

Adapting the Story in Every Generation

In *Crow and Weasel*, a fable inspired by North American Plains myths, Barry Lopez writes, “The stories people tell have a way of taking care of them ... Sometimes a person needs a story more than food to stay alive.” Maybe this is why *Maggid*, the storytelling section of the Haggadah, is the heart of the seder. In fact, the Haggadah teaches us, “The more expansive a person is in recounting the story of departing Egypt, the more praiseworthy.” This line invites seder facilitators and guests to weave their own creativity, experiences, and insights into the seder’s storytelling.

Below, you will find four stories by four writers, each representing a different family and a different Jewish experience. In the first, Mishael Zion paints a portrait of the many voices, past and present, that are represented at his family seders. Vlada Nedak describes her introduction to Passover in Ukraine and the importance of translating the Haggadah into Ukrainian. Tamar Elad-Appelbaum expresses the importance of asking questions and the need for collective liberation. Finally, Ziva (Tezezew) Mekonen Degu recounts her family’s annual retelling of their own exodus, from Ethiopia to Israel. As you read these excerpts, we invite you to consider your own family’s history and how telling that story has changed over time and been integrated into different contexts.

The Mitzvah to Tell Our Story: A Three-Generation Haggadah Project

Mishael Zion

I will never forget the first seder I led in 2002: I was a twenty-one-year-old soldier in the Israeli army serving in Rafah, between Egypt and Gaza, home for the holiday. My father, Noam, encouraged me to take on the role of seder leader.

We planned the night meticulously, including customs of Jews from around the world: sitting on the living room floor as Yemenite Jews do, passing the seder plate in blessing and song over the head of each child and adult in the tradition of North African Jews, wearing white like the German Jews, and beating each other with green onions during *Dayenu* like the Jews of Persia and Afghanistan. It was a wonderful and joyous evening: my youngest sibling prepared a quiz with prizes to accompany *Ma Nishtana*; my older sister offered a feminist analysis of contemporary slavery based on *Avadim Hayenu*. As we ate *maror*, my mother told the tale of the devout Christian neighbors who saved her father during World War II. After we read the line, “A person is obligated to see oneself as if they left Egypt,” my paternal grandfather told us about how, as a chaplain in the US Airforce immediately after World War II, he and his Jewish soldiers in Okinawa composed an original Haggadah as a humorous parody about serving in the military. Then my grandfather described organizing a seder for his fellow soldiers in the Haganah in 1948, just weeks before the founding of the State. The great writer Shmuel Yosef Agnon led that seder, which was held in the Jerusalem neighborhood of Talpiot, where I grew up. In the telling and hearing of these stories, past and present became more deeply intertwined.

The Haggadah teaches us that stories of persecution and redemption are bound together like the Hillel sandwich of *maror* and matzah: *In every generation our enemies arise to try to wipe us out and in every generation each of us is obligated to see ourselves as having participated in the Exodus from slavery to freedom.* I understand today, as a father to my daughters and as son to my parents, how much these two themes of freedom and challenge stand at the foundation of every conversation between parents and children. Parents want to grant their children freedom and hope for the future, but also to instill in them the lessons of centuries of Jewish suffering. Children want the freedom to set out on their own independent path and formulate for themselves their destiny, yet they can only do that confidently based on a rooted sense of belonging to something greater than themselves. The Haggadah reminds us that our family story is always a combination of two things: the memory of the bread of affliction that our ancestors ate in Egypt and the commandment to believe that next year we will be free people.

Questions for Conversation

- This excerpt identifies several seder traditions from around the world. Does your family have any unique traditions or rituals for your seder? If so, what are their origin stories?
- Share one particularly memorable seder you have experienced. What made it special?
- Mishael describes the two poles of the seder narrative as persecution and freedom. Share a story from your life or your family history that reflects these themes. What are other important themes of the seder?

The New Ukrainian Haggadah: *For Our Freedom Za Nashu Svobodu «За нашу свободу»*

Vlada Nedak

“The more they oppress us, the more we increase.” (Adapted from Exodus 1:12)

My first Passover lasted about four hours. I was twelve years old, and the seder was packed with people my grandfather’s age. I understood nothing because the entire celebration was in Hebrew, but I only spoke Russian and Ukrainian. I felt like the simple child who can only ask: “What is this?”

