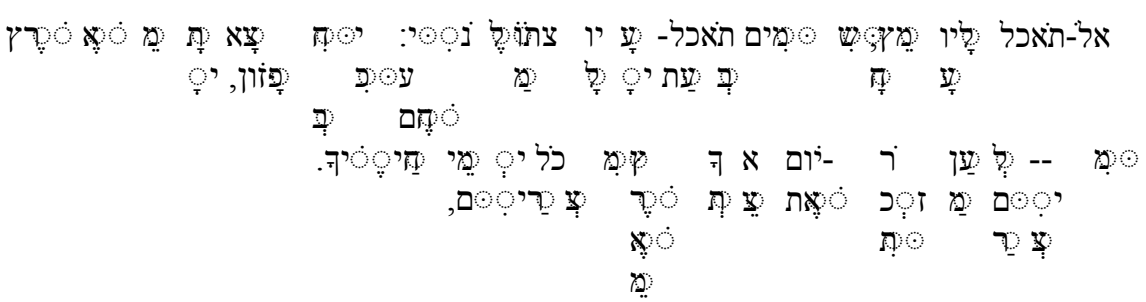
An Alternative Paradigm: Bread of Bondage

On the one hand matzah represents a redemptive quality and role in the Exodus miracle, sustaining our ancestors as they fled from Egypt. In the above sources it is seen as the biblical bread that celebrates God's protection and deliverance, which we eat today in affirmation of that enduring Divine covenant. Yet we also find within the Bible, and the later Haggadah liturgy, a radically different interpretation of this Seder food—that of



This epithet for matzah has been variously translated as "bread of poverty,"[55] "bread of affliction,"[56] "bread of distress,"[57] and even "bread of persecution,"[58] offering us a powerful opposing depiction of matzah.

The phrase *lehem oni* is mentioned only once biblically, and not even in the book of Exodus itself. We read in Deuteronomy 16:3:



You shall eat no leavened bread with it [the paschal lamb]; seven days you shall eat unleavened bread, the bread of affliction. For in haste did you come forth out of the land of Egypt in order that you may remember the day when you came forth out of the land of Egypt all the days of your life.

[55] See Rashi's comment on Deuteronomy 16:3.
[56] *The Union Haggadah: Home Service for the Passover*. CCAR Press, 1923.
[57] *JPS Hebrew-English Tanakh.* Philadelphia: JPS, 2003.
[58] Zion, Noam, and David Dishon. *A Different Night: The Family Participation Haggadah*. Jerusalem: Hartman, 1997, p. 36.

Here, as in Exodus 12:39, matzah is mentioned in the context of the Israelites' liberation, and their hurried departure is emphasized. However, the juxtaposition of מַצּוֹת with this new phrase לֶחֶם עֹנִי changes how we might view this unleavened bread; its connotations of poverty and affliction stress the slavery section of the Exodus narrative over the redemptive ending. The Amoraim offer multiple meanings for these two words, in part due to the unusual pointing of the Hebrew as it appears in the Torah. In b. Pesahim 115b-116a some of these interpretations are preserved:

> אמר שמואל: לחם עני ־ לחם שעונין עליו דברים. תניא נמי הכי לחם עני ־ לחם שעונין עליו דברים הרבה. דבר אחר: לחם עני ־ עני כתיב, מה עני שדרכו בפרוסה ־ אף כאן בפרוסה. דבר אחר: מה דרכו של עני ־ הוא מסיק ואשתו אופה, אף כאן נמי ־ הוא מסיק ואשתו אופה.

> Shmuel said, "bread of *oni*"—bread over which we declare [*onin*] things. A similar teaching also states "bread of *oni*"—bread over which we declare [*onin*] many things. Another interpretation: "bread of *oni*"—it is written "*ani*" [poor person]. Just as a poor person's way is that of a broken loaf, here too we have a broken loaf. Another interpretation: just as a poor person's way is to heat up [the oven] while his wife bakes [in haste], so here as well he heats up and his wife bakes [in haste].

This passage is an excellent example of Talmudic hermeneutics, with one Hebrew word yielding multiple possible meanings. Shmuel, for instance, links *lehem oni* directly to the developing Seder ritual, whereas the two "*davar aher*" interpretations relate more to the ways in which bread might be baked or eaten. Through each proposed *derashah* or interpretation, the rabbis seek to supply meaning to an otherwise ambiguous biblical phrase, informed by a combination of their own life experiences and grammatical strategies.

In addition to these translations of *lehem oni*, we find another series of interpretations in b. Pesahim 36a. The Gemara first posits that it is the "bread of affliction" because it must be eaten in grief or "**אנינות**," swapping the *ayin* for an *aleph* in a typical rabbinic word play. Later in this section, we are told that the term *lehem oni* excludes dough that was kneaded with wine, oil, or honey.[59] Since these ingredients would have made the matzah "rich," this is a vote for reading *oni* as it is written, without the *vav,* and translating the phrase as "bread of poverty." A few lines later in the Gemara, Akvia is quoted emphasizing the phrase's original pointing, and advocating for reading it to be read as "bread of poverty" rather than "bread of affliction." While Shmuel and others offered compelling midrashic interpretations, most *haggadot* reflect a translation more akin to Rabbi Akiva and Rashi's "bread of poverty." This interpretation is underscored by two key Seder elements: the ritualized breaking of a matzah and the recitation of the Aramaic passage *Ha Lahma Anya*.

The symbolic breaking of matzah, though likely based on both biblical and Talmudic texts, appears to have been a rather late addition to the Seder ceremony. The custom, termed *yahatz* in the mnemonic device for ordering the evening, is not mentioned by Rav Saadiah Gaon,[60] and appears without much explanation in Maimonides' *Mishneh Torah*. In *Hilhot Hametz U'Matzah* 8:6, Rambam instructs us on how matzah is to be blessed at the Seder:

> ולוקח שני רקיקין וחולק אחד מהן ומניח פרוס לתוך שלם ומברך המוציא לחם מן הארץ.
> ומפני-מה אינו מברך על שתי ככרות כשאר ימים טובים? משום שנאמר: "לחם עני"-
> מה דרכו של עני בפרוסה אף כאן בפרוסה.

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[59] In contrast to the Talmud, *Mekhilta de-Rabbi Shimon bar Yohai* 12:20 permits this type of matzah to be eaten on Passover, presuming that it has not risen, but agrees that it does not count as "*lehem oni*."

[60] Tabory, p. 25.

> He takes two cakes [of matzah], divides one of them, places the broken half inside the whole, and recites the blessing *hamotzi lehem min ha'aretz*. Why does he not recite a blessing on two [complete] loaves, as on other festivals? Because, as it is stated [in Deuteronomy 16:3], "the bread of poverty." Jut as a poor man is accustomed to eating a broken [loaf], so too, a broken loaf should be used [at the Seder].

Maimonides, in his advocating for reciting the blessing over an incomplete loaf is likely adapting a teaching from b. Berahot 39b, in which the Gemara accepts that on *Pesah* one need not prefer whole loaves for making *motzi*. Rav Papa is quoted in this section, saying: "**הכל מודים בפסח שמניח פרוסה בתוך שלמה ובוצע. מאי טעמא? לחם עני כתיב.**" – All admit that on Passover one places the broken piece inside the full one and performs [the blessing]. What is the reason? [Because] 'bread of poverty' (Deut. 16:3) is written."

