THE EXODUS: AN EXTRAORDINARY PASSAGE

A Text-Learning Guide For Your Seder

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A project of the Aleph Society
The Exodus: An Extraordinary Passage

Welcome!

Passover is a time for asking questions. Everyone knows “The Four Questions”, but there is always so much more to think about when it comes to making the holiday and the Exodus meaningful for our lives. This guide contains excerpts of texts about the journey out of Egypt, and accompanying questions to prompt discussion about those texts. Use them to enrich your seder or to help your community members for their seders.

Here at the Global Day of Jewish Learning, our annual study theme serves as a lens to help us focus on new aspects of Jewish texts that we turn and return to each year. The 2018 study theme is Extraordinary Passages: Text and Travels, and the most extraordinary is the passage out of Egypt. We hope you will use the following resources as a map that points out new sights on your annual journey through the Exodus.

The holiday of Passover is about a journey. Experiencing the holiday is a journey in and of itself. What are the journeys that matter most to us, and what can we learn about ourselves through these experiences? The materials included here address these questions, and are taken from the writings and commentaries of Rabbi Adin Even-Israel Steinsaltz. Rabbi Steinsaltz is internationally regarded as one of the greatest rabbis of this century, he is best known for his commentary on the entire Talmud and his work on Jewish mysticism.

This selection is a deep dive into one small slice of the Haggada, framing it with the Bible, the Talmud and an essay from Rabbi Steinsaltz. Discussion questions accompany each text. Excerpts are from these sources:

1. Exodus 13:8, 14, from the Steinsaltz Bible
5. “The First Step”, an essay from On Being Free by Rabbi Steinsaltz

You can engage with any or all of the texts and discussion questions, adapting them in whatever way makes sense for your seder. Use them to inspire your conversations, or as a guide to bring fresh readings to the Haggada.

This journey to – and from – the past is still relevant today for so many reasons. The holiday of Passover celebrates the communal and the personal voyages we made in the past and will make today. We hope this text selection gives you a new way to discover, unfold and explore the Exodus.

Chag Sameach,

Karen Sponder  Eliana Moskowitz
Project Director  Community Coordinator

The Global Day of Jewish Learning
Text #1 – Exodus 13:8,14


13:8 You shall tell your son on that day, when you commemorate the exodus, saying: It is because of this, so that I will preserve the memory of these events and perform the commandments, that the Lord did this, all the signs and wonders, for me upon my exodus from Egypt.

... 

13:14 It shall be when your son asks you tomorrow, saying: What is this? Why do you redeem the human firstborn and the firstborn of a donkey, and consecrate the firstborn of sheep, goats and cattle? You shall say to him: With strength of hand, power and force, the Lord took us out from Egypt, from the house of bondage.

Discussion Notes:

d1 – You shall tell your son: This obligation, to preserve the memory of the exodus and to pass it on to the next generation by relating the story of the redemption to one’s children, is the basis of the Passover Haggada.

Discussion Questions for Text #1

1. Why is it important to make the Exodus a personal experience? Are there experiences in your life or your family’s that help you relate to the feelings and challenges of slavery or fleeing? How do the paths you have taken in life help you understand the journey out of Egypt?

2. Read Exodus 13:8 and 13:14 closely and compare how the departure from Egypt is described. Who is taking action in each verse? How do those differences in the way the verses are phrased change what you understand to be the key meaning of each verse? How might this help you understand the Haggada?

3. There are two types of journeys in these verses: one is the physical passage out of Egypt, and the other is how the story of the Exodus is carried through time by passing down the generations. In what ways are those journeys still happening? What steps might you take to continue or contribute to these journeys?
Text #2 – From “The Four Sons”


Expansions

The simple-natured son who does not know how to explain the details of his question poses his query in a general way: “And when, in time to come, your son asks you, saying, ‘What is this?’” (Exodus 13:14). And you must tell him, “With a strong hand the Lord brought us out of Egypt, from the grip of slavery” (13:14-17). And the one who does not know how to ask, who sees everything transpiring, and to him it all appears simple and normal, you must open [the story] for him. Explain everything to him, so that he understands what is happening, and why. As it is said, “And you shall tell your child on that day, ‘Because of this the Lord acted for me when I came out of Egypt’” (Exodus 13:8). This entire section of the Torah deals with the commandments that were intended to serve as a remembrance of the Exodus – especially the Paschal offering.

