

shema bekolah. hear her voice
שמע בקולה

Discussing the Exodus
until Daybreak:
The Significance
of Nighttime Tales
By Erin Leib Smokler
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At the Seder, after we ask the four questions and sing *avadim hayinu*, we are immediately presented with two rabbinic tales. First, we tell the story of five rabbis in Bnei Brak who discuss the story of the Exodus until daybreak. Second, we recount how Rabbi Elazar son of Azariah learned that one must recite the story of the Exodus at night. What function do these stories play in the drama of the Haggadah? Why are they given such primacy and prominence? How do these narratives frame our retelling of the Exodus in the ensuing *maggid* section? As openers of the core section of the Haggadah, these accounts demand close attention.

Tales of great sages recounting the Exodus story for hours, or grounding the practice to do so, serve as live examples of the principle that “whoever discusses the Exodus at length should be praised.” All must participate in *sippur yetziat mitzrayim*, the telling of the redemption from Egypt, no matter how scholarly — and the longer the exercise, the better.

On a conceptual level, however, much more is at stake. Embedded in these two very brief rabbinic accounts are profound themes related to the nature of human experience, the uneven march of history, and the difficult call to redemption. Indeed, as we shall see, these stories embody and promote a central message of the *maggid* section of the Haggadah, guiding us in how we are to tell our foundational story, not only when to tell it and for how long.

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Let us focus first on the statement of Rabbi Elazar son of Azariah:

אמר רבי אלעזר בן עזריה: הרי אני כבן שבעים שנה ולא זכיתי שתאמר יציאת מצרים בלילות עד שדרשה בן זומא, שנאמר “למען תזכר את יום צאתך מארץ מצרים כל ימי חיידך” (דברים טז: ג). “ימי חיידך” – הימים; “כל ימי חיידך” – הלילות. וחכמים אומרים: “ימי חיידך” – העולם הזה; “כל ימי חיידך” – להביא ימות המשיח.

Rabbi Elazar son of Azariah said: I am like a man of seventy years old, yet I never understood why the story of the Exodus should be told at night until Ben Zoma explained it [on the basis of the biblical phrase], “So that you remember the day you left Egypt all the days of your life” (Deuteronomy 16:3). “The days of your life” means during the daytime; “all the days of your life” includes the nights. However the other sages said, “the days of your life” means during this world; “all the days of your life” [also] includes the messianic age.

For Ben Zoma, the presence of the seemingly superfluous word “all” indicates that one ought to tell the story of the Exodus throughout the day and also well into the night. For the other sages, that extra word serves an alternate function. It indicates that speaking of the Exodus is imperative both in this world and in the next — or, differently put, in the unredeemed world as much as in the redeemed one. Interestingly, both of these opinions are suggestive of this same claim: that we must learn how to speak of salvation both in the “daytime” of our lives, when redemption feels real, and in the “nighttime,” when it does not. The mitzvah of *sippur yetziat mitzrayim* — which references both our slavery and our freedom — is incumbent on all, all of the time and in all times, offering the promise of liberation to those still enslaved and a reminder of captivity to those already free. It seems that the challenge of the Seder might very well be to learn how to believe in deliverance precisely when it feels most far off — and to learn how to stay rooted in the reality of an unredeemed world precisely when we are poised to celebrate our own emancipation. Rabbi Elazar son of Azariah, “like

a man of seventy years old,” laden with the actual or perceived burdens of advanced age, could not fathom speaking of the Exodus in the dark. Reveling in redemption, he thought, is only for those blissfully in the light. It would take the deep message of Ben Zoma and the sages to convince him otherwise.

Rabbi Elazar’s lesson is not limited to the Haggadah. In fact, his statement, found originally in the mishna in *Berakhot* 1:5, is connected not to the Seder at all, but to the nighttime recitation of the Shema. The Shema contains a reference to the Exodus and is thus identified directly with it. “מזכירין יציאת מצרים בלילות” opens this mishna on prayer: “The exit from Egypt is to be mentioned at night.”

Commenting on a related mishna, the Gemara (*Berakhot* 12a) states the following:

אמר רבה בר חיננא סבא משמיה דרב: כל שלא
אמר “אמת ויציב” שחרית ו”אמת ואמונה” ערבית
לא יצא ידי חובתו, שנאמר: “להגיד בבקר חסדך
ואמנתך בלילות” (תהילים צב:ג).

