

# The Four Stories: Passover night as our children tell it to us

Shawn Ruby '89 | Pesach 2015 | Bronfman Torah

*Shawn Ruby (BYFI '89), at age 43, is still a work in progress. His wife (Tammy) and three children (Eliana, Keren and Noam) think that he should put "Professional Student" on his business cards. Currently studying for Rabbinical ordination at Yeshivat Maale Gilboa, he also spends time working with researchers at Bar Ilan University's Faculty of Engineering, and consulting for analog and RF integrated circuit design groups. He holds degrees in Physics, Mathematics and BioPhysics from the University of Pennsylvania, and an MBA from the InterDisciplinary Center in Herzliya. A native of an obscure suburb of Montreal, Canada, he has lived in Israel since 2000, since 2012 on Kibbutz Maale Gilboa. He is currently building a house there, and trying very hard not to let it bankrupt him.*

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On Seder night, we tell not one, but two stories of redemption.

In the Passover spirit of 4's, I want to suggest two additional ones.

The Mishna teaches, without detail, that the Passover story should begin with the bad and end with the good – מתחיל בגנות ומסיים בשבח. Rav and Shmuel, the founding sages of the Babylonian Talmud, disagreed about what this meant. Shmuel took the plain sense meaning – start with the evil of slavery and end with praise for the redemption from Egypt. Rav said something more surprising – begin with our distance from God as idol worshippers and end with our closeness to God at Sinai. The compilers of the Haggada (apparently unconcerned that the soup might get cold), included both versions for our Seder night.

**Shmuel's** interpretation sees every generation reliving the story of our first redemption as a people. Every person, generation to generation, must find in themselves the connection to their ancestors and feel part of that experience. Eat the matza, feel the burn of the maror, and relive our collective experience.

**Rav** looked around himself in exile, and with first-hand knowledge of the dwindling community in the land of Israel, and asked himself what any of this had to do with him? How could he see himself as leaving Egypt, as having been freed from the yoke of foreign rule, while he lived under a foreign king in far-off Babylon? What was left of the great redemption from Egypt, if the people were scattered, and the Temple in ruins? His answer, however, was not despair, but to find the divine redemption that he felt in his own life. For him, the story of the Exodus was only part of the larger story – the story of our coming close to God through Torah. This was a story he could relate to intimately as a teacher of Torah and the founder of a Yeshiva in Sura that stood for 800 years – longer than either of the Temples in Jerusalem. For Rav, as long as he could feel close to God, he felt redeemed, and could sing praises for his redemption. Slavery was terrible, but paled in comparison to distance from the Divine.

At the end of each of these versions of the story in the Haggada, we are given a model of generational self-image appropriate to each story. Shmuel's version ends with each generation recapitulating our experience in Egypt – *בכל דור ודור חייב אדם לראות את עצמו כאילו הוא יצא ממצרים* – **"In every generation a person must see him/herself as if he/she left Egypt."** Rav's story ends with a different command. It is incumbent on each generation to see the redemption that has occurred in their own

times. שלא אחד בלבד עמד  
עלינו לכלותינו אלא שבכל דור  
דור עומדים עלינו לכלותינו  
והקדוש ברוך הוא מצילנו מידם.

*"For not one alone stood  
over us to wipe us out,  
but **in every generation**  
they stand over us to wipe  
us out, and the Holy One,  
Who is Blessed, saves us  
from their hand."* Rav's

version of the story challenges us not to live in an imaginary land of dreams of the past – look around and identify the redemption in your life, and in the lives of your contemporaries. It is not "as if" you were redeemed – you were actually redeemed. Recognize the redemption in your present.

In our parents' and grand-parents' generations, those who lived through the despair of Auschwitz and the redemption of the creation of the State of Israel, it was easy to identify the modern version of the story. As a child, I remember how palpable these historical realities were at our Seders, how facile the comparisons were. My sense of how that narrative is incomplete has grown with the years. Yet for me, still, this is the story that is my version of starting with the bad and ending with the good. As I build my home on a hilltop in the

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sovereign Jewish State of Israel, in the Land of Israel, I cannot but contrast that to where our people were but seventy years ago.

However, I am also very aware that I am parenting a new generation, for whom these realities are more remote – who need the space to find their own story of redemption, alongside Rav and Shmuel's story, and perhaps replacing their father's version. This summer my daughter will draft into the IDF, and she needs a version of the Passover story, not only for Seder night, but to make sense of her service to the State of Israel – to which she recently signed up for a nine (!) year stint. She has to find the redemption she recognizes as her own as an Israeli, as a Jew, as a human being. She must find the story that makes sense of the sacrifices she has committed herself to, and the place she chooses to take in the chain of our people. For the Seder story is not only about one night's ritual, but about how we, like Rav in Babylon, make sense of our world.

On this Seder night of fours – four cups, four questions, four children – we must tell four stories, of which but two are in the text before us. First we tell the story of our ancestors redemption from Egypt, as per Shmuel's instructions, and as the central metaphor around which our history hinges. Next, the tale of our coming under the Divine Wing at Sinai, as per Rav, understanding that our history is about ideas and spirit, not only about power and freedom. Then, my own generation's story of the 20<sup>th</sup> century's destruction and rebirth, acknowledging the remarkable historic period we have lived through. Finally, a fourth story will be told by my children – for which I am but the listener, asking only questions.

So, in the spirit of the Seder, I end not with a statement, but with some questions. How is this Seder night different from all other Seder nights in the past and future? How do you – individually and collectively – imagine you have been redeemed? What redemption do you celebrate, and what redemption do you look forward to? Is it a story of personal redemption, or collective redemption? Is it a redemption complete, or a redemption in progress? What story do you want to tell?

Tell me a story, and together let us drink a cup of wine over it.

Chag Sameach V'Kasher

Shawn Ruby '89

(Credit to HaRav Beni Holzman of Yeshivat Maale Gilboa for triggering the thought process that led to the this dvar torah).

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