

# *A Guide for the Perplexed: Clarifying the Roles of the Leader of the Seder*

by Noam Zion (Leader's Guide of the *A Different Night*)

**David Hartman on Liberating the Seder** : The haggadah was meant to facilitate lively dialogue. Unfortunately seder too often becomes rote reading to "zoom" through, rather than a drama of creative roles. Don't let the printed word paralyze the imagination. Talk. Discuss. You are free. This haggadah invites you to shape your own seder.

## **Beware of Complaining about Boring Seders**

[In medieval Catholic Europe] religion was not a laughing matter, at least for the officials assigned to enforce orthodoxy. They did not treat even trivial jokes lightly. In France, a villager named Isambard was arrested for having exclaimed, when a friar announced after mass that he would say a few words about God, "The fewer the better."

In Spain, a tailor named Garcia Lopez, coming out of church just after the priest had announced the long schedule of services for the coming week, quipped that:

**"When we were Jews, we were bored stiff by one Passover each year, and now each day seems to be a Passover and feast day."** Garcia Lopez was denounced to the Inquisition.

(Steven Greenblatt, *The Swerve*, 236)

The leaders of the seder often face contradictory demands from the heterogeneous "audience" at the table, on one hand, and from the Jewish tradition embodied in the Haggadah, on the other hand. Personally I feel like the conductor of a symphony orchestra with a complex operatic score to perform. The Haggadah jumps from one movement to the next with very disjointed transitions. The audience is made up of a diverse group: some dislike classical Jewish "music" altogether and many cannot read the Hebrew libretto. Others remember the masterly performance of a beloved grandparent, against which they measure my poor imitation and condemn my every innovation as an unforgivable deviation. Non-Jewish guests and young children are totally unacquainted with the "program." The age range produces differing attention spans and many unscheduled intermissions. As for the

hungry and not-so-silent majority of the "audience", they sometimes prefer to end the "concert" after the first overture rather than demanding encores. The guests at the seder are, in fact, meant to be the musicians, yet they are often reluctant to participate in the concert. They often struggle among themselves to shorten the score in the middle of the performance.

Yet everyone seems to have such high expectations of the seder. It is no surprise that I feel inadequate to the task at hand. After all, I am no rabbi. Yet my grandparents and all of Jewish tradition peer over my shoulder insisting I carry on the torch, doing it all as it has been done for generations and engaging the next generation to boot.

What is the leader's role at the seder? By what criteria must you judge the evening successful? How do you concentrate on the main goal and avoid getting distracted by the details? Rabbinic tradition offers three models for the seder leader:

- (1) the priest/rabbi who is the *Master of Ceremonies*
- (2) the host of a symposium who is a *Talk-Show Moderator*
- (3) the parent educator who is a *Skilled Storyteller*

## (1) **Priestly Master of Ceremonies: Maintaining the Traditional Protocol**

The final poem of the seder declares: "*We have concluded the seder performed according to all the standards of Jewish law.*" It reflects the satisfaction of priestly/ rabbinic leaders who have completed all the steps of the seder, on time, and without skipping anything. They fulfilled their duties not only to religious law but to the age-old tradition of their grandparents. It was "done right," with the same conscientiousness with which the priests once conducted the Pesach sacrifice in the Temple. Even though the age of sacrifices is over, the Rabbis codified the "seder" — which means "the order of rites" to allow lay persons to transform their homes into miniature Temples. After a religiously meticulous purification of the house from *hametz*, the leaders become the stand-in for the priest at this home service. Since Pesach is the covenant renewal ceremony of the Jewish people, the punishment for a Seder improperly performed is figuratively *karet* — to be cut off from one's people.

In the twentieth century, rabbis are often hired to serve priestly roles in synagogue rites, but on Pesach the home is the synagogue and each parent must become the **master of Jewish ceremonies**. Even if we are lax on kashrut or holiday observance generally, Pesach is not to be taken lightly. It cannot be just a social get-together. The table must become a kind of altar, and the atmosphere must be more formal, more sanctified.