Discussion questions for Text #2

1. When you share your personal journey, do you tell that story in different ways to different people? Why or why not?

2. The two sons receive different explanations for why we celebrate Passover, and each explanation is a verse from the Book of Exodus. What are the similarities and differences between those explanations? What do those explanations tell us about those two children and their ways of understanding?

3. The sons are told the story in different ways. How is storytelling an act of remembering? What is the role of memory in the building of Jewish culture and society?
Expansions

The Declarations of Praise: Generation by generation, each person must see himself as if he himself had come out of Egypt, and this was not merely an episode that occurred many long years ago, but an event that transpires anew each Passover, in the life of both the individual and the nation. As it is said: “You shall tell your child on that day, ‘Because of this the Lord acted for me when I came out of Egypt’” (Exodus 13:8). The intention here is that each person should relate to the Exodus as if he had experienced it personally, because after all, it was not only our ancestors whom the Holy One redeemed; He redeemed us too along with them, as it was then that we became a distinct and independent nation. As it is said: “He took us out of there, to bring us to the land He promised our ancestors and to give it to us” (Deuteronomy 6:23). The redemption from Egypt and the entrance into and settlement of the land are one continuous process.

Continued...
Since it is customary to raise the cup of wine at this point, we first cover the matzot and recite: Therefore, in light of all these praiseworthy, benevolent acts that we have enumerated here, it is our duty to thank, praise, laud, glorify, exalt, honor, bless, raise high and acclaim the One who has performed all these miracles for our ancestors and for us. We now enumerate the different aspects of the miracles that occurred at the Exodus, corresponding to the various types of praise listed here. Who has brought us out from slavery to freedom, from sorrow to joy, from the grief of hard labor to the celebration of redemption, from the darkness of slaves who dwell in dungeons to great light, and from enslavement to redemption; and so we shall sing a new song before Him to mark this joy and goodness, i.e., the song of Hallel – Halleluya!

Discussion Notes

Generation by Generation: Even though Israel may be in the midst of another difficult exile, nevertheless, when God freed us from Egypt, He liberated something inside of us, so that on the spiritual level we will never again be subservient to the Pharaohs of every era and their cronies. Thus, not only did God free our ancestors in this redemption. But we, too, experience a spiritual redemption today as a result of the Exodus. It is our obligation to give thanks for this (See Zevah Pesah).

Each Person Must See Himself: Some have written that each and every year, the same sort of Supernal Light that was revealed when Israel left Egypt is revealed again on the seder night. One who merits experiencing this illumination can truly “see himself” return and experience the process of redemption, with the aid of this celestial lights. (Haflaah)

To Thank, Praise...and Acclaim: There are many different variations of this prayer. Some versions list seven distinct expressions of praise; others list eight. In accordance with the most prevalent custom, nine declarations of praise are listed here, and a tenth (for the sake of reaching a total of ten, considered a complete number) with the concluding words “And so we shall sing a new song before Him. Halleluya!”

“Lekalles”: To Acclaim: The root of the word lekalles, in the sense of glory and praise, is not native to the Hebrew language (indeed, the original Hebrew root has opposite connotations). It is borrowed from the Greek (kalos, meaning “beautiful”) and was utilized to form a new Hebrew root, whose implied meaning is to ascribe beauty to something – to extol and praise.

From Slavery to Freedom: Here, too, the Haggada lists five separate word pairs – ten expressions in all – corresponding to the ten declarations praise listed above. Some explain that each of these expressions conveys a separate idea: From the Egyptian slavery to freedom; from the enslavement in Babylon to redemption; from the sorrow of Persia to joy; from the grief of Greece to celebration; and from the darkness of the Roman exile – the last exile – to the great light of the final redemption (Zevah Pesah).

Discussion Questions for Text #3

1. Which of those experiences of leaving Egypt described in the Haggada – “...from sorrow to joy, from grief to celebration; from darkness to great light,” etc... – have you had in your life? How might these personal experiences help you appreciate and commemorate the Exodus?

2. What are some of the obligations listed in this text? How are they described? How do you connect the obligation to experience leaving Egypt personally with the duty to express gratitude?

