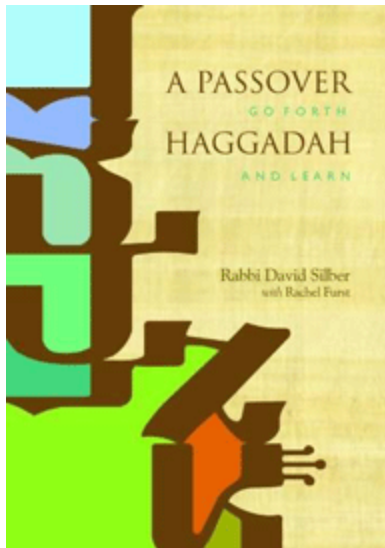


Taking The Haggadah Personally

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A former student of Rabbi David Silber at the Drisha Institute for Jewish Education offered the rabbi a suggestion a few years ago — he should do his own Haggadah, based on the Passover-based classes and lectures he had given for three decades.

The rabbi's first answer was "no."

"I've never written anything in my life," he explains. "I teach. I speak. I've never written — maybe two or three articles."

Then, upon the advice of other students, he reconsidered. He had accumulated a life's worth of insights into Passover and the seder's message, and a book would reach a wider audience than the groups he teaches at Drisha, the institution on the Upper West Side he founded in 1979 to bring "classical Jewish texts" to women on an equal basis with men.

Rabbi Silber approached Rachel Furst, another former Drisha student, who is now living in Jerusalem and studying for her Ph.D. in Talmud at Hebrew University. Furst, "a very good writer," would be his assistant, putting his taped speeches and outlines into publishable form.

Their product, "A Passover Haggadah: Go Forth and Learn" (Jewish Publication Society), is two books in one: the rabbi's essays on such topics as "Elu Eser Makot: Rereading the Plagues" and "Creation Themes in the Exodus Story," and the Haggadah itself, in Hebrew and English, accompanied by his original commentary that focuses on the structure and biblical roots of the text.

"It plays to my strengths," analyzing the path of text from the Torah to the Pesach liturgy, he says.

For example, Rabbi Silber's commentary on the Wise Son: "The parent's detailed response to the wise child is the only one of the four responses ... that is not based on any biblical source, despite the fact that the Torah does provide such an answer, which appears elsewhere in the Haggadah. ... In its biblical context, the question assigned the wise child is not particular to Passover ... it is a general question about the meaning of the Torah."

The Haggadah, the rabbi says, is designed for the reader or seder participant who has some knowledge of Jewish thought and Hebrew phrases; it's not a beginner's Haggadah.

One caveat: though the rabbi has spent much of his life teaching women and advancing the egalitarian cause, though his Haggadah has a blurb from a female Reform rabbi and cites non-Orthodox scholars, it reads like a standard Haggadah, with no emphasis on a woman's perspective or on opinions that would be controversial in the Orthodox community.

"It's not a feminist Haggadah, though I have nothing against feminism," says Rabbi Silber, a product of the Modern Orthodox movement who was ordained at Yeshiva University but now shuns denominational labels.

He says he'll use some of the insights he developed for the Haggadah in lectures he'll deliver in this pre-Pesach season. Maybe he'll do more writing, Rabbi Silber says. The inspiration for all his writing comes from the same source: "I'm a teacher."

'A Traditional Haggadah'

A Jewish native of Athens with an artistic bent, Monicka Clio Rafaeli had grown up attending small family seders where she was often the only child. "I was bored," she says. She didn't understand much of the text or rituals. "I was just looking at the pictures" in the Haggadah.

At 9, in a toy store, she saw some captivating pictures of the Exodus experience in a children's Viewmaster toy, and made a promise to herself: "One day I will make my own Haggadah."

Three decades later, she has kept her promise.

"A Happy Passover Haggadah" (Blue & White Press) features her own artwork (color depictions of the seder steps and other Jewish scenes), the traditional Hebrew text (in some cases, including the blessing over the meal, both Ashkenazic and Sephardic versions) and the English translation written by Rabbi Marc Angel, the emeritus spiritual leader of Manhattan's Congregation Shearith Israel, for his 1988 book, "A Sephardic Passover Haggadah" (Ktav).

With some brief explanatory notes but no rabbinic commentaries, Rafaeli's creation is designed for kids and adults to use around the seder table, not for scholars to read in advance.

