

Passover Participation Primer

Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Pesachim, page 116a

MISHNAH. THEY FILLED A SECOND CUP FOR HIM. AT THIS STAGE THE SON QUESTIONS HIS FATHER; IF THE SON IS NOT PERCEPTIVE ENOUGH TO ASK, HIS FATHER INSTRUCTS HIM:

‘WHY IS THIS NIGHT DIFFERENT FROM ALL [OTHER] NIGHTS. FOR ON ALL [OTHER] NIGHTS WE EAT LEAVENED AND UNLEAVENED BREAD, WHEREAS ON THIS NIGHT [WE EAT] ONLY LEAVENED BREAD; ON ALL OTHER NIGHTS WE EAT ALL KINDS OF HERBS, ON THIS NIGHT BITTER HERBS; ON ALL OTHER NIGHTS WE EAT MEAT ROAST, STEWED OR BOILED, ON THIS NIGHT, ROAST ONLY. ON ALL OTHER NIGHTS WE DIP ONCE, BUT ON THIS NIGHT WE DIP TWICE.’

AND ACCORDING TO THE SON'S LEVEL OF UNDERSTANDING HIS FATHER INSTRUCTS HIM. HE COMMENCES WITH SHAME AND CONCLUDES WITH PRAISE; AND EXPOUNDS FROM ‘A WANDERING ARAMEAN WAS MY FATHER’ UNTIL HE COMPLETES THE WHOLE SECTION.

... Rav Nahman asked his slave Daru: ‘When a master liberates his slave and gives him gold and silver, what should he say to him?’ ‘He should thank and praise him,’ replied he. ‘You have exempted us from saying "Why [is this night] different?"’ observed he. [Thereupon] he commenced by reciting, ‘We were slaves.’

Prayerbook – Blessing for the bestowing of the name of the baby at the end of the brit mila ceremony

Our God and God of our fathers, preserve this child for his father and mother, and his name in Israel shall be called

(say his Hebrew name) the son of (say the father's Hebrew name). May the father rejoice in his offspring, and his mother be glad with the fruit of her womb, as it is written: "May your father and mother rejoice, and she who bore you be glad." And it is said: "I passed by you and saw you weltering in your blood, and I said to you: You shall live through your blood; and I said to you: 'You shall live through your blood.'" And it is said: "He has remembered His Covenant forever, the word which He has commanded to a thousand generations; the Covenant which He made with Abraham, and His oath to Isaac; He established it for Jacob as a statute, for Israel as an everlasting Covenant." And it is said: "Abraham circumcised his son Isaac when he was eight days old, as God had commanded him." Give thanks to the Lord for He is good, for His kindness is everlasting. Give thanks to the Lord for He is good, for His kindness is everlasting. May this little infant (say his name) become great. Just as he has entered the Covenant, so may he enter into Torah, into marriage, and into good deeds.

Midrash Abkir, brought in Yalkut Shimoni 163

“Ruthlessly they made life bitter for them with hard labor at mortar and bricks and with all sorts of tasks in the field (Shmot 1:14)” – Were they working in the fields? Was it not in the city? Rather, the Egyptians had decreed that the Israelite men should sleep out in the fields while the women slept in the cities, in order to prevent them from multiplying further.

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HAROSETH IS NOT A RELIGIOUS REQUIREMENT R. ELEAZAR SON OF R. ZADOK SAID: IT IS A RELIGIOUS REQUIREMENT. Why is it a religious requirement? R. Levi said: In memory of the apple-tree; R. Johanan said: In memory of the clay. Abaye observed: Therefore one must make it tart and thicken it: make it tart, in memory of the apple-tree; and thicken it, in memory of the clay. It was taught in accordance with R. Johanan: The condiments are in memory of the straw; [and] the haroseth [itself] is a reminder of the clay. R. Eleazar son of R. Zadok said: Thus did the grocers cry, Come and buy ingredients for your religious requirements.

Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Sota page 11b

R. Samuel b. Nahmani said in the name of R. Jonathan: They changed men's work for the women and the women's work for the men.

R. Avira expounded: As the reward for the righteous women who lived in that generation were the Israelites delivered from Egypt. When they went to draw water, the Holy One, blessed be He, arranged that small fishes should enter their pitchers, which they drew up half full of water and half full of fishes. They then set two pots on the fire, one for hot water and the other for the fish, which they carried to their husbands in the field, and washed, anointed, fed, gave them to drink and had intercourse with them among the sheepfolds, as it is said: “When ye lie among the sheepfolds etc.”⁴ As the reward for “When ye lie among the sheepfolds”, the Israelites merited the spoliation of the Egyptians, as it is said: “As the wings of a dove covered with silver, and her pinions with yellow gold.”⁵ After the women had conceived they returned to their homes; and when the time of childbirth arrived, they went and were delivered in the field beneath the apple-tree, as it is said: “Under the apple-tree I caused thee to come forth [from thy mother's womb] etc.”⁶ The Holy One, blessed be He, sent down an emissary from the high heavens who washed and straightened the limbs [of the babes] in the same manner that a midwife straightens the limbs of a child; as it is said: “And as for thy nativity, in the day thou wast born thy navel was not cut, neither wast thou washed in water to cleanse thee.”⁷ He also provided for them two cakes, one of oil and one of honey, as it is said: “And He made him to suck honey out of the rock, and oil etc.”⁸ When the Egyptians noticed them, they went to kill them; but a miracle occurred on their behalf so that they were swallowed in the ground, and [the Egyptians] brought oxen and ploughed over them, as it is said: “The ploughers ploughed upon my back.”⁹ After they had departed, [the Israelite women with their babes] broke through [the earth] and came forth like the

herbage of the field, as it is said: "I caused thee to multiply as the plants of the field";¹⁰ and when [the babes] had grown up, they came in flocks to their homes, as it is said: "And thou didst increase and wax great and didst come with ornaments"¹¹ read not "with ornaments [ba'adi adayim]" but "in flocks [be'edre adarim]". At the time the Holy One, blessed be He, revealed Himself by the Red Sea, they recognized Him first, as it is said: "This is my God and I will praise Him."¹²

(1) Ibid. 13.