3. What does “from Generation to Generation” mean to you? How might a journey through time, rather than across distance, be part of the Exodus itself? What steps might you take to continue that journey?
Text #4 – Pesaḥim 116b


MISHNA Rabban Gamliel would say: Anyone who did not say these three matters on Passover has not fulfilled his obligation: The Paschal lamb, matza, and bitter herbs. When one mentions these matters, he must elaborate and explain them: The Paschal lamb is brought because the Omnipotent Passover over the houses of our forefathers in Egypt, as it is stated: “You shall say: It is the sacrifice of the Lord’s Paschal offering for He passed over the houses of the children of Israel in Egypt, when he smote the Egyptians, and delivered our houses” (Exodus 12:27).

Rabban Gamliel continues to explain: The reason for matza is because our forefathers were redeemed from Egypt, as it is stated: “And they baked the dough that they took out of Egypt as cakes of matzot, for it was not leavened, as they were thrust out of Egypt and could not tarry, neither had they prepared for themselves any victual” (Exodus 12:39). The reason for bitter herbs is because the Egyptians embittered our forefathers’ lives in Egypt, as it is stated: “And they embittered their lives with hard service, in mortar and in brick; in all manner of service in the field, all the service that they made them serve was with rigor” (Exodus 1:14).

The tanna of the mishna further states: In each and every generation a person must view himself as though he personally left Egypt, as it is stated: “And you shall tell your son on that day, saying: It is because of this which the Lord did for me when I came forth out of Egypt” (Exodus 13:8). In every generation, each person must say: “This which the Lord did for me,” and not: This which the Lord did for my forefathers.

HALAKHA Anyone who does not say these three matters does not fulfill his obligation: One who does not mention the three matters of the Paschal lamb, matza, and bitter herbs on Passover has not fulfilled his obligation of reciting the Haggadah. The text of the Haggadah cites the Gemara verbatim (Rambam, Sefer Zemanim, Hilkhhot Matzot 7:5).
Discussion Questions for Text #4

1. The Talmud describes the reasons for including the Paschal Lamb, Matza and Bitter herbs in the seder. They are reminders of different aspects of slavery and our flight to freedom. How do these foods help immerse you in the feeling of escaping Egypt? How do these foods remind you of your family’s journey?

2. The commentary says, “The LORD did this for me...not: This which the LORD did for my forefathers.” How is it different to think of things as happening to someone else, a long time ago, rather than to yourself, now?

3. In what ways have you made a personal connection to the Exodus? How has that changed the ways you understand or empathize with other people? How does the Exodus inform the kinds of actions and decisions you take?
Passover, the festival of the Exodus from Egypt, is imprinted on all the days of the year. Moreover, the "memory of the Exodus from Egypt" is mentioned on almost every festive occasion.

What makes the Exodus from Egypt so important?

The Jewish festivals are first and foremost historical festivals: each one is a remembrance of a certain event in Jewish history. But their essence goes far beyond that. Whenever we remember a historical event, we connect ourselves not so much with the facts, but rather with their psychological and emotional significance. If we want to understand the personal, inner meaning of a festival, we should look to its intrinsic spiritual essence. And what is more, we should see the festivals as internal events in the life of the individual, which are reflections of the collective life of the nation. This approach will open a door for us toward a wider, albeit not immediately apparent, understanding.

Our sages say: "In every generation, each person must regard himself as if he came out of Egypt." This is the key to a new understanding of the festivals: in order to relive things, we must participate spiritually in the process of our people's birth.

At first glance, it seems that the Exodus from Egypt is not nearly as important as the giving of the Torah. The Exodus is the mere deliverance of the people of Israel from slavery, whereas the giving of the Torah is the event that shaped the character of our people. In other words, the giving of the Torah is the beginning of Jewish history, whereas the Exodus from Egypt – like the stories about the patriarchs – is, in this sense, prehistory.

If we translate historical events into terms pertaining to each individual's pilgrimage toward his true goal in life – the Promised Land – then the three festivals, together with their natural/agricultural symbolism of spring (Passover), reaping (Shavuot), and harvest (Sukkot), can be seen as landmarks along that path.

The individual journey begins when a person tears himself away from the state of aimlessness. This is the first step. At this point everything is still in the embryonic stage, incomplete and undefined – the festival of spring. Clearly, at this stage one does not fully understand the significance and future consequences of the spontaneous first step into the unknown. Only later does one reach a degree of maturity and self-knowledge that gives an understanding of the road taken. This is the time of the receiving of Torah, the feast of reaping. And only long after, possibly many years later, does one reach full awareness and the ability to enjoy the good fruits. This is the tranquil hour of "the season of our joy" – the feast of harvest.

