

Order from Freedom

*“And you should tell your child on that day saying: Because of this God did for me when I left Egypt”
(Exodus 13:8)*

“And those who increase in the telling of the story of the Exodus are considered praiseworthy! (from the Hagada)

What does it mean to tell our kids about how we left Egypt? What does it mean to increase the story-telling? Many believe that the hagada gives us license to turn the Seder into anything we want. The Forward reports that this year, there is a cannabis Hagada, a 30 minute Hagada, a JDate Hagada, a #BlackLivesMatter Hagada, and much more. Are there any limits?

The Hebrew word “Seder” means order. The Seder evening and traditional Hagada have a framework - a time for talking, a time for ritual foods, a time for dinner, a time for praising God, a time for singing, a time for engaging children, a time for questions and a time to think about possible answers. The irony of all this, of course, is that the Seder celebrate freedom. Isn't this a contradiction – to celebrate freedom with order?

I think this may just be the point the Hagada's authors are trying to teach us. Freedom is free, but it does not mean anything goes. And it does not happen in a vacuum. Still, there is room for free expression and exposition when we talk about our ancestors' experiences. My own suggestion is that we follow the text, say the words, perform the mitzvot, and follow the halachot of the Seder. But at the same time, we should also see the Hagada as an outline, a way for us to take the enduring messages emanating from our people's beginning, and make them our own. Indeed we should make the entire Seder our own.

I reflect on how our family Sedarim have changed over the years. For Ashira and me, this is our 40th. (And yes, this means we have a big anniversary coming up!) When we had no children of an age to participate, ours were filled with adult conversation, learned approaches to tying in the Hagada with the issues of the day, much commentary. As our kids grew older and participated, we had to make our sedarim child centered. Each child came home with Divrei Torah from school. As the kids grew, the sedarim again began to become incredibly learned. Having guests from my then-congregation also enriched our sedarim. Trying to give all a voice led us to have very late Sedarim, often going until 2am. Then the kids got even older and left the house for Israel and having their own families, leaving us with our parents, and the need to cut things a bit shorter. And now we have come full circle again with grandchildren of our own, having to find ways to integrate small kids into the fabric of the evening. We are looking forward this year to celebrating with four generations at our Seder table.

So, yes, we talk of freedom within the context of order. Whatever twist you put on your family Seder, make sure you are following the halachot properly. But beyond that, please do make it your own in whatever way works for you, your family and your guests. This is the essence of what it means to tell our children – and ourselves – about what God did for us when we left Egypt.

Ashira and our extended family join me in wishing a most joyous Yomtov – Chag Kasher V'Sameach!

Rabbi Joe Ozarowski