Rav Papa's consideration is as close as the Talmud comes to specifying that we literally break the bread so long before figuratively "breaking bread," a tradition that is absent in the *Mishneh Torah* as well. Tabory explains, "Maimonides accepted the principle that the blessing over the matzah should be said over a broken loaf rather than a whole one, but he considered it sufficient to break one of the matzot later in the evening—just before reciting the blessing over bread."[61] As with so many aspects of the haggadah's development, we cannot be certain exactly when or why the ceremonial breaking that we now call *yahatz* was shifted to earlier in the Seder. We can surmise, however, that doing so would make it more likely to arouse the curiosity of children, which we know was among the rabbis' goals. Breaking the matzah would likely lead participants to anticipate that it would be promptly eaten; so when the matzah is returned

[61] Tabory, p. 25.

to its holder and the storytelling commences, the youngsters would be surprised and pay attention.

The symbolic act of breaking the matzah is further accentuated by the passage called "**הא לחמא עניא**," essentially an Aramaic translation of the Hebrew **לחם עני** from Deuteronomy. This prelude to the *maggid,* or narrative, section of the Seder is recited while holding the matzah up for all to see, and places the "bread of poverty" on center stage as the Exodus story unfolds:

> הא לחמא עניא די אכלו אבהתנא בארעא דמצרים. כל דכפין ייתי ויכל. כל דצריך ייתי ויפסח. השתא הכא. לשנה הבאה בארעא דישראל. השתא עבדי. לשנה הבאה בני חורין.
>
> This is the bread of poverty that our ancestors ate in the land of Egypt. Let all who are hungry come and eat. Let all who are needy come and [celebrate] Passover. Now we are here; next year [may we be] in the land of Israel. Now we are saves; next year [may we be] children of the free.

Theories as to the origins and purpose of this passage abound: although the Hebrew phrase *lehem oni* was obviously known to the Amoraim, we do not see any version of this text in either Talmud. More likely drafted during the Gaonic period, when Aramaic was the rabbis' vernacular language, *Ha Lahma Anya* appears to be first mentioned in *Seder Rav Amram Gaon* around 860 CE.[62]

Other scholars seek to date it far earlier to the first or second century, hypothesizing that it may have been a polemic against Jesus' declaration, "This is my body," over bread at the Last Supper.[63] Hoffman proposes that, "Contrary to Christians, who identified matzah with their *second* covenant (the one instituted by Jesus), Jews

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[62] Gray, Alyssa. Medieval Commentary in *My People's Passover Haggadah, Vol. 1.* Edited by Lawrence A. Hoffman and David Arnow. Woodstock: Jewish Lights, 2008, p. 126.
[63] As recorded in the New Testament, Luke 22:19.

made a liturgical point of tying it to the first (and *only*) covenant that began with our forebears who ate 'bread of affliction'."[64] While this theory is certainly interesting and much ink has been spilled about Jesus' Last Supper possibly having been a Passover Seder,[65] some remain unconvinced. Kulp comments, "While it is not impossible that a medieval recitation should be composed in competition with the Christians, […] it is equally likely that the prayer was based on internal Jewish needs only."[66] In any case, it is this metaphor of matzah as the "bread of poverty" that essentially starts the Seder and frames the food for us at its outset—a stark contrast from the initial paradigm I presented of matzah symbolizing freedom and redemption.

The Transformation of a Symbol

As we have seen, rabbinic sources include matzah traditions that reflect both ends of the Passover plot, from the hardship of Egyptian bondage to the joy of God's deliverance. So how do we reconcile the tension between these two competing interpretations, and how do they each play out in the Haggadah?

M. Pesahim 1:4 provides a clue, instructing us to teach our children about the festival and its laws accordingly: "**מתחיל בגנות ומסיים בשבח** - Begin with disgrace and conclude with praise." That is to say, the proceedings of the Seder ought to parallel the

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[64] Hoffman, Lawrence A. and David Arnow, eds. *My People's Passover Haggadah, Vol. 1*. Woodstock: Jewish Lights, 2008, p. 135.
[65] See, for example: Jeremias, Joachim. *The Eucharistic Words of Jesus*. 3d ed. New York: Augsburg Fortress, 1966; Bokser, Baruch M. "Was the Last Supper a Passover Seder?" *Biblical Archeology Review*. Spring 1987.; and Klawans, Jonathan. "Was Jesus' Last Supper a Seder?" *Biblical Archeology Review.* Online: http://www.bib-arch.org/e-features/jesus-last-supper.asp.
[66] Kulp, Joshua. *The Schechter Haggadah: Art, History, and Commentary*. Jerusalem: The Schechter Institute of Jewish Studies, 2009, p. 191.

arc of the Exodus story itself, from the shame and degradation of slavery to the exultation experienced upon the Israelites' liberation. Gillman comments: "That trajectory is expressed verbally throughout the Haggadah, but frequently, in Judaism, theological reflections are also articulated in another language, ritual behavior."[67] Hence we begin the *maggid* section by breaking a piece of matzah and speaking about the "bread of poverty," and end it with Rabban Gamliel's explanation of matzah as a reminder of God's redemption. So the meaning of matzah is neither exclusively that of slavery, nor freedom; rather, over the course of the Seder, its significance actually evolves through our ritual enactment of the Exodus. As Tabory puts it, "We might say that the bread is transformed from a symbol of distress to a symbol of freedom through the telling of the Passover story."[68]

Of course, on a practical level, this is all the same matzah we're talking about—be it the hand-baked, round *shmurim* (literally "guarded") *matzot* or perfectly perforated Manischewitz squares. According to Ross-Kopelman, it is primarily a psychological shift that yields new meaning for this unleavened bread:

> Matzah is one of those wonderful transcendent ritual items in Judaism, a symbol embodying a duality to teach a moral lesson. At the beginning of the seder, we break one of the cakes of matzah and call it the bread *(lehem)* of affliction *(oni).* It is the meager sustenance of slaves, the meanest fare of the poor, the quickly produced food of those who make a hurried, under-cover-of-dark getaway. Yet later, it represents freedom, the bread we ate when we were liberated from Egyptian bondage. In both situations, as slaves in Egypt and once we were free, we ate the same flat wafers. What was different was our own attitude when we ate: cowering, accepting our subservience, then claiming our rightful dignity as

[67] Gillman, Neil. Theological Commentary in *My People's Passover Haggadah, Vol. 1.* Edited by Lawrence A. Hoffman and David Arnow. Woodstock: Jewish Lights, 2008, p. 125.
[68] Tabory, p. 82.

> human beings equal before God. Just as we transform mentally and physically, the symbol of our status is transformed."[69]

This teaching speaks not only to the story of our biblical ancestors but to our own lives as well. How fine a line it sometimes is between feeling down in the trenches, covered in muck and mud, versus being able to access all the good that life (or God) has to offer us!

The Breslov Haggadah, based on the teachings of Rav Nahman of Breslov, shares a similar message about the two matzah motifs: "The bread did not change. Our awareness of its Source did! […] Two people can externally experience the same event. The one who is spiritually impoverished will perceive affliction and suffering. […] The one who is aware of the Source of all events will perceive benevolent providence."[70] With this *Hassidic* interpretation in mind, *The Breslov Haggadah* offers yet another name for matzah—"the Bread of Experience."[71] While it is often chance and circumstance that determine which side of the line we fall out on, there are moments when we have the choice to either see ourselves as shackled or insist that we are free. Moreover, there are times when we need to be reminded of the alternative. The invention of the Seder, and more specifically the injunction to eat matzah during it, can provide that psychological counterbalance to whichever state we are in. Bokser observes of Seder participants: "Those who felt themselves in a state of redemption needed to know that they had been slaves and to be thankful to God who redeemed them. Those who saw themselves as enslaved should remember that they had once been redeemed from slavery in Egypt. As

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[69] Ross, Lesli Koppelman. "Matzah." Online: http://www.myjewishlearning.com/holidays/Jewish_Holidays/Passover/The_Seder/Matzah.shtml. Excerpted from *Celebrate! The Complete Jewish Holiday Handbook.* Reprinted with permission of the publisher (Jason Aronson Inc.)