However, choosing the priestly/rabbinic role often means fighting a rear guard action against all those who want to "get to the food already." Many leaders think that the seder requires them to read all the Hebrew even if incomprehensible. Under time pressure, the priest-in-us may squelch adult discussions and postpone the need to dramatize the story for the children. In the name of the demands of tradition, innovations may seem threatening. The priestly leader may feel that without faithfully sticking to the order, the family seder will disintegrate and with it perhaps the family cohesiveness.

In appreciation of that impulse, our Haggadot *A Different Night* and *A Night to Remember* contain the complete traditional Haggadah with expanded directions for performing halachically mandated rituals, but they also contain much more. They offer adults and children both the stimulation of good discussion and the pleasure of a good story. The priestly seder seeks to maintain an "order" well-known (whether that of the secular kibbutz, of the Reform or Orthodox denominations). However that often lacks the novelty, the personalized emotional identification and the educational charm and flexibility that the Rabbis demanded no less.

## (2) Symposium Moderator or Talk Show Host: A Lively, Thoughtful Discussion

The Rabbis envisioned an additional role for the leader of the seder very different from the religious legalist. They sought a gracious and sophisticated host of a symposium. The meal, for Greek upper classes and for Rabbinic scholars alike, was a place for intellectual discussion — serious and light at once. The mark of an aristocratic Greco-Roman world was *schola*, leisure time, free time for intellectual pursuits (politics, philosophy, Homeric poetry) in an informal social setting around the living room.

While reclining on couches (living room in Greek is *tri-clinium* — three beds or couches), sipping wine ("*symposium*" means "drinking together"), and dipping vegetables in appetizing sauces, the host would propose a topic for discussion such as the nature of love (as in Plato's *Symposium*) or the origins of the holiday being celebrated. Later the celebrants would sing songs to praise the divine. The qualities demanded of the leader remind us of a top-notch talk-show moderator:

"The leader of the symposium "took pride in gathering about him many persons of culture and entertaining them with conversation ... now proposing topics worthy of enquiry, now disclosing solutions of his own; for he never put his questions without previous study or in a haphazard way, but with the utmost critical, even Socratic acumen, so that all admired the keen observation showed by his question."

(ATHENAEUS, *DEIPNOSOPHISTS*, 2ND C. GREECE)

"Questions should be easy, the problems plain and familiar, not intricate and dark, so that they may neither vex the unlearned nor frighten them from speaking up ... the discourse should be like our wine, common to all, of which everyone may equally partake."

"A symposium is a communion of serious and mirthful entertainment, discourse and symbolic actions .... (It furthers) a deeper insight into the points debated at the table. For the memory of the pleasures arising from the food is short-lived but the subjects of philosophical queries and discussions remain always fresh after they have been imparted." (PLUTARCH, *QUAESTIONES*, 2ND C. GREECE AND ROME)

The Rabbis, like the Greeks, loved to delve into the classics (Torah and Homer respectively) and derive philosophic insights. In the Haggadah the Biblical text *Arami Oved Avi* ("A Wandering Aramean," Deuteronomy 26) is the opening gambit and around it the Rabbis weaved "oral explications." This free-wheeling oral commentary is called *agadah* — one of the origins of the word *haggadah*. In Rabbinic symposia, playful and insightful comments were called for, as well as attempts to connect the classical texts to contemporary political events. (Some scholars say that the five rabbis who spent all night discussing the Exodus texts in Bnai B'rak were also laying the foundations for the Bar Kochba Revolt against the Roman Empire, 132 C.E.)

What would it mean to lead a seder as a rabbinic/philosophic symposium? First, the leaders would have to loosen up their exclusive focus on *reading* the Haggadah out loud. After all, "*haggadah*" does **not** mean book, it means oral commentary and discussion. The sample of Rabbinic commentary — *Arami Oved Ami* — found in the Haggadah would be viewed as just one of many possible ways to deal with the question of the evening: what is freedom?

