



## **Beginning & Ending: Reflections on the Haggadah**

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At first glance, the Haggadah appears to be a collection of random verses, stories and statements. However, upon further reflection we come to understand the intentional yet, nuanced structure of this ancient script. The Talmud (Pesachim 115) explains *Maschil B'Genus U'Misayeym B'Shevach*, we begin with degradation and conclude with praise. We begin the Seder by discussing the "low points" or disparaging chapters of our national existence. The sages disagree as to which "low point" we should begin with. Shmuel explains that we begin with, "*Avadim Hayinu, we were slaves.*" We acknowledge that we did not begin as a nation of free men and women. We were slaves who served a human master. Rav states, "*Mitchila Ovdei Avoda Zara Hayu Avoseinu, in the beginning our forefathers were idolaters.*" We were not always monotheists, we did not always pledge our allegiance to God, and we served and paid homage to other gods. According to Shmuel over the course of the Pesach Seder we work our way to celebrating our physical freedom. According Rav, the Seder is the opportunity to celebrate our newfound spiritual emancipation. Rav and Shmuel may disagree on the specific beginning and end points but do agree on the structure of the Seder night; *Maschil B'Genus U'Misayeym B'Shevach*, we begin with degradation and conclude with praise.

What is the meaning of this rabbinic framework? Why must we start with the negative or disparaging chapters of our national existence? Why not begin and end with our freedom, emancipation and positive identity as the nation of God?

The commentaries on the Haggadah share many approaches and answers. The Malbim (Rabbi Meir Leibush, 1809-1879) explains that the best way to make a dramatic point is through contrast. One appreciates light when one has been exposed to darkness. In order to fully appreciate the freedom granted to us on this sacred night, we must first acquaint ourselves with servitude. In order to feel physically free we must spend time reminiscing, *Avadim Hayinu L'Pharaoh B'Mitzrayim, we were slaves to Pharaoh in Egypt*. Only after we engage in historical reflection and taste some of the bitter *marror*, can we truly thank God for redeeming us. In order to fully celebrate our spiritual emancipation we must reflect what it was like to be a spiritual wanderer, not knowing what to believe or how to connect. *Mitchila Ovdei Avoda Zara Hayu Avoseinu, in the beginning our forefathers were idolaters*. Only when we remember our past can we truly appreciate our future.

The great Maggid of Kohznitz (Rav Yisroel Hopstein, 1737-1814) provides another beautiful insight. The Maggid explains that the greatest danger we face in life is believing we are beyond salvation. A person may think to himself, "*I have done so many terrible things, I have tarnished my soul, I have sullied my reputation, I have failed to actualize my potential; what hope is there for me?*" *Maschil B'Genus*, even if the beginning is degrading, even if the beginning is stunted and handicapped, *Misayeym B'Shevach*, I choose how the story ends, I can change, I can live better, do better and create a beautiful future. We were slaves, we were more animal than man, we were viewed by others and we viewed ourselves as chattel and property. And yet, look at us now; we are a strong and free people. We were idolaters, spiritually bankrupt and estranged from God and yet, we managed to find our way home. We lifted ourselves from serving the creations of our hands to serving the King of Kings. We cannot always rewrite the past but we can absolutely decide how to script our future.

Perhaps, there is a third lesson as well. Life requires patience. Events occur and we search for answers. Situations unfold and we try desperately to understand their deeper meaning. We want insight and clarity and we want it now. Clarity will come but it often requires the passage of time. *Maschil B'Genus U'Misayeym B'Shevach*, we begin with degradation and conclude with praise, the difficult life situations will have a positive resolution (not necessarily the resolution we desire, but positive nevertheless). However, just as it takes time to reach the *Shevach* (praise) contained within the Haggadah; it takes time to see our personal praise and resolution as well. It will come – but we must be patient.

*Maschil B'Genus U'Misayeym B'Shevach*, we begin with degradation and conclude with praise; the rabbis were not simply giving us a format for the Haggadah, they were providing us with a format for life. To actualize our freedom and maximize our ability to shape our personal and national destiny we must internalize the messages of the Haggadah. We must remember that while building our future; we must reflect on the events and messages of our past. No matter how far we have wandered, no matter how estranged we have become from God, ourselves and one another – no person is beyond salvation. We must bear in mind that resolution, understanding and happiness will come to those who are patient enough to wait.