(2) They induced the Israelites to work by using smooth words to them.

(3) Ibid. 14.

(4) Ps. LXVIII, 14, E.V., 13.

(5) Ps. LXVIII, 14, E.V., 13. The dove is often used by the Rabbis as a symbol of Israel.

(6) Cant. VIII, 5. That is how the verb is interpreted here.

(7) Ezek. XVI, 4. There was no midwife present to cut the navel-string, nor was ordinary water used.

(8) Deut. XXXII, 13.

(9) Ps. CXXIX, 3.

(10) Ezek. XVI, 7.

(11) Ibid.

(12) Ex. XV, 2. The word this implies that He had been previously seen; therefore it must have been by the former babes.

Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Sota page 12a

And there went a man of the house of Levi.¹⁸ Where did he go? R. Judah b. Zebina said that he went in the counsel of his daughter. A Tanna taught: Amram was the greatest man of his generation; when he saw that the wicked Pharaoh had decreed Every son that is born ye shall cast into the river, he said: In vain do we labour. He arose and divorced his wife.¹⁹ All [the Israelites] thereupon arose and divorced their wives. His daughter said to him, Father, thy decree is more severe than Pharaoh's; because Pharaoh decreed only against the males whereas thou hast decreed against the males and females. Pharaoh only decreed concerning this world whereas thou hast decreed concerning this world and the World to Come.²⁰ In the case of the wicked Pharaoh there is a doubt whether his decree will be fulfilled or not, whereas in thy case, though thou art righteous, it is certain that thy decree will be fulfilled, as it is said: Thou shalt also decree a thing, and it shall be established unto thee!²¹ He arose and took his wife back; and they all arose and took their wives back.

And took to wife¹⁸ it should have read and took back!²² R. Judah b. Zevina said: He acted towards her as though it had been the first marriage; he seated her in a palanquin, Aaron and Miriam danced before her, and the Ministering Angels proclaimed, A joyful mother of children.²³

(18) Ex. II, 1.

(19) Since all the male children to be born would be killed, and the primary object of marriage was the procreation of sons.

(20) The drowned babes would live again in the Hereafter; but unborn children are denied that bliss.

(21) Job XXII, 28.

(22) His wife, according to the story just related.

The props: We have the seder steps each printed on separate sheets of paper, and these are hanging by a wire strung across the room. Then we have arrow which is also hanging from a - separate - wire, and this is in such a fashion so that we may slide it to point to the different stages of the seder that are hanging across the room. The youngest stands on a chair and slides the arrow as the seder progresses.

We also have parshat arami oved avi, from devarim 26, printed on a big poster that is hanging, as well as being printed on individual sheets which we hand out to the participants. This year I prepared three new props: 1) The chain of Jewish history. My youngest prepared a paper chain, and I hung from each link a small card on which I wrote the name of a major figure from Jewish history. The names go from Terach, to Avraham, Yitzhak, Ya'acov, etc, all the way down - chronologically - to Rav Kook and Rav Soloveitchik, to my Rosh Yeshiva, Rav Aaron Lichtenstein. The next cards have, respectively, the names of myself and my wife and my kids, and the guests. 2) Under the clear plastic tablecloth, I covered the table with a collage of the news pages of the newspaper from the past few days. 3) At the end of the table, by the chair left for Eliahu, I stood up a portrait of my wife's grandparents, and one of my great grandparents. I didn't overtly explain the meaning of all this, but it came across very forcefully during the seder, vis, that we are all part of one grand continuum, from Terach and Avraham, to the generation of the exodus, through Jewish history, to Rav Soloveitchik, my own teachers, myself, the kids and my students, to the people and events in the (Israeli) newspapers that we read daily. Everyone must see himself, as well as seeing others and everything that happens around us, in that light.

There is one other unique prop that we have on our seder table, and that is vegetables to nosh on before we actually get to the matza. No one, especially kids, can learn well when their stomach is growling. The importance of this cannot be underestimated.

Every year before the seder I prepare about one hundred questions on matters related to the seder and the exodus. I decide before and which of my four kids will be asked which questions, according to their age, level, and interests. We also prepare play money which we call zuzim. For each correct answer the child gets a zuz, which after the holiday is redeemable for money. This year I announced that each zuz would be worth half a shekel each (about 10 cents). I also think up many questions on the spot, and they can also get zuzim for answering a question asked by a sibling.

I also have prepared for the seder very short divrei tora of about half a minute, which I throw in at the proper opportunity.

This year I asked each child a week before to prepare something, whatever he or she wished. This year, as opposed to what they did in the past, there were no skits, but one son did prepare some humorous questions asking everyone who the modern-day Paro is, the plagues, etc. In the past I've given them assignments, each child getting a different topic to research, with instructions on what to learn and what questions to try to answer.