[70] Mykoff, Moshe, ed. *The Breslov Haggadah.* Jerusalem: Breslov Research Institute, 1989, p. 39.

[71] Ibid.

they had experienced redemption once, so would they experience it again."[72] Passover, and the dual symbolism of matzah, can teach us about the power of perspective.

We see now that the transformation of matzah's symbolism over the course of the Seder is intended not only to reflect the Israelites' change of status across the biblical narrative, but also what we as participants are supposed to be experiencing as well in the moment. The hope is that somehow we feel transformed and transported by this ritual, newly appreciative of our own freedom and perhaps more aware of those in the world who lack it. Rabbi Jonathan Sacks urges that this awareness move us to open our doors on Passover and help feed the hungry at our own table, just as the *Ha Lahma Anya* passage instructs. Sacks posits that "what transforms the bread of affliction into the bread of freedom is the willingness to share it with others. […] Sharing food is the first act through which slaves become free human beings. […] Reaching out to others, giving help to the needy and companionship to those who are alone, we bring freedom into the world, and with freedom, God."[73]

Maybe this is why the Haggadah provides us with one last reminder of *lehem oni,* when we bring back the second half of the matzah we broke back at *yahatz* and hid away during the meal. The rabbis taught that the matzah we now call *afikoman* ought to be the final flavor in our mouths as the Seder draws to a close, standing in for the paschal lamb in Temple times.[74] In a sense, the *afikoman* not only concludes the evening but also takes us full circle back to the Seder's start. Although we have already finished the four cups of wine and sung Hallel in praise of God's deliverance, we cannot depart without tasting

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[72] Bokser, p. 99.
[73] Sacks, Jonathan. *Rabbi Jonathan Sacks's Haggadah*. New York: Continuum, 2003, p.11.
[74] See b. Pesahim 119b and 120b.

once more the "bread of poverty." Perhaps this ritual coda is intended to remind us that although we are privileged enough to be dining as free people, there are others in the world who remain enslaved, and for whom we must work towards a similar liberation. Thus matzah, with its many shades of meaning, is above all a call to action: to retell the stories of our ancestors, to acknowledge and appreciate the many freedoms we enjoy in our lives, and to help ensure a future in which no person is left hungry or oppressed.

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Pidyon HaBen: Past and Present

The modern Jewish life cycle may include a number of milestone moments: *brit milah* (male circumcision and covenantal ceremony) or a *simhat bat* (female covenantal ceremony), becoming a *Bar* or *Bat Mitzvah*, a wedding for some, and a funeral for all. Most of us have attended each of these communal events countless times and are familiar with at least some of the customs that they entail. There is one life cycle ritual, however, of which few in the Reform movement have ever heard of, let alone seen. This lesser-known ceremony, called "Redemption of the [First-born] Son," or פדיון הבן, is supposed to be enacted on the thirty-first day of a baby boy's life if he is a mother's first child[75] to exempt him from complete dedication to God's service.

Pidyon HaBen is one of the few biblical rites that continues to be practiced today almost precisely as it was first described, despite the Temple's destruction some two thousand years ago. This is especially remarkable given the rabbis' relative silence for several centuries about how it ought to be performed. Hoffman notes, "Of all our rites, Redemption of the Firstborn is the least documented in rabbinic literature."[76] Clues as to the origins and purpose of this bizarre ritual are sprinkled throughout the Bible and Talmuds, though no single passage contains a full explanation. In fact, the ritual's primary reference in the Gemara comes as an addendum to *b. Pesahim* "which does not even purport to give us the whole rite."[77] Rather, we must piece together a variety of

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[75] Additional qualifications for *Pidyon HaBen* include having been delivered vaginally, the mother not having previously had a miscarriage, and not being born into a family from the priestly or Levitical line.
[76] Hoffman, Lawrence A. *Covenant of Blood: Circumcision and Gender in Rabbinic Judaism*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996, p. 185.
[77] Ibid.

biblical and rabbinic materials to understand why and how the tradition evolved. This paper seeks to trace the development of *Pidyon HaBen* in both ancient and medieval sources, as well as to examine contemporary responses to it by the liberal Jewish movements.

Biblical Beginnings

The commandment of פדיון הבן is introduced biblically in the midst of the Exodus narrative, and at first glance seems to be placed in the text haphazardly. As the Israelites are preparing to leave Egypt, God gives Moses one of the first commandments for the budding nation:

קַדֶּשׁ לִי כָּל בְּכוֹר פֶּטֶר כָּל-רֶחֶם בִּבְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל בָּאָדָם וּבַבְּהֵמָה לִי הוּא׃

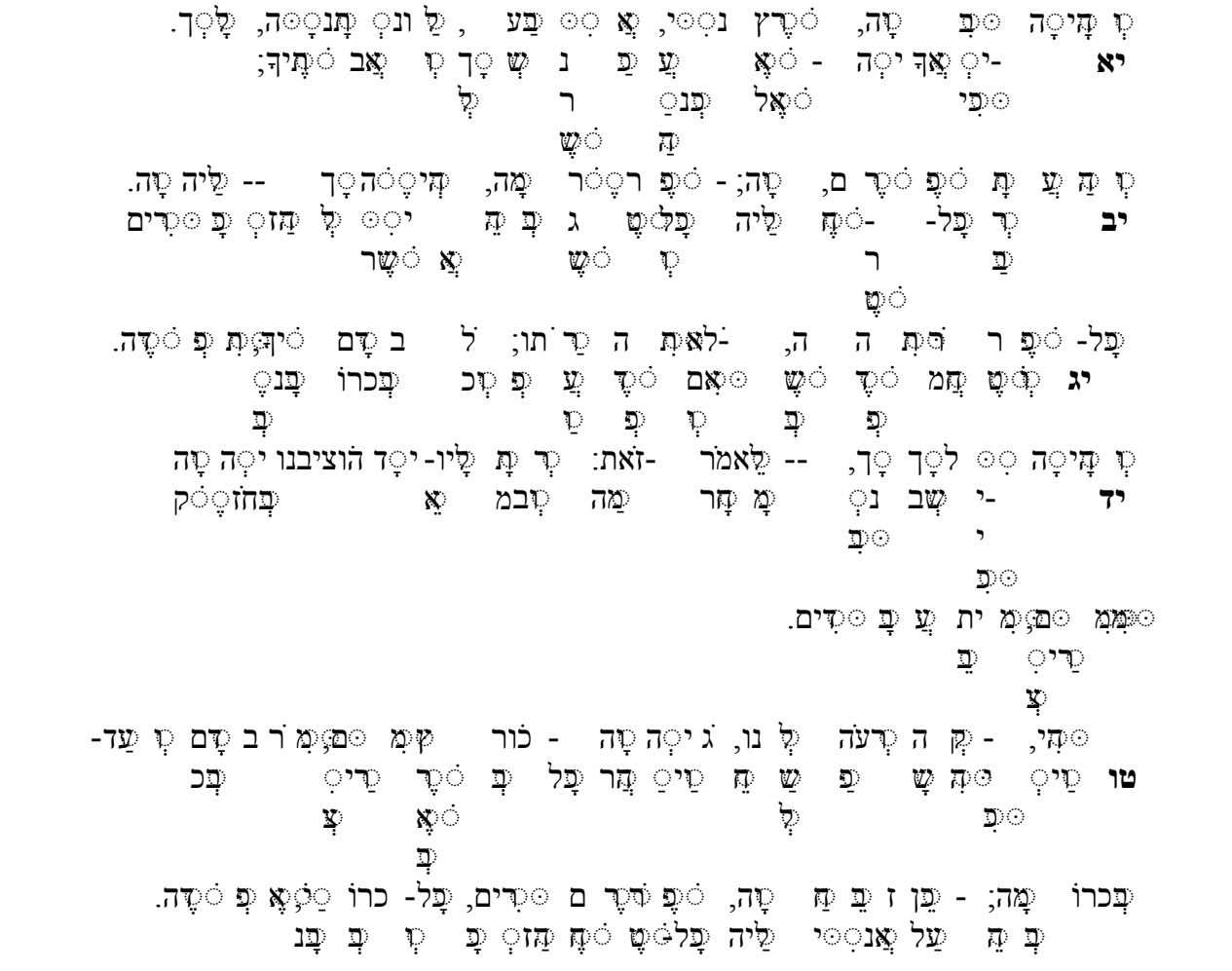
"Sanctify unto Me all the first-born; whatever opens the womb among the children of Israel, both of man and beast, it is mine (Exodus 13:2)."