These three stages of spiritual development can be found, in various forms, in the life of every individual, as well as in the spiritual and historical course of the nation as a whole. The Exodus from Egypt is the departure from material and spiritual nothingness in the direction of a new and as yet unknown destination. The spiritual baggage at the moment of this crucial decision is almost nonexistent. At most, it is "the bread of affliction."

Only later, farther along the path chosen without knowledge, does one reach full understanding; only then are goals and aspirations formulated in fixed laws. Then a person can see things in their entirety and evolve a bird's-eye view of his way in life and what it entails. This is the hour of the giving of Torah to the entire nation, and the hour of the receiving of Torah by the individual. The time of receiving the Torah is a time of turmoil and inner strife, despite the newly acquired spiritual and intellectual maturity. Things are forced upon us – "God forced the Mount [of Sinai] over the people of Israel like a pail" (Shabbat 88a) – and we find it difficult to absorb all of this novelty, which, however close to the heart, is as yet foreign to the spirit.

Continued...
Only after a lengthy period of digestion and adjustment does one attain a sense of inner integrity, wholeness, and peace. It is then that one feels capable of harvesting the crops that have grown in the course of time, and of enjoying them in calm and happiness.

There are three points, then, in a man's path: the decision, the understanding, and the rejoicing. All are essential and important, but not equally important. Which one bears the greatest significance?

At the point of departure, the people of Israel were a nation of slaves in body, mind, and spirit. They had no spiritual content or any real goal in life. The only thing they did have was a vague sense of continuity, an obscure link with their forefathers. This is what prevented them from assimilating completely with the Egyptians, and what prepared them for what they were about to be given.

Then came the call to depart from Egypt. The very desire for freedom was a tremendous revolution in the soul of this nation of slaves; it was the awakening of the need for inner freedom that exists in the soul of every individual. And although they did not yet know God, and had no idea as to how the Exodus would in fact occur – they believed. The slaves had neither knowledge nor understanding, and yet they went out into an unknown and unmapped desert.

Such a spark of faith can enable those who possess it to overcome all dangers and obstacles. True, this path of faith is almost bereft of profound intellectual content, but it creates a link that goes much deeper than that of any other kind. It is a relationship of devotion, of inner oneness beyond perception, with the Divine.

This lightning decision, this inexplicable faith, conceals within itself the seeds of all that will in due course be revealed. This is where the relationship begins and where its character is shaped. The overt, external revelation occurs at a later stage; but the inner, essential relationship is there from the very beginning, from the very first act of faith. This is why the people of Israel were able to say, prior to the giving of Torah, "We shall do and we shall hearken" (Exodus 24:7), because their essential link with the Torah, albeit hidden, was there from the first.

The prophet Jeremiah says, "I remember in thy favor the devotion of thy youth, thy love as a bride, when thou didst go after me in the wilderness, in a land that was not sown" (Jeremiah 2:2). The memory of the basic relationship of the people with God is the memory of the decision to depart from Egypt: The young nation of Israel, inexperienced and ignorant, followed God without knowing anything about Him, about the commandments He was about to give, or about the path they were destined to take.

The essence of the Exodus, then, is in the initial, faith-motivated decision to leave the ordinary, the routine life, and to follow God. This is that all-inclusive point of departure. Prior to that there is nothing. All the rest is elaboration. This is what gives Passover – the festival of spring – its prominence among the festivals. And this is also why the month of Nisan, the month of spring, is the first month – the starting point, the beginning.

**Discussion Questions for Text #5**

1. Think of a life experience in which you are at the first stage. How does experiencing the Exodus help you take a step forward?

2. We are meant to experience the Exodus individually and personally, but it is still a story about a group of people, and the birth of a nation. What does it mean to experience coming out of Egypt with a group of people? How is your sense of belonging in a community tied to experiencing challenges together?

3. Why do you think Rabbi Steinsaltz describes going out of Egypt and “into an unknown and unmapped desert” as a “path of faith”? Think of a time when you went into the unknown. What can the Exodus teach us about how to handle such a situation?
Discussion Questions for All Texts

Exodus 13:8,14
1. Why is it important to make the Exodus a personal experience? Are there experiences in your life or your family's that help you relate to the feelings and challenges of slavery or fleeing? How do the paths you have taken in life help you understand the journey out of Egypt?
2. Read Exodus 13:8 and 13:14 closely and compare how the departure from Egypt is described. Who is taking action in each verse? How do those differences in the way the verses are phrased change what you understand to be the key meaning of each verse? How might this help you understand the Haggada?
3. There are two types of journeys in these verses: one is the physical passage out of Egypt, and the other is how the story of the Exodus is carried through time by passing down the generations. In what ways are those journeys still happening? What steps might you take to continue or contribute to these journeys?

