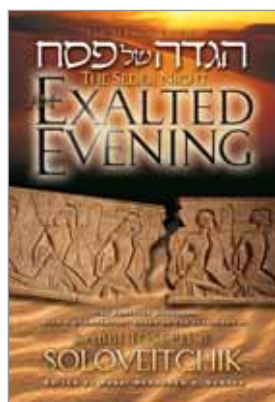


**The Seder Night:
An Exalted Evening
The Passover Haggadah,
with a Commentary Based on
the Teachings of Rabbi
Joseph B. Soloveitchik**

Edited by Rabbi Menachem D. Genack
OU Press
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216 pages

Reviewed by Simcha Krauss



The noted writer Nat Hentoff, who describes himself as having “abandoned our God but not abandoned our people,” explained that he remained loyal to “our people” because of a chance encounter with Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik. That encounter was speechless—words were not exchanged. The Rav simply “nodded” to him, Hentoff later recalled, and “there was a slight smile.” That created sufficient positive memory for Hentoff not to forsake Knesset Yisrael.¹

The Rav would not have been surprised that Hentoff’s alienation from *Yahadut* was not total. A constant theme in the Rav’s general *hashkafah* is that no Jew completely severs his

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relationship with *Netzach Yisrael*. This, in fact, is a motif in *The Seder Night: An Exalted Evening*, a new Haggadah with a commentary based on the Rav’s teachings.

In discussing Moshe Rabbeinu’s experience at the burning bush, the Rav says:

Moses had doubts about the Jews’ eligibility for freedom. He thought of them as slaves....Moses was in despair.... Therefore, God presented him with the very strange revelation of the burning bush. In its middle was a fire, while its outside was cold and dark. From the outside, it looked just like any other thorn-bush in the desert; but inside that bush, in its hidden center, there was a fire burning. The ecstasy of the Jews for God, their commitment to His path, had never been extinguished in Egypt. It was rather invisible, covered up. God told him, “Ra’oh ra’iti, I have surely seen the wretchedness of My people who are in Egypt” (Ex. 3:7). Our Sages say, “Atah ro’eh re’iyah ahat”—meaning, “You see only My people in Egypt”—“va-Ani ro’eh shetei re’iyot”—“whereas I penetrate into the depths” (Ex. Rabbah 3). And once we penetrate into the depth of a Jew, no matter how repugnant his exterior, no matter how subservient he is to the taskmaster, we will find him questing for freedom and searching for God. Within every Jew, there is a burning bush. “We were slaves to Pharaoh in Egypt,” but we remained free, even during the time of oppression.

In another section, the Rav says further:

Deep in the Jewish soul, no matter how sunk in sin it is, there is something holy and mysterious which cannot be erased or eliminated, and upon which there lies the seal of individuality and originality. But in order to perceive this separation, one must be capable of peering into the depths of the soul. In Egypt, the Almighty had to distinguish between Israel and the nations at a time when there was hardly any contrast between Jew and Egyptian. Only God, the

knower of thoughts, He who distinguishes inner thoughts, saw the difference. “God saw the children of Israel and God knew” (Ex. 2:25). He saw sanctity in the abyss of the Jewish soul, even though it was full of profanity and sin, and therefore He saved His people. What Pesach expresses is the idea of separation even when superficially there is no reason to distinguish.

What makes that “something holy and mysterious” element move from dormancy to awareness? The encounter with something transcendent, something that carries within it an element of eternity, such as the burning bush. I believe that an encounter with *chachmei Yisrael* can be another such catalyst. According to the Gemara, one *tanna* said that he had attained his wisdom, such as it was, because he saw Rav Meir “from his back.” Had he seen Rav Meir’s face, he would have been much greater.

Generally, the publication of another Haggadah does not generate much excitement; Kohelet’s injunction about the publication of endless books is of particular relevance to the appearance of yet another Haggadah. But *The Seder Night* is a notable exception. For in this Haggadah we are fortunate to learn and experience from *Torat HaRav*, an encounter that vastly enriches our Pesach experience.

This Haggadah does not feature the Rav’s line-by-line, chapter-by-chapter running commentary. Rather, Rabbi Menachem Genack, the editor—a longtime and devoted student of the Rav who possesses vast knowledge of the Rav’s Torah—has culled ideas from the many *shiurim*, lectures, notes and writings of the Rav on *inyanei Pesach*, and indeed on the Haggadah. With painstaking work, Rabbi Genack, CEO of OU Kosher and rabbi of Congregation Shomrei Emunah in Englewood, New Jersey, has conveniently arranged much of the Rav’s *Pesach Torah* around the Haggadah.

While one might expect such an

editing job to result in a belabored, stilted and artificial style, the opposite is the case. In *The Seder Night*, the running commentary is integrated and unified; it is easy to understand and a delight to read.