The Hebrew root ק-ד-ש appears countless times across the Bible and is usually interpreted as "holy," "sanctified," or "consecrated," though a more literal translation of the root would be "set aside," "cut off," or "separated."[78] In Leviticus 19:2, God famously charges the Israelite community, "קְדֹשִׁים תִּהְיוּ כִּי קָדוֹשׁ אֲנִי יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵיכֶם" - You shall be holy, for I, Adonai your God, am holy." Elsewhere in the *Tanakh*, the Israelites are commanded to do the consecrating, though usually it is a period of time (e.g. Shabbat[79]) or a material good (e.g. first fruits[80]) that they are instructed to separate and sanctify. On the Sabbath and festivals the day itself is to be set aside through words and deeds, and in

[78] Jastrow, Marcus. "קדש." *A Dictionary of the Targumim, the Talmud Babli and Yerushalmi, and the Midrashic Literature.* Jerusalem: חורב, 1903.
[79] For examples, see Exodus 20:7, Exodus 31:14,15, Exodus 35:2, and Leviticus 23:3.
[80] For examples, see Exodus 23:19, Leviticus 23:9-14, and Deuteronomy 26:1-15.

the case of agricultural tithes or animal sacrifices, the people are told to divide off a percentage of their bounty for Adonai. With each of these holy dedications, the Israelites express thanksgiving to God and an acknowledgment that their good fortune is achieved only by Divine grace. Through these ritual acts, they also change the status of the items from חול (ordinary or profane) to קודש (holy).

According to the Torah's interpretation of *Pidyon HaBen*, it is some of the Israelites' very children who are to be sanctified, as if we could somehow tithe human beings like cattle or crops. While all of these other offerings may generally reflect gratitude to God for whatever item is being sanctified, the *Pidyon HaBen* consecration has a more particular rationale that is articulated in Exodus 13:11-15:



> **11** And when Adonai has brought you into the land of the Canaanites, as God swore to you and to your fathers, and has given it to you, **12** you shall set apart for Adonai every first issue of the womb: every male firstling that your cattle drop shall be Adonai's. **13** But every firstling ass you shall redeem with a sheep; if you do not redeem it, you must break its neck. And you must redeem every first-born male among your children. **14** And when, in time to come, your son asks you, saying "What does this mean?" you shall say to him, "It was with a mighty hand that Adonai brought us out from Egypt, the house of bondage. **15** When Pharaoh stubbornly refused to let us go, Adonai slew every first-born in the land of Egypt, the first-born of both man and beast. Therefore I sacrifice to Adonai every first male issue of the womb, but redeem every first-born among my sons."

As in the earlier verse from this chapter, we read here that all first-borns shall be dedicated to God, but now the Hebrew root פ-ד-ה is introduced, specifying the boys and beasts specifically are to be "redeemed." Against the backdrop of the Exodus story, the

logic of this law seems clear: Just as God redeemed our ancestors from slavery in Egypt, each family is commanded to redeem its first-born sons going forward. This, however, is not exactly what the text says. Rather, the *mitzvah* of *Pidyon HaBen* is specifically connected to the slaying of first-born Egyptians, and, we might guess, to the counterpart Israelite sons who were spared. Still, the Exodus passages leave much unknown about this ritual; they do not explain how exactly the Israelites are to redeem their first-born sons,[81] and are equally vague about what it means for a person to be consecrated to God. A series of excerpts from the book of Numbers begin to fill in some of these gaps and lay the foundation for the ceremony that is still done today.

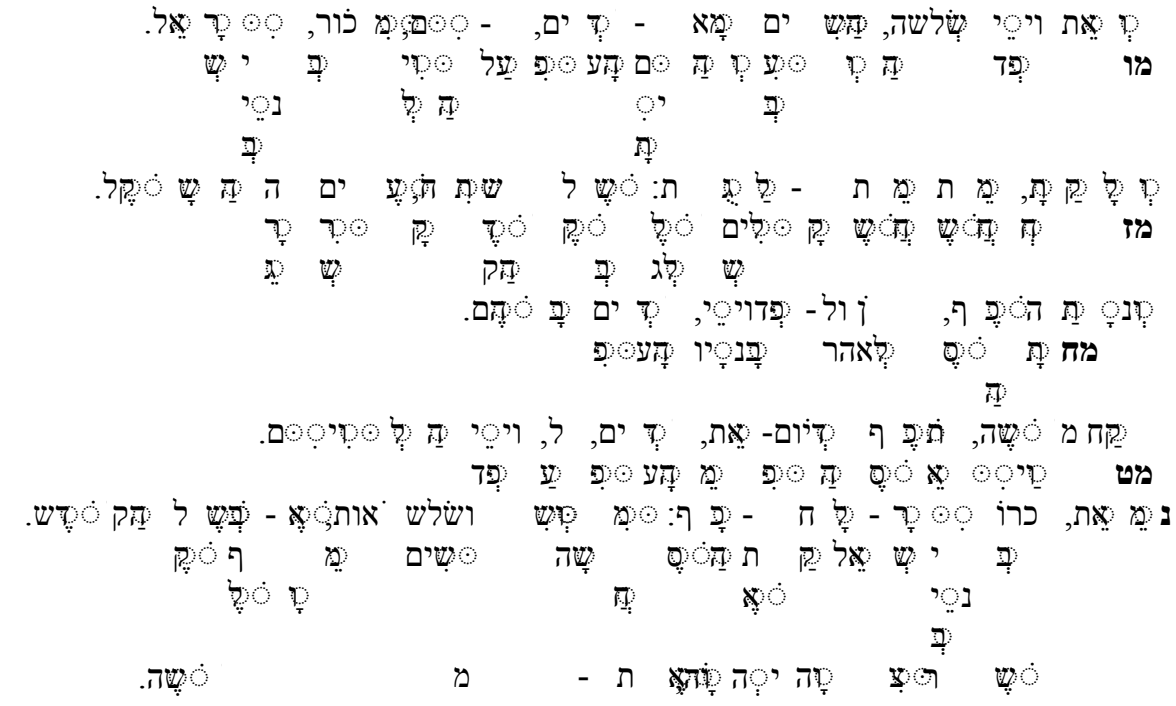
Pidyon HaBen appears again in Numbers 3 as Moses begins to complete the first Israelite census and divide up the encampment areas for each tribe. In the context of this counting—of every male who is twenty years of age or older[82]—we are reminded of what seems to be a flashback to Sinai when God told Moses to appoint Aaron and all the Levites to tend to the work of the tabernacle as priests.[83] A few lines later, the commandment to redeem all first-born Israelites is repeated, but now God clarifies that the Levitical priests will actually work in their stead as God's dedicated servants.[84] Rashi, in his comments on both Numbers 3:17 and 8:12, asserts that God's mind was changed about who would minister after the Israelites participated in the Golden Calf episode, while the Levites supposedly abstained. Of course, this *midrash* must have been the rabbis' attempt to explain an otherwise absent biblical plot point; it is never explicitly

