

Midrash Shir HaShirim Raba 1:8

Our rabbis say: Let not the parable be lightly esteemed in your eyes, since by means of the parable, a man can master the *Torah*. By means of a parable a man arrives at the true meaning of the words of *Torah*.
ורבנן אמרין: אל יהי המשל הזה קל בעיניך. שעל ידי המשל הזה, אדם יכול לעמוד בדברי תורה.

Babylonian Talmud,

Pesachim 116a/

תלמוד בבלי, מסכת פסחים

קטז.

מאי בגנות? רב אמר
'מתחלה עובדי עבודת
גלולים היו אבותינו'
[ושמואל] אמר 'עבדים
היינו'

What is 'WITH SHAME'? Rav said: 'In the beginning, our ancestors were idolaters'; while Shmuel said: 'We

What's Your Story?

Rebi Nahman of Breslov, Likutei Moharan 60

There are many who have fallen into deep sleep. Some people believe they are serving God, but they are really sleeping. There are others who are in such a deep slumber that they do not even know they are asleep. The only way to wake people up is through stories. The stories can awaken and revive them.

משנה פסחים 10:4 Mishna Pesachim

ולפי דעתו של בן, אביו מלמדו.

מתחיל בגנות ומסים בשבח, ודורש מארמי אובד אבי, עד שיגמור כל הפרשה כלה.

And according to the child's intelligence, the parent instructs [the child]. [The parent] begins [answering the question] with [the account of Israel's] shame and concludes with [Israel's] glory, and expounds from "My father was a wandering Aramean" (Dt 26:5-10) until he completes the whole passage.

If history were taught in the form of stories, it would never be forgotten.
-Rudyard Kipling

The purpose of a storyteller is not to tell you how to think, but to give you questions to think upon.

-Brandon Sanderson

A Nesiya Pesach Study Guide for 5774/2014

The moment you start telling a story, it becomes less clear, and you have to invent your way out of those logistical corners that you get into. It never works out as simply as you imagined it will, because the audience is there and sometimes they just plain don't believe you and you have to invent something that they then might accept. Their silences are very articulate. When they're able to follow you, they become very happy and this is clear.

-Garrison Keillor

Sister Lillian Harrington's Midrash

In the long, long ago, the Lord God searched for people to be his own. God went to the Greeks and asked, "What can you do for me if I make you my chosen people?"

"We are gifted architects. We can build beautiful temples where people can come in great numbers from all over the world to worship you."

"Thank you very much," God said, and moved on.

Then the Lord God went to the Romans and said, "What can you do for me if I make you my chosen people?"

"We are great builders of roads and bridges. We will build bridges and roads so that the people can find their way to you."

"Thank you very much," God said, and moved on.

Then God went to the Jewish people and asked, "What can you do for me if I make you my chosen people?"

An old rabbi answered for them. "We are not gifted architects. Neither are we great builders of roads and bridges. What we can do is tell stories."

And God said, "Then you will be my people."

Sister Lillian Harrington, OSB, Benedictine Sister of Mount St. Scholastica, Atchison, KS.

GUIDED QUESTIONS FOR THE STUDY SHEET

- How much of storytelling is dependent on who is listening?
- If you had to choose between Rav and Shmuel, which makes more sense to you?
- Why do you think the Midrash says that parables (stories) are a way of arriving at the true meaning of the Torah? Is it the **only** way, or is it **also** a way?
- Sister Lillian Harrington's 'midrash' is based on a Traditional Jewish Midrash that teaches that God offered the Torah to all the Nations of the world who each rejected for their own particular reason, but the Jewish People accepted it with enthusiasm before even knowing what it included, suggesting commitment and leap of faith. What can we learn from Sister Harrington's perspective as someone from outside the Jewish People?

Stories-A Nesiya Approach to Seder Night

Why do we tell stories?

What kinds of stories do we tell?

How would you tell the story of the Jewish People?

Where would it start? How would it finish?

These are the questions that the ancient Jewish Sages were struggling with as the Passover holiday celebration was taking shape. The Passover story is the central moment in the Bible that defines the Jewish People: The Jewish Nation is taken out of Egypt and led towards Mt. Sinai to receive the Torah on the way to the Land of Israel. This is the foundational story of the Jewish People and establishes the relationship with God. *This* is the story that parents are obligated to tell their children on seder night. *This* is the vehicle for the transmission of generations of history on to the next generation.

So where would you start to tell the story?

The Sages of 2000 years ago debated this question, suggesting that how you start the story frames it in its own particular way. With a cryptic turn of phrase, the Sages agree that the story should: **“Begin with shame and end with praise...”** (Mishna Pesachim 10:4)

In the Talmud (Pesachim 116a) Rav and Shmuel disagree on the “shame” with which we should begin to tell the story. They have a fundamental argument over which “pre-story” will be the most important or effective way to frame the story of the Exodus from Egypt: Rav starts by reminding us that we are descended from idol worshippers—a spiritually shameful part of our past, whereas Shmuel begins the story when we were slaves in Egypt—a physically shameful blemish.

What is the real difference between these two positions? What are they really arguing about?

One way to look at the argument is that it is a tension between body and soul. Rav claims that the main story is a telling of the spiritual revolution of monotheism in a world of idol worship, whereas Shmuel sees that this story is one of a particular oppressed people that rose up and rallied behind a charismatic leader to claim autonomy in the name of justice and freedom of religious worship.

So who wins the day? Which approach does the Hagaddah go with? Our tradition answers in classic Jewish fashion: Yes. Both.

The foundational Jewish Story—the Greatest Story Every Told—is at the same time one of profound spiritual revolution, **and also** the story of a particular people that dared to dream that political and historical realities can change.

The Hagaddah is suggesting that the Jewish People are both a Religion and Nation. We have both a National soul as well as a National body.

Particularly interesting is that on seder night, as we are instructed to share this story with our children, we are not simply sharing an idea about the Jewish People. If we accept the invitation to participate more fully—and more personally—in the telling, we are also teaching our children about ourselves (see supplement from [2007](#)). Each and every Jewish individual is both part of the spiritual reality of an intimate connection to the Divine Source of Life, as well as part of the unfolding historical narrative of the Jewish People. Each Jew is an embodied soul.

On Passover night, we invite all who are hungry to come and eat. On one level, it is literal, but on another level, perhaps we are inviting all seekers to come and join in the feast of stories and ideas: whether you are person inclined to relate to the “Jewish Story” as a spiritual story, or as a national and political story, both are invited and included in the Hagaddah. Perhaps this is the “Greatest Story Ever Told” because it includes so many different voices and ways of relating to our Tradition. It includes each and every one of us.

But the most meaningful story that can be told at the seder night that most deeply leaves an indelible impression on our children is the personal story of our own freedom from spiritual bondage and physical oppression. When Rav and Shmuel were arguing over where to start telling the story of the Jewish People, they were also shouting out to each and every one of us throughout history: how do you see your own personal narrative? Where are *you* in this story?

When we are challenged to share the story in a meaningful way with our children, we are invited to more deeply understand our own sense of self and identity.

Hag Sameach!

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Two writers rushed in the *beit midrash* of the Rhizner Rebbe. They wanted him to write the preface to their respective books, one on Jewish law, the other on stories. The *gabbi* was sure that the *rebbe* would see the writer of law first, but he checked. The *rebbe* told him that he would see the storyteller first. “Our *Torah* begins with stories, were it not for the stories, we would have no basis for the *mitzvot* that follow.”