

## INTRODUCTION

### *On the Passover Haggadah*

**T**HE NIGHT IS “different from all other nights.” The book has a special place among all Jewish books.

It is the fourteenth of the Hebrew month Nisan. As evening descends in succession over five continents, Jews have gathered in their homes for the Passover Seder, the one great liturgical celebration entrusted, not to the public worship of the synagogue, but to the intimacy of a family meal. Even before the well-rehearsed questions are asked by the youngest present, all are intuitively aware of the distinctiveness of this night. Less obvious, perhaps, is the singular character of the book held open around the table.

The Haggadah is in many ways the most popular and beloved of Jewish books. Scholars have meditated upon it, children delight in it. A book for philosophers and for the folk, it has been reprinted more often and in more places than any other Jewish classic, and has been the most frequently illustrated. Over 3,500 extant editions have been catalogued thus far through the assiduous labors of bibliographers, and yet hitherto unknown editions continue to come to light. There is hardly a city or town in the world where a Hebrew press once functioned which has not produced at least one Haggadah. It has been translated into almost every language spoken by Jews throughout their global

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dispersion. As these words are being written, one is confident that Jewish printers in far-flung places are already preparing other Haggadahs for local or foreign markets in anticipation of the Passover to come.

*The Book of Remembrance and Redemption*

IN THE REALM of books, such a long and ubiquitous career for a single work constitutes a remarkable phenomenon. Mundane factors alone will not explain it. To be sure, the Haggadah is a relatively small book (some twenty to forty pages, depending on the format), and it is thus an easier undertaking for a printer than a Bible or even the Prayer Book. Moreover, it is a notoriously perishable item, readily vulnerable to the stains of spilled wine, the hands of inquisitive children, and other normal hazards of the festive meal, and this factor alone creates a constant need for new copies.

Clearly, however, such considerations are only subsidiary to the central fact—the extraordinary hold that the Passover holiday itself continues to have over the Jewish people even in our own day. Of all the great Jewish rites, the Passover Seder seems to have suffered the least erosion in modern times; of the entire Jewish liturgy, the words of the Haggadah remain for many the most familiar. In one form or another the Seder continues to be celebrated not only by Jews committed to religious tradition, but across the spectrum of religious modernism and revisionism, among secularists of every stripe, even by seemingly alienated Jews whose knowledge of Judaism has otherwise atrophied to that of the Fourth Son in the Haggadah “who knows not what to ask.” Separated ordinarily by the widest range of ideology and depth of Jew-

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ish commitment, heirs to the atomization of Jewish life since the end of the eighteenth century, they are yet to be found together on the eve of Passover, often at the same table, somehow united in the living reality of the Jewish people. Nostalgia, the congenial opportunity for family reunion, the modern attractiveness of the theme of freedom—all these may play a part. Yet more profound impulses seem to be operative here, set in motion ages ago and sustained through the entire grand and awesome course of Jewish history. However dimly perceived, in the end it is nothing less than the Jewish experience and conception of history that are celebrated here, in that orchestration of symbol, ritual, and recital for which the Haggadah provides the score.

For Passover is preeminently the great historical festival of the Jewish people, and the Haggadah is its book of remembrance and redemption. Here the memory of the nation is annually revived and replenished, and the collective hope sustained. The ancient redemption of Israel from Egypt is recounted and relived, not merely as an evocation from the past, but above all as prototype and surety for the ultimate redemption yet to come. That, indeed, is the basic structure of the Haggadah itself. And so the participant is adjured to regard himself literally “as though he himself had emerged from Egypt,” and in that phrase lies the latent power of the Haggadah to move the hearts of Jews. Every oppressor is Pharaoh, and Egypt every exile. On this night time is in radical flux, the generations are linked together around the table and across millennia, past has become present, and the Messianic era is suddenly imminent. “*Next year—in Jerusalem . . . !*”