[81] Rashi, for instance, in his comment on Exodus 13:13 notes that the price of redemption is explained elsewhere in Numbers 18:16.
[82] See Numbers 1:2-3.
[83] See Numbers 3:5-10.
[84] See Numbers 3:11-13 and Numbers 8:16-18.

stated in the Tanakh that the first-born Israelites would have served in that capacity, nor why the Levites were better suited.

What follows in Numbers 3 is some cultic number crunching; 22,273 first-born Israelite males minus 22,000 Levites equals a 273-man surplus of the former group. Still, the first-born Israelites are not able to merely return to normal life upon release from God's service without some sort of ceremony marking their reversed status. Like the Levites, these men are seen by God as holy and must somehow revert to an ordinary ritual state in order to rejoin the rest of the Israelite community. In this sense, to be redeemed is to be made חול as opposed to קודש—a kind of reverse sanctification. As Hoffman puts it: "Firstborn males are held to be inherently sacred, just like the universe in its pristine state; they too belong to God. Therefore, they must be redeemed from God if they are to live a human, that is, an everyday, life."[85]

Later in Numbers 3, God gives instructions as to how this smaller number is to be officially redeemed and thereby exempt from service:



◌ֶשׁה - ◌ֶכּ◌ ◌ֶסֶף , ול י◌ְה ◌ָה: ◌ַכּ ◌ְאָ
◌ֵתּן מ ◌ֶאת ◌ם◌ ן - ◌◌ִפּי
◌◌ִי ◌ִ ר - ◌ַעַל
נא ◌ַ י ה ◌ָבְּנ◌ָיו
◌ְדּ א
◌ִפּ ◌ְל
◌ַה

46 And as for the redemption price of the 273 Israelite first-born over and above the number of the Levites, **47** take five shekels per head—take this by the sanctuary weight, twenty *gerahs* to the shekel— **48** and give the money to Aaron and his sons as the redemption price for those who are in excess. **49** So Moses took the redemption money from those over and above the ones redeemed by the Levites. **50** He took the money from the first-born of the Israelites, 1,365 holy shekels. **51** And Moses gave the redemption money to Aaron and his sons at Adonai's bidding, as Adonai had commanded Moses.

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[85] Hoffman, p. 160.

From this passage we glean the first concrete details as to how the ceremony of *Pidyon HaBen* was originally enacted, much of which remains the same today. Most significantly, the text introduces an exchange of money on behalf of the redeemed son as the decisive ritual act. Whereas in most of the other redemption or sanctification rites, a portion of the item itself is given to the priests or God, the whole point of *Pidyon HaBen* is that parents are given the option of paying a kind of bail in place of actually dedicating their child to *Adonai*. Instead of parting with their sons, the Bible specifies that fathers pay five "holy *shekels*" to Aaron, the High Priest. This weighted silver currency, after which the modern Israeli *shekel* was fashioned, was used in all biblical transactions such as the half-*shekel* dues collected from every Israelite to sustain the tabernacle.[86]

Both the monetary value of these coins as well as their formal presentation to a priestly representative were reinforced by medieval codes and continue in the modern *Pidyon HaBen* ceremony. M. Behorot 8:7, for example, speaks about these five coins but substitutes the word סלעים for the comparable שקלים and adds that they were of Tyrian minting. A long series of debates is later recorded among the Amoraim in b. Behorot 50a-51b as to the appropriate denominations in their own day that would match the biblical measurement. Maimonides, consolidating these discussions into a set legal system, still refers to the standard of five silver *shekels* or the equivalent in *Hilhot Bikkurim* 11:6:

> מצוה זו נוהגת בכל מקום ובכל זמן, ובכמה פודהו בחמש סלעים שנאמר ופדוייו מבן חדש תפדה, בין בכסף בין בשוה כסף מן המטלטלין שגופן ממון כענין השקלים, לפיכך אין פודין בקרקעות ולא בעבדים מפני שהן כקרקעות ולא בשטרות לפי שאין גופן ממון ואם פדהו בהן אינו פדוי.

[86] See Exodus 30:13.

> This mitzvah [*Pidyon HaBen*] is practiced in every place and time. For how much should the son be redeemed? Five *selaim*, as it is written, "And their redemption money—from a month old you shall redeem them…" (Numbers 18:16). [It shall be paid in] silver or in articles worth silver such as movable property of similar worth to *shekalim*. Therefore one may not redeem [a first-born] with land nor with servants for they are like land. Nor with promissory notes because they are not movable property. If one redeemed [a first-born son] with these, he is not redeemed.

As codified by the *Mishneh Torah*, approximating the five biblical *shekels* or the monetary equivalent remained the model for use in *Pidyon HaBen*. Even today, fathers traditionally present five symbolic coins of value—sometimes US silver dollars—as part of the ceremony.

The excerpt from Numbers also sets the stage for the continued priestly role in this ritual, even long after Judaism maintained an official priesthood. We read in Numbers 3:51 that Aaron, the biblical high priest, accepted the money from Moses on behalf of the Levites. This is not entirely surprising since someone would clearly need to accept the money in God's stead, and it was usually the Levites who were beneficiaries of such financial or food contributions by their Israelite brethren.[87] Just as God instructed Aaron to collect the original redemption payment, today it is customary that a *kohen* (a Jew of priestly descent) fulfill the symbolic responsibility of accepting the coins. In the spirit of the original biblical act, this money often goes to help support the synagogue or to a communal *tzedakah* fund.

Finally, the Numbers passage delineates the timing for when this ritual should take place. Numbers 3:39 and 40 both speak about counting the first-born Israelites who are "מִבֶּן חֹדֶשׁ וָמָעְלָה from one month and upward." From this verse, the rabbis derived

[87] See Numbers 18:14-19.

that barring any medical problems or other extenuating circumstances, a son should be redeemed on the thirty-first day of his life, immediately after he has reached this prescribed age. The one major exception to this rule is if the thirty-first day falls on Shabbat or festival. Unlike a *brit milah,* which can still be performed at these sacred times, a *Pidyon HaBen* ceremony must wait until the following day because it involves a monetary transaction.

Rabbinic Expansion

One aspect of this ritual that the Bible does not mention at all is whether the father or priest are to say any prescribed declaration or benediction, as in the *bikkurim* offering.[88] In general, it was the rabbis who began to create liturgical templates for both day-to-day observance and rarer religious moments.[89] This seems to be the case with the *Pidyon HaBen* ceremony as well, since no verbal script is mentioned as part of the biblical rite. Yet even in the Mishnah and Talmuds there is no succinct explanation of how the ritual ought to unfold. *B. Kiddushin* 29a includes redemption as one of the central responsibilities a father has to his son, but says nothing of the ceremony. Even the entire Talmudic tractate *Behorot* ("choice ones," which refers to first-borns) sheds little light on the actual redemption ritual and mostly focuses on how to handle exceptional cases and first-born animals.