Years later, in 2022, when my family gathered for the Passover seder, I was able to lead the seder for them. I explained the symbolic meaning of certain foods, told the Exodus story, and emphasized how long it had taken for the Israelites to get out of slavery. It was the second month of the full-scale war between Ukraine and Russia. The air raid siren was howling, and I was unsure whether we should stay at the table or run to a shelter. I found some comfort in the fact that during World War II, Jews, even in death camps, had practiced some of the rituals of Passover.



Illustration by Zoya Cherakaski, “Ma Nishtana (2022): How is this night different?”

Unfortunately, many Ukrainian Jews do not speak Hebrew and can't understand the prayers and texts in their original language. This means many Ukrainians read the Passover texts in Russian. As the war continued, I began to worry: How can we celebrate our freedom in the language of the oppressor? I resolved that in the future, we must celebrate Passover, the holiday celebrating freedom from oppression, not only in Hebrew, but also in Ukrainian—a language that has become a symbol of courage, fortitude, and indomitable will, the language of the land where we were born and raised. This new Ukrainian Haggadah is named *For Our Freedom* (2024), quoting from the Ukrainian national anthem, “Soul and body shall we sacrifice for our freedom.” This phrase echoes the mood of Ukrainian Jewry, that, in response to the Russian invasion, has continued to develop its distinctive identity. This title reflects our desire to unite for the sake of our freedom and to claim our unique identity as Ukrainian Jews.

Questions for Conversation

- In this piece, Vlada Nedak describes herself as the “simple child” at her first seder. Can you share a time when you participated in a Jewish ritual where you felt out of your depth? What impact did that experience have on you?
- Vlada translated the Haggadah into Ukrainian in part as a political statement about language and in part to empower Ukrainians to feel ownership over their Jewish literacy and pride in their language. What are examples of times when you have found yourself telling a story differently because of a specific context? When have you encountered tools, like translation, that have helped you feel a greater sense of competence or empowerment over texts, rituals, or other parts of Jewish life?

A Faithful Girl's Question: How Can We, Too, Go Out of Egypt Tonight?

Tamar Elad-Appelbaum

Moses replied to Pharaoh: “We will go [out of Egypt, all of us] with both our children and our grandparents.” (Adapted from Exodus 10:9)

On one seder night in Bat Yam, when I was a little girl of approximately seven, our extended Bouskila family, originally from Morocco, gathered around the Passover table of my beloved grandparents, Saba Ya'ish and Savta Zari, may they rest in peace. We began the seder with great excitement, in song and in joy. But as the seder got longer and longer, my grandfather noticed everyone was growing tired, even though we had not yet finished the *Maggid* section of the Haggadah. So he announced: “My sweet ones! There are some tired people here, so let's ask Savta, the daughters-in-law, and the beloved granddaughters to go to the kitchen to prepare the food, while the rest of us complete the readings from the Haggadah. Thus, we will succeed in speeding up a bit the Exodus from Egypt tonight.”

Savta Zari got up and went to the kitchen. So too, my mother and my aunts. Now it was my turn, the oldest of the granddaughters, to join the other women who were already in the kitchen. But suddenly, I, a little girl, stood up and cried out: “No, Saba! It is you who taught me that on this night everyone came out of Egypt together. It is you who taught

me that we are all free and we were all destined to live as free people in Eretz Yisrael. And now you send the women to the kitchen? How will the whole family together come out of Egypt tonight and arrive to the land of Israel?”

I asked the question of the faithful child. The question of a faithful girl, a granddaughter.

Everyone went quiet. Then my beloved Saba Ya'ish arose and announced: “The girl is right. Just as then—so tonight; just as then—we always come out of Egypt only when we are all together, the whole family, united and helping until we arrive!”

On that night in my grandparents' home, the whole Bouskila family went out of Egypt. Together we finished the *Maggid* portion of the Haggadah. Together we went to the kitchen. Together we all helped each other. And together we merited to become free men and free women in Israel. That night, we sang until the middle of the night—Hallel, the Song of Songs, songs of praise and liturgical poems. On that night, Saba Ya'ish and Savta Zari showed us the way to the land of Israel, the way of family togetherness, the way of honoring God's creations with humility and faith, listening to one another and taking mutual responsibility for one another.