Though she spent a few years at a secular kibbutz during her first stint in Israel several years ago — she now is married and lives in Tel Aviv — she incorporated none of the often-quirky political and sociological readings that modern Haggadot frequently include.

Rafaeli says she is "not religious," but "connected to the tradition."

A "traditional Haggadah," she calls her book the fruit of three years of work. She intensively studied the meaning and symbolism of the standard Haggadah text, and "didn't think I should change that." Her research, she says, gave her "even more appreciation for the traditional text. There is a power in the specific words and in the order."

Seder, after all, means "order."

Rafaeli's creativity emerges in her drawings. There's an empty seder table, but the identity of the absent inhabitants is the reader's choice. ("I didn't want to draw specific people" and limit the book's appeal.) Of the Four Sons, the Wise Son is a bespectacled redhead; the Evil Son, a bleached blond with a little beard favored by Tel Aviv's artistic set. (Her "big dilemma": How to represent the archetypal children who reflect universal traits without disparaging anyone.) And there's her choice, unique in a Haggadah, to print the separate Ashkenazic and Sephardic wording of Birkat HaMazon ("I wanted to do a Haggadah for everybody.")

This year, Rafaeli says, she will attend the seder of her Israeli in-laws. Next year, she and her husband will host their own seder. Each year, copies of her Haggadah will be available at her table.

In Israel, seder guests usually bring their own Haggadot. Her 2-year-old son Carmi will grow up with "A Happy Passover Haggadah."

"That's what I will give to my son," Rafaeli says.

A Haggadah In The Oppressors' Language

At a family seder in Scarsdale about 30 years ago, Holocaust survivor Zygfryd Wolloch decided to commission a Haggadah, with appropriate Shoah-related artwork, to commemorate family members who had died at the hands of the Nazis. He asked David Wander, a young cousin and recent Pratt Institute graduate, to do the artwork.

At first, Wander said no. "It's too big an undertaking for me to do," he told Wolloch. Finally, he agreed to do a few pastels.

Zygfryd, who died in 2003, commissioned the Haggadah because of the parallels between the survivors' liberation and the Jews' exodus from Egypt, says his widow, Helene.

Wander enlisted Rabbi Yonah Weinrib, a self-trained scribe, to do the calligraphy of the Haggadah's Hebrew text for the finished product that by 1984 had grown into the "Pesach Haggadah In Memory of the Holocaust" (aka the Wolloch Holocaust Haggadah). Printed by Goldman's Art Gallery in Haifa, its German translation "Passa-Haggada zum Gedenken an den Holocaust," is, as far as is known, the first original German-language edition of the Haggadah since the one printed for residents of DP camps immediately after World War II.

Wander's Haggadah was used as a fundraiser for the International Society for Yad Vashem, exhibited at Yad Vashem and the 92nd Street Y.

The limited-edition English version of the book was distributed mainly among museums, libraries and members of the survivor community until it came to the attention of Peter von der Osten-Sacken, a theology teacher at Humboldt University in the former East Berlin and leader in Jewish-Christian dialogue activities.

"He had seen it and thought it should be in German," Wander says.

The 119-page book, published by Humboldt University's Christian-Jewish Studies Center, came out last year shortly after Pesach. The book (available at buecher.hagalil.com/2010/07/wolloch-haggada/), with the English version's original art and calligraphy, German translations of the traditional text, and an accompanying pamphlet of commentaries by von der Osten-Sacken and Berlin's Rabbi Chaim Rozwaski, is available for the first time for Passover this year. Wander used the English-language version of his Haggadah at his own seders in recent years. This year, guests will have a choice. A cousin, Ana Altman, who recently returned from studying in Berlin, will probably read from the German version.

Wander's full-color artwork features no faces, no gruesome scenes; instead, there are evocative depictions of flames and prisoner's uniforms and a pile of suitcases.

"I didn't want it to be too bloody," says Wander, 56, a Lower East Side painter-illustrator who serves as artist-in-residence at the SAR Academy in Riverdale. He lost several relatives in Poland on his father's side to the Shoah.

Wander calls his drawings a "visual midrash. I made a whole language of objects that relate to Pesach."

Besides explanations of the drawings, there are no commentaries on the text itself in Wander's Haggadah; they are not needed, he says. His drawings are commentary. "I tell the story through images."