The most substantial reference to *Pidyon HaBen* in the Bavli comes in the form of a completely tangential *sugya* at the very end of *b. Pesahim* (121b):

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[88] See Deuteronomy 26:5-10 for the "My father was a wandering Aramean" speech that Israelites were instructed to recite when bringing their first fruits.
[89] See b. Berahot for examples of both daily prayer and blessings for special occasions.

רבי שמלאי איקלע לפדיון הבן בעו מיניה פשיטא על פדיון הבן אשר קדשנו במצותיו וצונו על פדיון הבן אבי הבן מברך ברוך שהחיינו וקיימנו והגיענו לזמן הזה כהן מברך או אבי הבן מברך כהן מברך דקמטי הנאה לידיה או אבי הבן מברך דקא עביד מצוה לא הוה בידיה אתא שאיל ביה מדרשא אמרו ליה אבי הבן מברך שתים והילכתא אבי הבן מברך שתים:

> R. Simlai attended a redemption of the [first-born] son. They inquired of him: It is obvious for the redemption of the son [that the blessing] "Who has sanctified us with your commandment and commanded us concerning the redemption of the first born" [should be] said by the father. [But as for the blessing] "Who has kept us alive and preserved us and enabled us o reach this season"—does the *kohen* recite it or the child's father? [Does the] *kohen* say the blessing since the benefit [of the money] goes to his hands, [or does the] father say the blessing since it is he who fulfills the *mitzvah*? He [R. Simlai] did not have [the answer] in hand, so he came and asked in the study hall. They said to him: The father of the son says both [blessings]. And the law is that the father of the son says both [blessings].

These final lines of tractate *Pesahim* provide us with the two main blessings that comprise the *Pidyon HaBen* ceremony even today: a *birkat hamitzvah* or blessing over the performance of this particular commandment, and the more ubiquitous *shehehiyanu* blessing, thanking God for reaching this special moment in time. Beyond just giving us basic liturgy, Hoffman suggests that this pericope reveals a "ritual rivalry" between the Babylonian and Palestinian academies at the time.[90] As reflected by a Genizah fragment, the custom in the land of Israel was for the *kohen* to say the first blessing, and the second not to be included at all.[91] Rabbi Simlai—a third-century Palestinian sage who moved to Babylonia—may have seen both methods and questioned which was preferred. However, according to Hoffman's theory, the redactors of the Babylonian Talmud included this tale as an anti-Palestinian polemic.[92] As in most such cases, the Bavli's

[90] Hoffman, p. 180.
[91] Ibid.
[92] Ibid.

ruling that the father should recite both these blessings at the *Pidyon HaBen* was upheld by the codes[93] and continues today.[94]

Throughout the Middle Ages, the ceremony continued to evolve as different Jewish populations added their own customs, only some of which are documented by available sources. Why some of these traditions disappeared across the centuries while others endured is just one of the many unsolved mysteries about *Pidyon HaBen*.

A Gaonic *teshuvah* preserves at least a snapshot of how the ceremony was done in one community:

> ואמ' רז"ל שחייב האב לברך בשעה שנותנן לכהן ב' ברכות אקב"ו על פדיון הבן ושהחיינו. ונהגו רבותינו ראשי הישיבות המקיימים מצות כהונה והזריזים בהם כשהם פודים בכור פטר רחם מביאין כוס של יין והדס ומברכין בפה"ג ובורא עצי בשמים ואח"כ אומר הכהן בא"י אמ"ה אשר קדש עובר במעי אמו ומ' יום חלק רמ"ח אברים ואח"כ נפח בו נשמה דכתיב: ויפח באפיו נשמת חיים ויהי האדם לנפש חיה עור ובשר תלבישני ובעצמות וגידים סככו דכתיב עור ובשר תלבישיני ובעצמות וגידים תסוככני והאכילו בנם נפלאותיו מאכל ומשתה דבש וחלב להתענג בו. וזימן מלאכיו לשמרו במעי אמו דכתיב חיים וחסד עשית עמדי וגו'. ואח"כ אומר זה בני בכורי וזהו ראשית אוני ופי שנים ראוי לתת לו שכן כתיב בתורת משה לתת לו פי שנים. אמו אומרת זהו בני בכורי שבו פתח הקב"ה דלתי בטני. ה' סלעים נתחייבנו לתת לכהן לפדותו ממנו שכך היא גזרת המלך שנא' אך פדה תפדה ואומר ופדויו מבן חדש תפדה ונא' ולקחת חמשת שקלים לגלגלת. יהי רצון מלפני אלהינו שכשם שהכניסו אביו לפדיון זה כך יכניסהו לתורה ולחופה ולמע"ט. בא"י מקדש ישראל בבכוריהם ופדיונם. ואח"ך מגביה הכהן ב' ידיו וסומך על ראשו ואומר: לאביו איזה חביב עליך יותר בנך או ה' סלעים הללו? והאב אומר: בני חביב עלי ואני פודהו ופודהו.]...[מיד נוטל הכהן הכסף ומוליכו בידו אצל ראש הבן ואומר ה' סלעים אלו פדיון בנו של פלוני זה. זה פדיון תחת זה, חלופי זה על זה. יצא זה לכהן ויכנס הבן לחיים ולירא שמים ומברכו ואומר אל יתן למוט רגליך וגו' ה' ישמר צאתך ובואך מעתה ועד עולם.

> And our teachers, may their memory be blessed, said that the father must make two blessings at the time of handing the money to the *kohen:* "Who has sanctified us through His *mitzvot* and commanded us regarding *Pidyon HaBen*" and "*Shehehiyanu*."

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[93] See *Hilhot Bikkurim* 11:5 and *Shulhan Arukh Yoreh Deah, Hilhot Pidyon HaBen* 305:10.

[94] Goldin, Hyman E. *Hamadrikh: The Rabbi's Guide*, New York: Hebrew Pub. Co., 1939.

It was the custom of our teachers, the heads of the academies who strictly observe the commandments of the priesthood, that when they redeem the first-born who opened the womb, they bring a cup of wine and myrtle and bless "Who created the fruit of the vine" and "Who created fragrant plants."

And afterwards the *kohen* says: "Blessed are You Adonai our God who sanctifies the fetus inside the mother, and [at] 40 days gave [him] 248 limbs and afterwards breathed a soul into him, as it is written (Genesis 2:7), 'And [God] breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living soul.' God clothed him with skin and flesh; with bones and sinews God covered him, as it is written (Job 10:11), 'With skin and flesh you have clothed me; with bones and sinews you have covered me.' And He fed him with the miracle of God's wonders, food and drink, honey and milk [for him] to delight in it. And He called on His angels to guard him inside his mother, as it is written (Job 10:12), 'Life and grace you have granted me'."

And afterwards he [the father] says, "This is my first-born son, and he is my chief possession and deserving of a double portion, as it is written in the Torah of Moses (Deuteronomy 21:17): '[he shall give the first-born son] a double portion'."