Questions for Conversation

- In this anecdote, Tamar Elad-Appelbaum describes herself as a child learning from her elders in such a way that they changed the course of their seder plans to “come out together from Egypt.” Can you think of a time where you learned from someone with greater authority than you? What is an example of a time where you or someone else changed something that was “always done this way”?
- Tamar argues, based on the verse from Exodus 10:9, that the story of the Exodus was about collective liberation—Israelites of all ages and genders were redeemed together. What are some of the contemporary implications of her charge that we must listen to one another and take mutual responsibility for one another?
- When translating the Haggadah, the “*tam*” child is often translated as the “simple” one. Tamar's family understands this child not as simple, but as “faithful,” and the most important child. How does this translation change your sense of the *tam* and its role at the seder?

My Mother and Our Family's Exodus from Africa

Ziva (Tezezew) Mekonen Degu

“And you shall explain to your child on that day, ‘It is because of what God did for me when I went free from Egypt.’”
(Exodus 13:8)

At an Ethiopian Passover seder (*kurban*), the Qes (the Beta Israel rabbi) tells his son about the biblical trek from Africa, that is, from Egypt, to the land of Israel, from slavery to freedom. But in our family, it is on Israel's Independence Day, Yom HaAtzmaut, that my mother, Tru Work Adane, retells the tale of our family's trek from Ethiopia to Sudan and then to Israel in 1984.

I was twelve when we began to organize our illegal flight from the communist dictatorship in Ethiopia through Sudan to Israel. My mother started the trek with six of her children, her mother, and members of our extended family, but without our father (who joined us later in Sudan). This pilgrimage was her personal exodus to freedom: on foot, for hundreds of kilometers, through a parched desert, fulfilling her dream of going up to Jerusalem. The daily march usually began at night, to avoid both the police and the heat.

As we approached the Sudanese border, we were warned to walk quickly and to continue through the whole night. When all the families reached the thick bushes near the border, my mother asked me, “Where are your younger brothers?” They had disappeared. My mother opened her eyes wide in shock, speechless. I remember her standing there, with her hands on her hips, helpless, not knowing what to do, looking back in the direction from which we had come.

Earlier, my older brother had gone out with other young boys to find some water for our whole group. The water was more mud than water, but it saved our lives. My mother used a cloth to strain out the mud and gave us each a drink from my brother's jerry can, but she did not take a drink for herself, saying, “No, this is saved for my other children, [my lost children], not for me!” Then she instructed my oldest brother, “Take grandmother's horse, take this water, and go bring back your brothers.” It grew dark, but my mother still refused to drink or eat anything. I don't remember the exact hour, but my brother arrived with our missing brothers in the middle of the night. My mother lamented, “I almost lost three of my sons!” On the last week of our journey, we lost her niece's three-year-old daughter, Manaale Genetu, and on the last two days, her brother-in-law, forty-year-old Ayelign Avera. Even now, forty years later, we do not know what happened to them.

At the end of this debilitating march and after three more months in refugee camps in Sudan, the Mossad took us to Israel in cargo planes in what was named Operation Moshe. We arrived just one week before Israel's Independence Day. Over time, the evening of Independence Day has become a time to gather with family for a thanksgiving meal and to express our gratitude to the Holy One for uniting us and for the privilege to make *aliyah* in peace. Every year, my mother tells the story of our trek, highlighting how God rescued her children—Yael, Asher, and Uri, as they are now called in Hebrew—and we remember Grandma Wagaye Yitzhak, who started the trek but did not complete it.

Before my eyes, always, are my mother's integrity, faith, and professionalism. I feel that all my accomplishments were earned by her merit.



Image by Aliza Urbach, “Exodus of Ethiopian Jewry” (1991).

Questions for Conversation

- This excerpt describes one family's perilous journey to find safety in the land of Israel. Does your family history include an immigration story?
- Ziva (Tezezew) Mekonen Degu's family has turned their story into a ritualized addition to their Yom HaAtzmaut celebration. How do you think this changes their experience of the holiday or of hearing their own story? Does your family ritualize part of your family history? If so, how? If not, how might you create a ritual retelling of part of your story?