

## A New Haggadah for a Time of Crisis?

Rabbi Rachel Sabath Beit-Halachmi, Ph.D.

in conversation with

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### I. Radical Liturgical Changes in “The New Haggadah”

“For once I have acted out a dream of mine...”<sup>1</sup>

“[The New Haggadah](#)” Edited by Mordecai M. Kaplan, Eugene Kohn, and Ira Eisenstein for the Jewish Reconstructionist Foundation, Behrman House, New York, First edition, 1941.

- 1) Excised most references to the ten plagues;
- 2) Eliminated the call for divine vengeance embodied in the *Shfokh Hamat-kha* (“Pour out Thy wrath . . .”);
- 3) Dropped most of the rabbinic interpretations of the biblical text. “Most important, the Haggadah deleted all references to the election of the people of Israel.”<sup>2</sup>
- 4) In addition, the *New Haggadah* adds, in 1941, *HaTikvah* before “America” at the conclusion of the Seder.<sup>3</sup>
- 5) Focus on universal themes of feeding the hungry, freedom for all;
- 6) Focus on self-betterment and actualization.

### II. In Kaplan's Own Words:

#### A. From Kaplan's Diaries:

##### 1. Preparing the New Haggadah

“To those who observe a second seder, or for those whom our revised Haggadah is still too traditional, this modern Haggadah out to appeal very strongly....”<sup>4</sup>

##### 2. Sold Out Haggadah and Immediate Criticism

“The entire edition of the *New Haggadah*, which consisted of 3,000 copies, was sold out within ten days after it came off the press. Last Sunday there appeared a vicious attack on it ...in the *Jewish Morning Journal*. Personally, I am satisfied that this gave me an opportunity to bring out into the open the issue of the “Chosen People.” It will be even harder to give up than the doctrine of revelation, although the latter is one of the three cardinal principles of Judaism.”<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Kaplan Diaries, Jewish Theological Seminary of America, Archive 65 vol. X, April 29, 1941, p. 73. In *Communings of the Spirit, Vol. II: The Journals of Mordecai M. Kaplan, Volume II: 1934-1941*, edited by Mel Sault, Wayne State University Press, Detroit; Published in cooperation with the Reconstructionist Press, 2016, p. 326.

<sup>2</sup> Adapted from Jack Wertheimer,

<sup>3</sup> Lilian Cowan created a much revised Haggadah in 1904 which included *HaTikvah*, which was adopted in 1897 as an anthem by the First Zionist Congress. See Vanessa L. Ochs, *The Passover Haggadah: A Biography*, Princeton University Press, 2020; p. 109.

<sup>4</sup> Kaplan diary, May 16, 1940. See *Communings of the Spirit, Vol. II: The Journals of Mordecai M. Kaplan, Volume II: 1934-1941*, edited by Mel Sault, Wayne State University Press, Detroit; Published in cooperation with the Reconstructionist Press, 2016, p. 233.

<sup>5</sup> Kaplan diary, April 10, 1941. *Communings, Vol. II*, p. 320.

### 3. April 29, 1941: Anticipating the Storm and the Excision of Chosenness

*"The elimination from the Kiddush in the Haggadah of the reference to our being a chosen people has called down upon me the vociferous protestations of the great do-nothings who command positions of spiritual influence in Jewish life. I anticipated the storm which has broken loose and which may develop into a hurricane.*

*But I had to dislodge from the Jewish mentality an idea which was bound to be most obstructive in any growth, reconstruction, and progress in Jewish life. The very act of affirming with all the solemn pretense of prayer an idea which is not taken seriously and which in fact is flouted and ridiculed is the greatest offense against elemental decency.*

*That Jews could be so insensitive as to permit themselves such flummery would be evidence either of senility or degeneracy. I could not continue to work for the Jewish cause if it was to be inextricably tied up with such unfeeling disregard for the sanctity of prayer. Thank God I have had the courage to go through with the excision of such a cancerous growth from the Jewish consciousness."<sup>6</sup>*

#### B. From the Introduction to the first edition of *The New Haggadah*: [Click here](#)

### III. "[The New Haggadah](#)" Edited by Mordecai M. Kaplan, Eugene Kohn, and Ira Eisenstein for the Jewish Reconstructionist Foundation, Behrman House, New York, First edition, 1941.

#### A. Kiddush in the New Haggadah:

"Praised be thou, o Lord our God. King of the universe, who hast sanctified us by thy commandments. As a token of Thy love, O Lord our God, thou hast given us {Sabbaths for rest}, occasions for rejoicing, festivals and holidays for gladness, {this Sabbath day and} this Feast of Unleavened Bread, the season of our liberation from bondage in Egypt. Thou hast quickened within us the desire to serve thee, and {in love and grace}, in joy and gladness, hast bestowed on us thy holy {Sabbaths and} festivals. Praised be thou, O Lord, who hallowest {the Sabbath}, Israel, and the festivals."<sup>7</sup>

#### **Traditional Holiday Kiddush words omitted:**

"Blessed art Thou, O Lord Our God, Ruler of the Universe, **Who hath chosen us from among all peoples and hath exalted us above all nations and tongues**" and hath sanctified us through is commandments....

"For us it was that Thou didst **choose above all nations and didst sanctify** us to be dedicated to Thy Service...."

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<sup>6</sup> Kaplan Diaries, Jewish Theological Seminary of America, Archive 65 vol. X, April 29, 1941, p. 73. In *Communings Vol. II*, p. 326. Additional references to the New Haggadah in Kaplan's diaries can be found in *Communings Vol. II* on pages 53, 65, 233, 317, 319, 320, 322-323, 338-339, 341-344, 347-350, 350-351, and 366. See in particular the entries on p. 233 and p. 320.

<sup>7</sup> *The New Haggadah*, 1941, pp. 4-6.

- B. Omission of: *Shfoch HaMatcha* “Pour out your wrath on those who do not know your name...”
- C. Omission of Ten Plagues

#### IV. Reactions to the New Haggadah:

April 31, 1941: Professor Louis Finkelstein wrote a group letter to Kaplan:

*“The term Haggadah itself is quite a misnomer for your book. It is, if you will, a new Passover service. But a book, which omits **derasha**, or rabbinic interpretation of the biblical verses has ceased to be a Haggadah; for the word Haggadah is a technical term, applying to the interpretation of a biblical text.”<sup>8</sup>*

#### V. Sample of New Readings on Freedom and Self-Betterment

“But the freedom we strive for means more than broken chains. It means liberation from all those enslavements that warp the spirit and blight the mind, that destroy the soul even though they leave the flesh alive. .... For men can be enslaved in more ways than one. Men can be enslaved to themselves. When they let emotion sway them to their hurt, when they permit harmful habits to tyrannize over them—they are slaves. When laziness or cowardice keeps them from doing what they know to be the right, when ignorance blinds them.....When envy, bitterness and jealousy sour their joys and darken the brightness of their contentment—they are slaves to themselves and shackled by their own forging.”<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Professor Louis Finkelstein, April 31, 1941. Quoted in the new volume, *The Passover Haggadah: A Biography*, by Vanessa L. Ochs, Princeton University Press, 2020; pp. 108-109.

<sup>9</sup> *The New Haggadah*, p. 12, revised edition, 1942.