And the mother says: "This is my first-born son, through whom the Holy One, Blessed be He, opened the doors of my belly. We are required to give 5 *selaim* to the *kohen* to redeem him from him, for this is decree of the King, as it is said (Numbers 18:15), '[The first-born of man] you will surely redeem.' And it says (Numbers 18:16), 'And his redemption [money]—from one month and up you shall redeem,' as it is said (Numbers 3:47), 'You shall take 5 *shekels* a piece by the poll.' May it be the will before God that just as his father has brought him [the son] to redemption, so may he bring him to Torah [study], to the wedding canopy, and to good deeds. Blessed are you Adonai, who sanctifies the first-borns of Israel in their redemptions."

Afterwards, the *kohen* lifts up his two hands and lays them on the head [of the first-born son] and says to his father: "Which is more dear to you: your son or these five *sela'im* [coins]?" And the father says: "My son is more dear to me and I will redeem him," and he redeems him. […]

Immediately the *kohen* takes the money and holds it in his hand at the head of the son and says: "These five *selaim* are redemption for the son of so-and-so. This is the redemption [cost] in place of that [one], these are exchanged for that [one]. He is exempt from the *kohen* and [may] the son be entered into life, awe of heaven, and [may] he be blessed him and said (Psalm 121), 'He will not let your foot give way[…] *Adonai* will guard your going and coming now and forever'."[95]

[95] אוצר הגאונים, מסכת פסחים, שסב

This responsum is one of the only records we have of a complete *Pidyon HaBen* ceremony, and includes a number of ritual and liturgical elements that are not seen elsewhere. One aspect of the redemption ritual that we first read about here is the addition of wine and fragrant myrtle branches, and their corresponding blessings. The use of these two items in *Pidyon HaBen* is strikingly similar to their role in *Havdallah*, another ritual that symbolically marks the distinction between קודש from חול. At some point though, the spices must have fallen out of fashion, as the *Tur* only cites wine as part of the proceedings[96] (and Maimonides does not mention either in the *Mishneh Torah*). Today, blessing and drinking wine are usually the final steps of a *Pidyon HaBen* ceremony rather than the first ones, and mark the transition between the ritual and subsequent celebratory meal or *seudat mitzvah.*

We also see in the *teshuvah* much lengthier liturgy than that which the Talmud cites, as well as a formal dialogue that takes place between the father and *kohen*. The opening benediction is rife with biblical and midrashic references, depicting God's creation of humanity and how we are endowed with both body and soul in the womb. This elaborate poetic passage also depicts the angels watching over the unborn child in utero and God feeding the fetus honey and milk "for his delight." In a bookend effect, the closing Gaonic blessing of Psalm 121 also invokes God's protection of the child going forward. In all likelihood, none of these blessings were completely fixed at the time this *teshuvah* was written, but represent a random sample of what might have been said. Just as we know that for centuries the *shaliah tzibur* would create spontaneous prayers until a standard siddur was set and printed, so too might we imagine that the

[96] טור יורה דעה הלכות פדיון בכור סימן שה

officiating *kohanim* had a number of popular images from which to draw and improvised in the moment. Thus every blessing, like every new baby, was unique. Unfortunately, none of these beautiful blessings appear in the liturgical templates canonized by the Codes, and today the *kohen* typically just recites the standard priestly benediction from Numbers 6:24-26.

While the liturgical flourishes of this Gaonic ceremony have been largely lost, the central elements remain mostly intact, though in a slightly different order. A contemporary *Pidyon HaBen* still begins with a preamble by the father that this is his first-born son whom he is commanded to redeem, as per the biblical accounts in Numbers and Exodus. The two Talmudic blessings, mentioned early on in the Gaonic model, are now situated right in the middle of the ceremony, and followed by the formulaic question-answer exchange that appears in the *teshuvah*. The *kohen's* question is obviously a rhetorical one, as no father would actually select the silver coins over his own child. Yet still today, at every *Pidyon HaBen*, the father is asked the very same thing and expected to answer accordingly. This dramatic conversation may have been added to emphasize the father's intention or *kavannah*, an aspect of religious observance that was often of concern to the rabbis.[97] Just before the final benediction, the Gaonic ceremony ends with a formal declaration by the *kohen* that the five coins will indeed redeem the child, and that the deed is done. All of this dialogue was slightly reworded in a combination of Hebrew and Aramaic with each rendition of the ritual in the later Codes.[98]

In addition to including more personalized prayers for the child than we would find in a siddur today, this sample Gaonic ceremony features a rabbinic anomaly: a

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[97] See m. Berahot 2:1 and 5:1.

[98] טור/שולחן ערוך יורה דעה הלכות פדיון בכור סימן שה

significant speaking role for the baby's mother. Both the Talmuds and Codes exclusively deal with the actions and speech of the *kohen* and father, scarcely even noting if the infant's mother is present at the *Pidyon HaBen* . Here however, we have a remarkable example of women participating in religious ritual, speaking of commandedness, and reciting prayers. Like the father, we read that the mother also declares the boy to be her first-born, who "opened her womb." Moreover, she speaks in the plural—"נתחייבנו"—about the obligation that both parents share to redeem their son from the priest with the five coins. Like the *kohen's* long scriptural montage, the mother is also recorded as quoting various biblical verses that pertain to *Pidyon HaBen*, evidence that she too would have been familiar with these passages. Finally, it is she who recites a line similar to that said at a *brit milah*, expressing the hope that the child go on to study Torah, marry, and engage in good deeds. None of this speech is included in the *Mishneh Torah*, *Tur,* or *Shulhan Arukh;* in these later versions the father makes all declarations about the baby's status on the mother's behalf and only he and the *kohen* bless the boy.

The surprising presence of women's involvement in the Gaonic ceremony underscores how ironic it is that the mother seems to have had no formal role in the ritual before or since; after all, the qualification for being redeemed is primarily that the baby be the mot her's first-born (which only the woman herself can be absolutely sure of).[99] Hoffman speaks to this tension: "As with so many instances of women's involvement in ritual, practice and rabbinic theory are at odds here. On the one hand, only men are commanded to redeem children; on the other, only women can say whether a given child

[99] If the father were to be married twice, he could conceivably have first-born sons with both wives, and be obligated to redeem them both. Mothers, however, can only have one "first-born" son.

requires redemption."[100] Given the nature of this particular commandment, it seems fitting that the mother would have a role in the *Pidyon HaBen* ceremony, as she does in this Gaonic example. Nonetheless, we have no evidence that mothers were included in the ritual in Tannaitic or Amoraic times, nor was her prominent role in this responsum perpetuated by the later Codes.

Contemporary Responses

As expected, Orthodox communities today continue to practice this ancient redemption ritual exactly as prescribed by the Medieval rabbinic codes.[101] As a result, there is a hot market for engraved *Pidyon HaBen* coins on eBay, Amazon, and similar online sites. A *Jerusalem Post* article described a frantic search by an Orthodox family in Denver to acquire the appropriate *shekels* for their son's ceremony; apparently, the child's grandmother paid an astronomical $800 a piece for special 1970s commemorative coins from Israel, each made of 117 grams of pure silver.[102] (As the author notes, the Connecticut coin dealer later admitted that American silver dollars would have worked just fine too!)

