

Erev Shabbat Hagadol 5780

Why is this Night Different?

Rabbi Dr Andrew Goldstein
3 April 2020



This Shabbat goes by the name of Shabbat Hagadol – the Great Shabbat. sure. It is the Shabbat before Pesach and I'm not sure what will be so great about Pesach this year. Shabbat Hagadol got its name because of the closing words of the traditional Haftarah from Malachi (3:24) "Behold I will send you Elijah the prophet before the coming of the great and awesome day of the Eternal One, to turn the hearts of the parents to their children and the hearts of the children to their parents." Quite appropriate with mention of Elijah and the hope of family unity, parents and children together, the usual situation for Seder. But this year is different.

Shabbat Hagadol also got known because on this Shabbat the rabbi traditionally gave a great sermon – great in length, usually explaining the minutia of Pesach Kashrut. I promise not to bother you with kashrut or give a long sermon. And I do wonder how many otherwise strictly observant households will have to make compromises this year. The London Beit Din has made a few exceptions regarding salt and butter, but the Chief Rabbi couldn't find a way round Zoom Seders unlike some rabbis in Israel.

For all Jews world-wide this is a unique situation. The Torah tells us to gather the family together on Erev Pesach and if we consider our household too small, invite in our neighbour to join with us (Exodus 12:3-4). At the beginning of the Seder we declare: "*Ha lachma anya...* this is the bread of affliction...let all who are hungry come and eat, let all who are in need come and share our Pesach". This year so many face Seder night in self isolation. The mitzvah of inviting the stranger to join us, the lonely person, can't be contemplated.

Ma Nishtana - This year this night will certainly be different.

However, Jews with ingenuity have, in the past, coped with similar situations. Jews who are committed to celebrate Pesach have found ways. For generations, Marannos celebrated in strict secret lest the Inquisition found them out. Fifty or sixty years ago there were Refusniks in the Soviet Union, having to celebrate in secret or alone in the Gulag. Seders were held in concentration camps, the leader reciting the service by heart and with makeshift or make-believe symbols. Rabbis composing a prayer to be said when eating bread as no matzah was available. (Page 22b in our LJ Haggadah) For some it was seeking to perform the mitzvah ordained by God the redeemer even in times of oppression and persecution. For others it was the hope that just remembering the story of liberation would keep up one's spirits and the belief that freedom would come.

One of the benefits of being locked up at home is that this pre-Pesach I have had time to do what I have been promising myself for years...to sort out my collection of Haggadot. I tried not to peruse each one as I dusted them down, but I will share with you a few examples. Many have the time-honoured Hebrew but with a range of translations: Victorian English to modern gender-neutral versions. We used to have "Four Sons" now it is a quartet of "Children". In an American Haggadah of 1912 the fourth plague is "A myxture (sic) of noxious beasts" and the latest just has "Swarms".

My earliest Haggadah with an English translation was printed in 1780 and I have maybe a hundred published since then including 4 generations of Liberal Jewish versions, the best being of course the one Rabbi Pete Tobias and I together with Tammy Kustow produced ten years ago... now because of the emergency online with a new shortened version hot off the press or rather Tammy's laptop.

Of course, there are other translations in a variety of languages and I have represented 14 different languages, with obscure ones like Marathi and Chinese, Turkish and Bukharian, though it might be Russian as I can't read Cyrillic. And 6 or 7 in Russian, all printed since the end of the Cold war, playing catch up for a huge community denied Jewish ritual for so long. And do you recall the ones the Women's 36 committee had printed on airline paper to be sent by post to Refusniks, hoping to avoid the censors.

Many has been the Seder where each person brought their own so that there were many different versions round the table which led to a refrain "what page are we on?" Many the attempt to help the Seder go smoothly especially in an age where the Seder leader felt less than confident. Explanatory versions for DIY Seders that once were presided over by Zeider. Attempts to keep all generations interested. And now a range of puppets and toys for the Ten Plagues, jumping frogs made in China I suppose, ironic if you think about that.

Some Haggadot have responded to particular modern political situations. In the 1970s, the big campaign was the freedom of Soviet Jewry. I have already mentioned the air letter editions but there were campaigning Haggadot in the West. The "Let My People Go Haggadah" had wonderful political cartoons illustration by the master of this genre, Mark Podwal, who also collaborated with Elie Wiesel on another protest edition. Various social action groups have produced versions taking the themes of Pesach like liberation and ending poverty and applying these to contemporary situations. I have "The Woman's Haggadah", "The Humanist Haggadah", "The Mystical Haggadah", "The Haggadah for a secular celebration of Pesach". And "The Haggadah of the Liberated Lamb"... work that one out. And the beginning of a collection of early Kibbutz Haggadot, where God gets no mention and the pioneers celebrate themselves as responsible for redemption from exile. A Haggadah in braille and for those with restricted sight we nowadays have a range of recorded Seders.

But this year is different, the Covid-19 virus forcing many people to celebrate Seder isolated in their home, sadly many actually on their own. Some will give it a miss this year, like the Olympics and Wimbledon hoping to make up for it in a year's time. For some Zoom will be

the saviour to give just a hint of a connection to the family or friends. And do try out our short Liberal Jewish *Haggadah Limey Bidor* Haggadah for Days of Isolation.

Shabbat Hagadol, Pesach Hagadol... despite the difficulties of the time I think that looking back we will see greatness. Of society pulling together to overcome this Plague. And of Jews exploring all sorts of avenues... mostly modern avenues, to keep alive their connections to Jewish life and ritual. If Malachi was alive today I think he might have ended his book... behold I will send you Zoom to rescue the Jewish community, to rescue the Seder, to give comfort to so many in society, to many around the world living in isolation but connected by electronic media. Let this be in your mind as we mark Shabbat Hagadol. Jews have faced extraordinary times in the past, and as the very essence of Pesach tells: we will survive and we will be able to celebrate, in the future, in freedom and without fear. Bimheyra b'yameynu... soon and in our days.