Rabba, son of Hinena the elder, said in the name of Rav: If one omits to say “True and firm” in the morning and “True and trustworthy” in the evening, he has not performed his obligation, for it is said, “To declare Your lovingkindness in the morning and Your faithfulness in the night seasons” (Psalms 92:3).

One is obliged to recite the appropriate paragraphs following the Shema both in the morning and in the evening because the Torah exhorts us to praise God differently during the two time periods. Rashi explains this further:

וברכת “אמת ויציב” כולה על חסד שעשה עם
אבותינו היא, שהוציאם ממצרים ובקע להם הים
והעבירם. וברכת “אמת ואמונה” מדבר בה אף
על העתידות, שאנו מצפים שיקיים לנו הבטחתו
ואמונתו לגאלנו מיד מלכים...

The blessing of “*emet v’yatziv*” [said in the morning] is all about the lovingkindness that was shown to our ancestors when God took them out of Egypt, split the sea for them, and carried them across. The blessing of “*emet v’emunah*” [said in the evening] speaks of the future, that we

anticipate that God will fulfill God’s promise and faithfulness to redeem us from the kingdoms [of the world]...

Morning prayer, in other words, refers to redemption already witnessed. In the clarity of daylight, it references a relationship with God that is clear, confident, proven. Nighttime prayer, however, takes place in the context of a fog of fuzzy unknowns. Vulnerable and frightened in the dark, without the certainty of a God undeniably present, we reach out with hope for future salvation. The halakhic imperative to recite both of these declarations asks us to oscillate between positions, to learn to inhabit each of them — the backward glance toward a known past and the forward look toward an unknown, but assured, future. Through the Shema and its variant endings, we are to cultivate a relationship with God in the morning and in the night seasons, when redemption is live and also when it is merely a dream.

The five mishnaic rabbis in Bnei Brak understood this well.

מעשה ברבי אליעזר ורבי יהושע ורבי אלעזר בן
עזריה ורבי עקיבא ורבי טרפון שהיו מסבין בבני
ברק והיו מספרים ביציאת מצרים כל אותו הלילה
עד שבאו תלמידיהם ואמרו להם, “רבותינו, הגיע
זמן קריאת שמע של שחרית!”

It happened that Rabbi Eliezer, Rabbi Yehoshua, Rabbi Elazar ben Azariah, Rabbi Akiva, and Rabbi Tarfon were reclining [at a Seder] in Bnei Brak. They were discussing the Exodus all that night, until their students came and told them, “Masters, the time has come for the morning recitation of the Shema!”

These rabbis, all living under Roman rule in the aftermath of the destruction of the Second Temple, were far removed from any experience of redemption. On the contrary, they knew the most raw national devastation up close, and witnessed the already weakened Jewish community fracture and turn against itself in the aftermath. In this context, nighttime discussions of the Exodus take on a whole new significance and even dissonance. Deep in the dark, both literally and figuratively, these rabbis

elected to still speak of the light, of the glories of God's saving hand in history. They recalled the miraculous story of *yetziat mitzrayim* until the Shema beckoned. They talked through the night until they could taste the promise of the morning, until they could believe in the possibility of redemption again. Looking back to the liberation that was they could trust once more in a liberation yet to come. "*Emet v'emunah*" yielded to "*emet v'yatziv*."

This tale stands, then, at the start of the *maggid* section to model for us courageous engagement with *sippur yetziat mitzrayim*. It teaches us how best to tell our story. When the mishna sets out the general trajectory of *maggid*, it says, "מתחיל בגנות ומסיים בשבח" — "We start with degradation and we end with praise" (*Pesahim* 116a). In the Gemara, Rav argues that we begin with references to our idolatrous origins. That is the source of our shame. Shmuel argues that we start with our enslavement, with *avadim hayinu*. In the Haggadah, we incorporate both. Our rabbinic stories are poignantly sandwiched between these two proposed degradations, subtly highlighting the important role they play in dramatizing this arc. Indeed, the nighttime tales perform the very principle of "*m'gnut l'shevach*." They exemplify the move from shame to celebration, from darkness to light. In so doing, they urge us to find a way to tell the story of the Exodus no matter how mired we might be in an alternative narrative, no matter how far off redemption may feel. The imperative of Pesach night, then, is to speak our way from night into daybreak, "להגיד בבקר חסדך ואמנתך בלילות".

Hag Kasher V'Sameah!

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