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Rabbi Hayyim Angel

Book Review

Pesah: Insights from the Past, Present, and Future (The Habura, 2022)

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It has been delightful becoming acquainted with The Habura, a recently-founded England-based organization that has been promoting thoughtful Torah learning since 2020. It is headed by Rabbi Joseph Dweck, Senior Rabbi of the Spanish and Portuguese Community of the United Kingdom (see www.TheHabura.com).

The Habura promotes the inclusion of Sephardic voices and ideas in Jewish discourse, coupled with an openness to the broad wisdom of the Jewish people and the world. In this regard, their work strongly dovetails ours at the Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals.

Their recently published Passover volume contains an array of twenty essays. The first two are by Sephardic visionaries of the 19th and 20th centuries, Rabbis Benjamin Artom (1835-1879, Hakham of the Spanish and Portuguese Community of the United Kingdom) and Ben Zion Uziel (1880-1953, first Sephardic Chief Rabbi of the State of Israel). The rest of the book is divided between contemporary rabbis and scholars, and younger scholars who participate in the learning of The Habura.

The essays span a variety of topics pertaining to Passover in the areas of Jewish thought, faith, halakha, and custom. The authors stress the need for different communities to remain faithful to their interpretive traditions. Too much of the observant Jewish world has capitulated to a stringency-seeking approach that ignores dissenting opinions and fosters conformity. The essays in this volume seek to rectify this outlook. Sephardim, Ashkenazim, and other communities should be true to their halakhic traditions and customs, and learn from one another instead of striving for conformity with the most restricted common denominators.

In this brief review, I will summarize three of the essays I personally found most enlightening.

Rabbi Dr. Samuel Lebens addresses a surprising formula early in the *maggid* section of the Haggadah: “If the Holy One, blessed be He, had not taken us out of Egypt, then we, our children, and our children’s children would have remained slaves to Pharaoh in Egypt.” On its surface, this claim seems unsustainable. After all, there *is* no Pharaoh today. Are we really to think we would be slaves to Pharaoh?

No. We are supposed to *pretend* that we otherwise would still be slaves. This theme at the outset of the *maggid* relates to the statement toward the end of *maggid*, “In every generation a person is obligated to regard him/herself as if he/she had come out of Egypt.” We must imagine that we ourselves were redeemed from Egypt, and we therefore experience the slavery and redemption in our Seder.

Lebens argues that in addition to elements of faith and community-building, all religions have a component which arouses the imagination. Sometimes, we imagine based on a reality. For example, we believe God really did create the cosmos. However, it is imperative to also live our lives constantly *seeing ourselves* as God’s creations (see Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch on the first of the Ten Commandments in Exodus 20).

On other occasions, tradition demands that we pretend so that we live our lives in a certain way. It is insufficient to merely believe that God redeemed our ancestors from Egypt thousands of years ago. The Haggadah then demands that we imagine ourselves to have been enslaved and redeemed. If we do not invoke our imaginations, we remain distant with the identification required to transform our identity and actions. If we internalize the religious program of the Haggadah, we become more sensitive toward the underprivileged, since we too were

enslaved and redeemed.

Daniel Osen also exploits the Haggadah's directive, "In every generation a person is obligated to regard him/herself as if he/she had come out of Egypt." He employs this concept to explain the puzzling omission of Moses in the Haggadah (he is mentioned once in passing in most contemporary versions of the Haggadah, but in earlier versions of the Haggadah even that reference was absent).

This phenomenon is commonly explained as a means of highlighting God's central role in the exodus. Osen adds a dimension by noting that we may experience the exodus better in our imaginations if we do not dwell on a specific historical person. This interpretation creates a direct relationship between God and the Jewish people of all generations.

Rabbi Abraham Faur uses the Pesah narrative in the Torah to reflect on alarming contemporary trends toward tyranny in Western culture. A basic feature of utopian societies is that one is forbidden from criticizing the ruling class. To suspend critical thinking—the great threat to tyrants—the political elite will suppress anything that promotes scrutiny.

It is specifically the family unit promoted by the Torah that enables people to oppose tyranny. Faur quotes Frederick Engels, who wrote in 2015 that Marxism attempts "to end home and religious education, to dissolve monogamy in marriage…to shift mothers into factories, to move children into daycare nurseries…and, most of all, for society and the state to rear and educate children."

Tyrants recognize that promiscuous people with weak family bonds will become submissive citizens of the state. Contemporary "woke ideology…is an intentional attempt to promote values that contradict the family structure."

Jacob brought his family to Egypt *ish u-beto*, every man arrived with a family (Exodus 1:1). Pharaoh attempted to destroy Israelite families, first by enslavement, then through the secret murder of infant boys, and then finally publicly decreeing that Israelite boys be drowned.

Tyrants also control the information released to the public, and censor or punish anything that contradicts their narrative. The new Pharaoh suddenly forgot that Joseph had saved Egypt, and instead promoted fear and hysteria against the Israelites. A person raised in Egypt would not have known that there were alternatives to the enslavement and murder of the Israelites. In contrast, a strong

family might be able to think critically, because it has access to traditions and memories older than the tyrannical state.

Tyrannies often pretend to act for the best of the people, but critical-minded people see through their hypocrisy and lies. Pharaoh is a banner example of this evil: When Moses approached Pharaoh after the plague of hail, he demanded that men, women, children, and animals be released to the wilderness to serve God. Pharaoh responds, “may the Lord be with you, if I send you and your children; behold that evil is before you…the men may go and worship the Lord” (Exodus 10:10-11). Pharaoh presents the journey into the wilderness as dangerous for women and children, and therefore permits only the men to go. Pharaoh thereby postures as the protector of women and children.

Of course, the family-oriented, critical-minded Israelite women saw through Pharaoh’s outrageous pretense as a defender of human rights, since Pharaoh had decreed the murder of their sons. He could not care less about the welfare of them or their children. They followed Moses into the wilderness with their children, and sought out God’s word at Sinai.

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I had the privilege of giving a three-part series for the Habura in February-March, 2022. You may view these lectures at:

Tanakh and Superstition: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PD68xZ4J4M8

Torah and Archaeology: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dN1XAtia_x0

Torah and Literalism: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K__jp8V9sXY

The Institute looks forward to further partnering with The Habura in the future and building our shared vision together.