Many of the motifs of the Rav, the themes that he kept reminding his students of, as well as his analytic method, come through in this Haggadah accurately and consistently. For example, his great openness and his *"ani ma'amin"* in the ultimate victory of the truth of the Torah are captured in the following paragraph, as he explains the Haggadah's attitude towards the *rasha*:

The rasha, the evil child, challenges us, saying that Yezi'at Mizrayim no longer has any significance. However, this is not so, as the great story of our tradition can encounter any opposition or challenge. One may emerge victorious even with the radical atheist if one uses the proper terms and the proper categories. The Torah that God gave us is all-inclusive, all-embracing, all-pervading. It has the answers to all problems, even though we cannot always decode its language. The Torah is not afraid. We do not have to retreat into isolation or solitude because the street is "contaminated." To retreat means to lose.

"Tehillat nefilah nisah, the beginning of defeat is flight," the Talmud says (Sotah 44b). The enemy will conquer when the army begins to withdraw, to retreat, to flee. On the contrary, we face the rasha. The Torah did not say to throw the rasha out of the house. Rather, engage him in debate and show him that he is wrong: "blunt his teeth." Talmud Torah requires bringing the one who got lost, the child who was alienated, back into the fold. He or she is a rasha now, but there is potential in the rasha.

One of the well-known dichotomies in the Rav's halachic analysis is that of *"ma'aseh hamitzvah"* versus *"kiyum hamitzvah."* The former is the "dry" act that the Jew is commanded to do, while the latter implies not the simple act of the mitzvah but rather the feeling and experience of it.

The Rav, looking at the mitzvah of *"sippur Yetziat Mizrayim"* with his keen eyes, shows how Rambam created a new halachah by adding one letter to a traditional text:

Rambam says that on Passover

night, we should each act like a free person and demonstrate our freedom. "In every generation one should show himself—le-har'ot et azmo—as if he had been liberated from Egypt" (Hilkhos Hamez u-Mazzah 7:6). Rambam added the letter "he" to the usual formulation: not "li-re'ot et azmo" ("one should see himself"), but rather "le-har'ot et azmo" ("one should show himself"). Li-re'ot means to experience, to feel, to re-experience the slavery and the Exodus. It should not be an ancient event, lying at the dawn of our history and having no relevance for us. I am to re-experience it. Memory, in Judaism, means not just to remember technically, but also to relive the event. Le-har'ot adds another dimension: the re-experiencing should be so dynamic and so intense that it breaks through and somehow expresses itself in action. If we are overpowered by an emotion, we cannot suppress it; we cannot control ourselves. We will sing and dance; we will cry and shout; we will shed tears and embrace people. The experience of Yezi'at Mizrayim on the night of Pesach should be so overpowering, so overwhelming, that we should act it out.

The late Rabbi Walter Wurzburger had occasion to participate in the Rav's Pesach Seder. This is how he described it:

Witnessing how the Rav ZTL recited Hallel and Nishmat Kol Chai during the Seder left an indelible impression upon me. No one who has observed him on such an occasion could think of the Rav ZTL as a cold, detailed, purely intellectual talmid chacham. Having been exposed to the intensity of his religious passion, I can appreciate why he always spoke in such glowing terms of the joy Yom Kippur brought to him, and why he saw in the Rambam's last chapter of Hilkhos Teshuvah, with its reference to the passionate love of G-d as well as the two concluding chapters of the Guide, the very essence of Rambam's religious interest.²

Alas, we cannot participate in the Rav's Seder. But we can still learn from his Torah, albeit indirectly. We can study this gem of a Haggadah, internalize its lessons and plumb its depths. If we do so, I am certain that this coming Pesach, *haba aleinu letovah*, will be uplifting and exalted.

Notes

1. Nat Hentoff, *Boston Boy: Growing Up with Jazz and Other Rebellious Passions* (Philadelphia, 2001), 26-31. David Landes, a friend from Teaneck, New Jersey, provided me with this reference.

2. Michael J. Bierman, ed., *Memoirs of a Giant: Eulogies in Memory of Rabbi Dr. Joseph B. Soloveitchik, zt"l* (Jerusalem, 2001), 346

Everyone's Got a Story

Edited by Ruchama K. Feuerman

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Brooklyn, 2008

412 pages

Reviewed by Varda Branfman



Everyone's Got a Story, an anthology of creative non-fiction and short stories, has more than the customary stamp of its editor, Ruchama K. Feuerman, who culled these forty-one pieces from writing workshops she has led over the years. Many of them were midwived by Ruchama, and unlike the usual background presence of the editor, Ruchama, author of the novel *Seven Blessings*, has a highly visible role in the book as she introduces each section with writing directives and mentoring wisdom.

Full disclosure: Ruchama and I were members of a writing workshop that was active about twenty-five

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