Second, the measure of success would be the ability to engage as many participants as possible in the intellectual debate. Guests might be asked to prepare a short provocative contribution of their own. Questions, well-posed, would dominate rather than mere recitations of the text. The leaders would be judged not by their religious knowledge, but their ability to facilitate a general conversation about the Exodus and its contemporary significance.

No doubt this role definition is challenging. But that is precisely what the Rabbis wanted. They codified the ideal that every family hold a miniature Rabbinic symposium on Pesach, just as they codified the requirements to eat a precise minimum of *maror* and drink four cups of wine. Clearly the spirit of this Haggadah — *A Different Night* — encourages innovative discussions of this sort for all types of families, whatever their background. These "innovations" are in fact a return to the authentic Rabbinic seder.

The symposium model also has its drawbacks, however. It will be a longer seder, though more interesting and more participatory. Significant hors d'oeuvres must precede and accompany the discussion to prevent growling stomachs from drowning out the conversation. This model may be mistakenly perceived as a deviation from time honored Jewish traditions, so the leader must explain to the guests what will be different and why. Be aware that the focus on issues of interest to adults and perhaps older adolescents may go right over the heads of the children. Therefore it is important to balance between the **symposium model and the storytelling model of the seder.**

### (3) The Storytellers' Seder

The seder leaders are also **parent educators**. The biblical origin of the word "*haggadah*" echoes the commandment: "*v'higad'ta*" — "you shall tell your child." (EXODUS 13:8) True, since the days of the Rabbis formal Jewish education has been transferred from the parent to the teacher. Nevertheless, on Pesach night the parents are expected to reclaim their birth-right as primary Jewish educators for they have a family story of rescue to retell. **Not knowledge, primarily, but empathy is required.** The task is to dramatize the story so that "in every generation you shall see yourself as if you went out of Egypt." Only personal witnessing can transmit identification. In this spirit *A Different Night* suggests the leader ask the participants to retell personal stories of danger and escape, of enslavement and liberation, alongside the Exodus tale.

The parent educators must take their clues from the Haggadah but go beyond its recitation. For example, the singing of the four questions is not really enough. The Rabbis require parents to elicit real questions. Evoking them requires departing from the "seder" — the set ritual order — in order to create

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surprise and curiosity. That is the origin of the name *A Different Night* for as Maimonides explains: *One must make changes on this night, so the children will notice and ask: "Why is this night different?"*

The story of Exodus is mentioned over and over in the traditional Haggadah but never told. The Rabbis assumed the parent would **tell — not read — the** story at the appropriate level for each child. Therefore *A Different Night* adds children's versions of the Exodus as well as adult ones in order to facilitate the most central commandment of the evening. Ironically, those priestly leaders of the seder who mistakenly read only what the traditional Haggadah includes have not "completed the seder rite according to all its laws." They have forgotten to field the children's real questions and to retell the story dramatically.

In conclusion the traditional haggadah was not a libretto to be read and sung aloud word for word, but a **how-to manual** for the seder leader. Until the 19<sup>th</sup> C. when printed books became inexpensive only the seder leader would have a book. The less sophisticated leader just read it aloud turning what was meant to be an oral social interchange, form of living Oral Torah, into a performance of Written Torah read aloud like a formal Torah reading. But for those who understand the Rabbis' educational goals for the seder, the Haggadah is a do-it-yourself kit of songs, activities, advice, blessings, a checklist of key rituals and foods, triggers for Torah discussions, questions and answers and tricks for provoking questions and maintaining attention. Since most parents are not trained in pedagogy, the Haggadah is also a "Parenting for Dummies" book. So too it is a short guide to table rituals inspired by the Temple sacrifices and prescribed by the legally-inclined Rabbis. It is also a Discussion Guide for a Symposium and a Primer for a Drama Workshop on seeing oneself as if one went out of Egypt. Let the Haggadah be your guidebook for a Passover journey relived, but as with any guidebook you must choose from its menu of possibilities and construct an experience customized to your family, friends, beliefs, values and enriched by your talents and interests.