

The Liberated Haggadah: A Passover Celebration for Cultural, Secular, and Humanistic Jews, by Rabbi Peter H. Schweitzer, Center for Cultural Judaism. \$13.00

Review by Alicia Ostriker, www.jbooks.com, April 18, 2006

In my family we use, each year, a Reconstructionist haggadah entitled *The New Haggadah*. Edited by Mordechai Kaplan, among others, illustrated with charming folkloric-looking images, it is dated 1942 - a war year. We inherited it from my husband's family, and it is ornamented with the traditional wine and gravy stains. There is a new-new edition, dated 1978, which we've used as a supplement, but it lacks the required stains - so I always make sure I get a falling-apart old copy at my seder table. The editors explain that it is dedicated to "the age-old struggle between those who cherish freedom and those who would deny it to their fellow men." The commentary gently modernizes this theme, explaining, for example, that Pharaoh for our forefathers was every tyrant who enslaved his people, that the experience of slavery was to teach us to play the role of defenders of justice and freedom everywhere on earth, and that we hope for freedom for the whole world. What I love best about this haggadah is that it skips by the plagues in a short paragraph, as if looking the other way. No joy in the humiliation of our enemies!

So the first thing I check out in any haggadah is what it does or doesn't do with the plagues. *The Liberated Haggadah* does the following:

Moses returned to Egypt to rally his people and bring them out of slavery. He went to Pharaoh and first tried diplomacy. This was rejected. Then he tried magic. This was simply matched, trick for trick. Then he tried plagues. Now this was successful! But even then Pharaoh hardened his heart and rescinded his permission to let the Hebrew people go. Determined to escape anyway, they woke at midnight to leave under the cover of darkness. Because they left in haste, they could take only the clothes on their backs and the pleasant memories of their youth in the good land of Goshen.

This is interesting in a number of ways. No gloating over the plagues, but also no mention of the death of the first-born. Similarly, in the account of the crossing of the Red Sea, we get the story of Nachshon having the courage to step in first, but no drowning of the Egyptians. Later, the plagues are listed on a page that also lists ten modern afflictions, from AIDS and drugs to poverty and war, and we are asked to spill wine from our cups as these are mentioned.

The framing of this haggadah is historical rather than mythic. The text states up front that the exodus is legend rather than fact, and points out that the Passover festival is related to spring festivals before it. The reasons to celebrate this story, it claims, are that it is the first story in the world to embody the idea that slaves could become free people; that it has inspired Jews throughout history, "even in our darkest moments;" and that "it teaches us to have compassion for those who are still not free - because 'we, too, were once slaves in Egypt.'" The stress throughout is on the linked ideas of freedom and

responsibility. The initiative-taking roles of Moses, Miriam, and the people as a whole are equally represented. The story of the all-night rabbinical conversation is used to offer suggestions for post-meal discussion. What enables people to fight oppression? What makes people - like the midwives - take risks for others? What would we have done if we were there during the Warsaw ghetto uprising? What about the fact of slavery being virtually ignored all over the globe today? What can we do about racism? Most radically, the text quotes the saying that it was not only necessary to take the Jews out of Egypt, it was necessary to take Egypt out of the Jews, and draws a parallel with the Holocaust. "How," it asks, "do we escape becoming enslaved to the traumas and memories of the past? How do we resist enshrining the Holocaust as the defining moment of our identity?" It even asks us to ask questions about Israel and Zionism. As believers in freedom, should we not support Palestinians' right to self-determination? Should we not support "choice of religious expression" for Israel's secular citizens? This is a haggadah that, if used as intended, will stimulate and provoke discussion indeed. I wish I could hear some of those discussions.

As a mom and grandmom, one of the features I like about *The Liberated Haggadah* is the way it responds to the four types of children. Call me permissive, but I appreciate the way it asks us to encourage them all, including the irreverent one:

The rebellious child asks: What does this mean to all of you? This child is oppositional - and also skeptical. This child likes to protest for protest's sake, but he still comes to the table. He wants to appear not to be listening, but he takes in all the lessons. He wants to still belong, and his challenges need to be taken seriously.

Say to this child:

*We welcome your defiance and independence.
We will guide you to find your place among us.*

To my ear, this seems both realistic and inspirational. Would it might be so in all our families.

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