The Conservative movement, also committed to observing *halakhah*, maintains the tradition as well, at least on an institutional level. While it is impossible to know how many families affiliated with the Jewish stream actually have performed *Pidyon HaBen*, the Conservative rabbi's manual includes the service in its life-cycle section.[103] In

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[100] Hoffman, p. 180.
[101] טור/שולחן ערוך יורה דעה הלכות פדיון בכור סימן שה
[102] Blass, Howard. "Redemption in Denver." *The Jerusalem Post*. February 23, 2012.
[103] מורה דרך: *The Rabbinical Assembly Rabbi's Manual*, New York: The Rabbinical Assembly, 1998, p.A-47-54.

addition, the Rabbinical Assembly's Committee on Jewish Law and Standards (CJLS)—the panel that guides *halakhic* decision-making for the movement—has published a few *teshuvot* in relation to the custom and its qualifications. For example, in 1991, a question was raised as to whether first-born sons delivered by Caesarian section should to be disqualified from the ritual.[104] Although accepted *halakhah* requires that the baby be birthed vaginally, and therefore literally be his mother's פטר רחם[105] ("the first issue of the womb"), the CJLS was asked to reconsider this position in light of how common Caesarian deliveries are in modern medicine. Ultimately, the majority of the group ruled to uphold the *halakhah* as it stands despite the changing contemporary circumstances.

A second *teshuvah* considers the delay of a *Pidyon HaBen* past the 31st day of a child's life, and, based on other *halakhic* precedents, agrees that holding the ceremony at exactly one month is an ideal but not a requirement.[106] It is noteworthy that the first part of this *teshuvah's* conclusion states, "The *mitzvah* of פדיון הבן should be strongly encouraged among Conservative Jews."[107] I imagine that such a comment was responding to the reality that this ritual is probably not performed by at least a significant number of Conservative constituents; otherwise, the encouragement by clergy would not be necessary. Lastly, in light of the Conservative movement's increasing egalitarianism, a question was posed to the CJLS as to whether a first-born daughter could be redeemed

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[104] Handler, Howard. *Pidyon HaBen and Caesarian Sections* (Responsum). Committee on Jewish Law and Standards, 1991.
[105] Exodus 13:2.
[106] Kurtz, Vernon H. *Delay of Pidyon HaBen* (Responsum). Committee on Jewish Law and Standards, 1995.
[107] Ibid.

in a similar ritual to that of a son.[108] Although the *teshuvah* encourages first-born girls to be celebrated at a *Simchat Bat*, it upholds the *halakhah* that this particular biblical requirement is only for boys.

The Reform movement's historical position on *Pidyon HaBen* is less enthusiastic, if not altogether condemning of the ritual. Washofsky explains, "Since Reform Judaism no longer recognizes a hereditary priesthood and does not believe that the first born son ought to occupy a status that is different from other sons and daughters, this ceremony is incongruous for Reform Jews, and, therefore is no longer performed."[109] A 1989 responsum on the question of the ceremony's status in the Reform community (and whether it may take place after a mother has had a miscarriage) similarly comments, "If it is done in Reform circles, it is a symbol of a tradition and a tie to the past." [110]

There are, undoubtedly, occasional exceptions to this view who choose to re-embrace the ritual despite the movement's general rejection of it. Rabbi Richard Sherwin published such an alternative view alongside the aforementioned responsum in that CCAR journal. He writes in response to Jacob's and the Responsa Committee's *teshuvah*:

> I believe that his response misses an important aspect that can yield tremendous meaning in the modern world. Jacob claims that if the ceremony is done in Reform circles, it is a symbol of a tradition and a tie to the past. I contend that it offers much more. The first-born—son or daughter, born through the birth canal or by C-section, following a miscarriage or not—is special. It is this child that extends a family into a new generation, moving every generation up one level: children become parents, parents become grandparents. Rituals are designed to

[108] Skolnik, Gerald. *Should There Be a Special Ceremony in Recognition of a First-Born Female Child?* (Responsum). Committee on Jewish Law and Standards, 1993.
[109] Washofsky, Mark. *Jewish Living: A Guide to Contemporary Reform Practice.* New York: UAHC Press, 2010, p. 147.
[110] Jacob, Walter, CCAR Responsa Committee. "*A Reform Responsum: Pidyon HaBen*." *Journal of Reform Judaism.* Winter 1989, p. 87-88.

> give expression to human emotions ranging from *simcha* to sorrow […] *Pidyon HaBen* (or *Pidyon haBat*) ceremony thus becomes far more than a simple tie to the past. […] *Pidyon HaBen* as a ceremony for welcoming the first-born child—adapted to include both mother and father—is still a most meaningful mitzvah.[111]

This passionate defense of the ritual is representative of a newer generation of Reform rabbis and congregants who are seeking to reclaim, reinvent, and "redeem" many traditions that had long been rejected by the movement.

Sherwin is not the only one to advocate that families consider adapting this ancient ritual to fit their modern sensibilities. A few egalitarian *Pidyon HaBen* and even *Pidyon Habat* ("redemption of the daughter") ceremonies have been drafted and can be found on websites such as Ritualwell.org.[112] One such script with feminine language for both the child and God is shared by Rabbi Rona Shapiro, who shared an excerpt on Ritualwell on behalf of creators Daniel and Myra Leifer.[113] Shapiro describes the Leifer's contribution in light of *Pidyon HaBen's* controversial place among liberal communities:

> Many Jews today ignore the ceremony, even for their firstborn male children, or find it distasteful since they do not like the idea of redeeming their child from priestly service which, for all intents and purposes, no longer exists. In creating a ceremony for their daughter, the Leifers also addressed this issue (see below) arguing that the deeper meaning of the service lay not in the child's dedication to the Temple, but in the idea that children do not ultimately belong to their parents but are rather "on loan" from the Holy One.[114]

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[111] Sherwin, Richard. "Communications: *Pidyon HaBen*." *Journal of Reform Judaism*, Summer 1989, p. 83.
[112] For another example, see Isaacs, Ronald H. *Rites of Passage: A Guide to the Jewish Life Cycle.* Hoboken: KTAV, 1992, p. 57-59.
[113] For full ceremony see: Leifer, Daniel and Myra. "On the Birth of a Daughter." *The Jewish Woman: New Perspectives* ed. Elizabeth Koltun, 1976.
[114] Shapiro, Rona. "Pidyon Ha-bat/Ha-ben (Redemption of the First Born)." Ritualwell. Online: http://www.ritualwell.org/ritual/pidyon-ha-bat-ha-ben-redemption-firstborn.

In an educational pamphlet produced by the Conservative Movement's Federation of Men's Clubs, Rabbi Neil Gillman similarly reflects, "The פדיון הבן ceremony serves as a constant reminder that we have little ultimate control over our possessions. This lesson in humility is part of the touching message of the פדיון הבן ritual."[115]

Even when framed by this universal teaching, it is admittedly difficult for some of us (this author included) to overcome a negative visceral reaction to the more chauvinistic aspects of this biblical ritual. However, I am equally ambivalent about attempts to reshape so thoroughly the ceremony that these elements are completely hidden, and thus its biblical roots altogether lost. On a personal note: I coincidentally began writing this paper only a few weeks after the birth of my first child, a daughter. Despite being steeped in this research about *Pidyon HaBen* as she was approaching being a month old, I was never compelled to attempt a repurposing of the ritual for her.

Instead, we named and welcomed our baby girl into the covenant through a personalized *Simchat Bat* ceremony, which has neither rigorous religious requirements nor misogynistic psychological hurdles to overcome. To be sure, *Pidyon HaBen* is just one of many Jewish practices—most, if you think about it—that were intended exclusively for men. As a soon-to-be-ordained female rabbi, I know firsthand how essential it is that we Reform Jews not "throw the baby out with the bathwater," first-born or otherwise! The challenge, for those of us committed to progressive Judaism, is how we can continue to evolve and enrich such rituals as *Pidyon HaBen*, and still have them feel authentic to our two-thousand-year heritage.

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[115] *A Guide to the Pidyon HaBen Ceremony.* New York: Federation of Jewish Men's Clubs, 1993, p. 4.

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