Haggada – from “The Four Sons”
1. When you share your personal journey, do you tell that story in different ways to different people? Why or why not?
2. The two sons receive different explanations for why we celebrate Passover, and each explanation is a verse from the Book of Exodus. What are the similarities and differences between those explanations? What do those explanations tell us about those two children and their ways of understanding?
3. The sons are told the story in different ways. How is storytelling an act of remembering? What is the role of memory in the building of Jewish culture and society?

Haggada – “Generation by Generation”
1. Which of those experiences of leaving Egypt described in the Haggada – “...from sorrow to joy, from grief to celebration; from darkness to great light,” etc... – have you had in your life? How might these personal experiences help you appreciate and commemorate the Exodus?
2. What are some of the obligations listed in this text? How are they described? How do you connect the obligation to experience leaving Egypt personally with the duty to express gratitude?
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Babylonian Talmud, Pesaḥim 116b
1. The Talmud describes the reasons for including the Paschal Lamb, Matza and Bitter herbs in the seder. They are reminders of different aspects of slavery and our flight to freedom. How do these foods help immerse you in the feeling of escaping Egypt? How do these foods remind you of your family's journey?
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3. In what ways have you made a personal connection to the Exodus? How has that changed the ways you understand or empathize with other people? How does the Exodus inform the kinds of actions and decisions you take?

“The First Step”
1. Think of a life experience in which you are at the first stage. How does experiencing the Exodus help you take a step forward?
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About the Global Day of Jewish Learning

The Global Day of Jewish Learning unites Jewish communities across the world through the study of our shared texts. Explore the richness of our Jewish heritage with the 2018 Global Day of Jewish Learning on Sunday, November 11. The study theme is Extraordinary Passages: Text and Travels. What are the journeys that matter most to us? From ancient adventures to the modern diaspora, spiritual to physical, you can experience the journeys of individuals and the Jewish people. Tens of thousands of Jews in 500+ communities in 46 countries across 6 continents come together for this truly unique learning event.

The Aleph Society

The Aleph Society is the parent organization of the Global Day of Jewish Learning. Founded in 1988, the Aleph Society expands Rabbi Adin Even-Israel Steinsaltz’s goal of the development of Jews, Jewish identity and Jewish communities. The Aleph Society gives Jews everywhere access to fundamental texts and the skills with which to understand those texts. To read more of Rabbi Steinsaltz work, to subscribe to daily Talmud essays, or to make a donation visit steinsaltz.org.

Rabbi Adin Even-Israel Steinsaltz

Rabbi Steinsaltz is a teacher, philosopher, social critic and prolific author of more than 60 books. His lifelong work in Jewish education earned him the Israel Prize, his country’s highest honor.

Born in Jerusalem in 1937 to secular parents, Rabbi Steinsaltz studied physics and chemistry at the Hebrew University. He established several experimental schools and, at the age of 24, became Israel’s youngest school principal.

In 1965, he began his monumental Hebrew translation and commentary on the Talmud, which was completed in 2010. The Rabbi’s classic work of Kabbalah, The Thirteen Petalled Rose, was first published in 1980 and now appears in eight languages. In all, Rabbi Steinsaltz has authored some 60 books and hundreds of articles on subjects ranging from zoology to theology to social commentary. In 2012, Koren Publishers released the English edition of Rabbi Steinsaltz’s Talmud translation and commentary, and in 2018 will publish the groundbreaking Steinsaltz Bible.
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WHAT TIME: Whenever works best for you and your community schedule.

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HOW: Get started using the FREE, easy-to-use study guide.
Your community can explore the richness of Jewish texts in your very own Global Day event.

IDEAS: follow the curriculum, adapt the materials, invite a guest speaker, watch learning videos...

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Registration is FREE. Materials are FREE.

Questions? Call us at +1 (212) 840-1166 or email eliana@theGlobalDay.org.

The Global Day furthers the mission of Rabbi Adin Even-Israel Steinsaltz, to “Let My People Know”