

Student Perspectives on Passover

Bibhilu: Jordana Stern

“Bibhilu yatšanu mi-miṣrayim” translates to “With haste we left Egypt,” Bibhilu is a Moroccan tradition that my family does at every Passover seder. Some people use a seder plate; however, my family uses a vase with flowers in it. My parents buy flowers before Passover, and we bring them to my grandparents’ house, where the seders take place. The ritual takes place right before we start reading from the Haggadah. My uncle and grandpa are usually the ones who grab the flowers and wave them over everyone’s head. We sing the song every time the vase is above someone’s head. After it has been waved over everyone’s head, we wave it over the seder table. Everyone receives the blessing, which symbolizes that no one is left behind. No matter how many people are at the table - whether there are 5 or 50 - every single person will get the blessing. Especially during the pandemic, it is extremely important for everyone to know that they will not be left alone; family and friends are always there for each other.

250 Plagues: Noam Guralnick

Would you believe that there were 250 plagues in Egypt? Everyone knows about the ten plagues in Egypt; Blood, Frogs, Lice, Wild Animals, Pestilence, Bials, Fiery Hail, Locusts, Darkness, and Death of the First Born. But unknown to people are the aspects of each plague. In the Haggadah, we read Rabbi Akiva’s interpretation of Psalms 78:49, a verse which reads, “He sent upon [the Egyptians] the fierceness of His anger, wrath, and fury, and trouble, a sending of messengers of evil.” Rabbi Akiva says that each of the plagues has each of these five different aspects within them. This would mean that, according to Rabbi Akiva, each plague has five different elements associated with it, “fierceness of His anger,” “wrath,” “fury,” “trouble,” and “a sending of messengers of evil.” For example, if we look at blood, the plague was much more complex than just turning all the water in the Nile River into blood.

At the time, the Nile was vital for necessities; food, water, and bathing were all possible because of the Nile River’s water. One of the first issues that would have occurred would have been that the children of Egypt would be extremely thirsty, especially in the desert conditions in which they lived. The next problem would have been the food source. The Nile River is full of fish, which the Egyptians would catch and eat for dinner. With a lack of fish from all the fish dying from their habitat turning into blood, many Egyptians would not have been able to eat. This would cause a rift within the family as you have children and a wife to feed. Next, there would have been dead fish lying all around, causing many flies and other scavenger animals to swarm all over Egypt, especially near the Nile. The Egyptians would be quite irritated to be deprived of a food source and from their source of water. From this, it is clear that there was a massive “butterfly effect” from each of the plagues, causing arguably even more than 250 plagues from the original ten plagues.

There is quite a relevant example today with the COVID-19 pandemic. One virus has caused many different problems for people. The ripple effect experienced with this virus has been massive. COVID-19 has affected almost every aspect of our lives, from small things such as more frequent hand washing or having to wear a mask around people to more significant things for many people, such as losing a job or closing their businesses. Divorce and suicide rates are very high during this time and for many different reasons associated with COVID-19. We can now better understand Rabbi Akiva explaining that there were not just ten plagues in Egypt. You have to account for their vast ripple effects as well.

Dayenu: Vida Sussman

Dayenu literally means “It would have been enough.”

The structure of Dayenu is 15 stanzas, referencing different events the Jewish people experienced, from slavery in Egypt to the building of the temple in Jerusalem. We sing the chorus after every stanza, signifying that if this was the total of G-d’s intervention in the lives of the Israelites, it would have been adequate. But G-d has repeatedly stuck with us, and the only reason why we are here today is because of G-d’s intervention.

One of the Pesach seder’s fundamental purposes is to make us feel as if we personally experienced the exodus from Egypt and the redemption from slavery to freedom. Dayenu does just this; it reminds us of G-d’s intervention throughout Jewish history and pushes us to really think about how we lead our lives today.

We live in a world that is consumed by the physical, and it can be so easy to get distracted and to lose sight of what life really is about. Dayenu reminds us that there is another, more truthful way to look at life, and this is through Judaism. Judaism offers an outlook on all walks of life, and it by no means takes away from the “fun” in life. In fact, we are encouraged to make time for special occasions to drink and enjoy the finer things in life: for example Shabbat, holidays, and other occasions. But Judaism also teaches that life is not enjoyable if we expect it to be a constant “high”. We need moments of restraint as well, and it is this juxtaposition of indulgence and restraint that creates a life of truth and meaning.

Dayenu encourages us to think deeply about what life really is about, and what it means to be a Jew in this world - of the experiences we as a people have been through, and how we are miraculously still here.

Chad Gadya: Amy Aginsky

Though Chad Gadya does not identify as one, it is very similar to a nursery rhyme. On the surface, the song is a fun and festive way to end the seder, but the song is filled with paradoxes and odd images that are made to represent our Jewish History.

Chad Gadya means one little goat or one kid. The song is 11 verses long and each verse alludes to one person or event in our Jewish history. The one little goat represents the birthright mentioned in Genesis 25 as the baton being passed from Abraham to Isaac, in order to continue Abraham’s mission to build a world of kindness instead of idolatry, child sacrifice, and other evils. The repetition of each verse represents the flow and pattern of Jewish history. Sometimes we have setbacks - being slaves in Egypt - but then we rise. Though most of the song looks at our history, it ends our seder with a bright vision of the future as G-d brings us the Messiah.