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The Many Delights of the Haggadah, 1967.

The Many Delights of the Haggadah
Daniel Jeremy Silver
April 23, 1967

Spelunking is, as you know, the sport of cave exploration. It is the adventure which takes the daring and the skillful deep into the bowels of the earth where they are enabled to enjoy some of the most splendid of the beauties of our world: great conical forests of stalagmites, ink-black pools of subterranean waters, the strange, fantastic mineral collections which shimmer and give off color under the light, sights, sounds which are denied, only dimly understood by those of us who are bound to the crust of the earth. I want to spelunk into the depths of the Haggadah, the text which we use to guide our telling of the Exodus story on Passover.

Why does a man adventure deep into the earth? I suppose he would answer us simply, because the caves and the caverns are there. It is an adventure, something to do. That occasional moment of glory is simply a bonus. Why should we spelunk into the Haggadah? Because it is here; because this little book was written over 2,000 years ago by our people; because it is a many-layered book; because the depths of the text, its subtleties, its sophistication, help us to understand the full impact and bite of this upcoming Passover holiday.

You know, we're creatures of habit. Place us in an equitable climate, let the sun shine every day, and we will soon forget to notice and to enjoy the beauty of the sunlight. Seder night is a familiar routine to us. We know what to expect and when to expect it: the lighting of the lights, the saying of the questions, the answering of the questions, the madrigals, the hiding of the afikomen, the finding of the afikomen, and very often we skim through Passover on the surface of the road, reading the text, thinking of it simply as an historical narrative. And the Passover itself, the Seder, lacks the thrust, the importance, the personal spiritual significance that it ought to have.

So, know yourselves to your rope. I'll take the light and let's be off in - to the depths of the Haggadah. The first unexpected turn that we come across is what seems to be a grammatical error, a typographical mistake. The Exodus took place 3300 years ago. None of us were there. The Bible, of course, tells us that all the motley that were brought out of Egypt died short of the Promised Land. And yet, in the directions for the Haggadah, the father is told to answer his son who asks about the meaning of this festivity: "Why do we celebrate the Passover this night?" He is to answer him: "It is because of that which the Lord did for me when I came out of Egypt." Now, I did not come out of Egypt. I cannot even go into Egypt. What do we have here? A mistake? Should the book be sent back to the printers? Not at all. We have a warning, a road sign. The story of the Haggadah is not a simple descriptive history. It isn't a retelling, a chronicle, of that which happened to the children of Israel and of Moses so many millenia ago. We have before us a surrealistic text, a text which only the intellectual adventurer ought to enter because we are asked not only to recreate the history, but to place ourselves in the history. It is not only those children of Israel who are being talked about, but these children of Israel; not only then, but now. And as we read the Haggadah we must be able to make that jump across time and space, from Egypt to the United States, from the wilderness to Cleveland, and that, by the way, is not so difficult a mistake sometimes, but we must be able to see ourselves in the redemption, in the bondage, delivered.

There are four cups of wine, as you know, on Seder night. Tradition tells us that each of these cups of wine represents another of the statements of promise that God made to Moses and to the children of Israel. "And I will take you out, and I will deliver you, and I will take you out with Me, and I will redeem you." In order to emphasize the existential nature of the Seder, that it is not only history but contemporary, that it is here and now, it speaks of us. The rabbis insisted that these four

statements of promise can be equated with four of the great deliverances of our Jewish people. "And I will take you out of Egypt, and I will redeem you from Babylon, and I will take you out of the land of Persia, and I will redeem you from the iron boot of Rome." And in order to emphasize that oppression was not only back then in dim, faroff times, there is on Seder night at the head table a fifth cup of wine, a cup which is neither tasted nor touched. It is part of the promise of the Bible, that in some future day I will bring you out of this world of circumstance and confusion into a world of security, to the homeland, to the land of justice and a world of peace. This is not so much the destiny of the Jew or of the world, but the dream of the Jew and of the world. The Passover emphasizes that Pharoah is the paradigm of all the aggressors, of all the demigods, of all the lustful, of all who are greedy and sadistic and paranoid, and that what happened then can and does happen now. "For not in one age alone did oppressors stand up to destroy you, but in every generation of the tyrants have risen against us to destroy us."

Now you know that the framework of the Haggadah is the telling of the Exodus story by the father to the son, by the parent to the child. And no theme is more important, needs more emphasis, than this simple statement that life is bruising, that there are evil men abroad, that malevolence does not exist only in the dim past, that men are among us in every country and clime of this world whose lust and need for power, a contempt of dignity of human life, allows them to rush and destroy and erase all that civilization stands for.

As I teach your children I recognize that they have equated Hitler and Stalin with Pharoah and Haman. They assume that these were men who lived way back when, in medieval times, when men were more primitive and more animal. Such men and women simply do not exist in their homes, in their security, in their subur-

ban happiness, therefore, they cannot exist in this time and in this place. If I would, I would shake these youngsters alive because the first responsibility of a free man is the responsibility of vigilance and that nation dreams itself into bondage which deludes itself that there are no demagogues among them, that men mean what they say that every man has the well-being of the nation, its freedom and its justice, at heart.

The Seder, Haggadah, reminds us that there is no ultimate security, that that one redemption did not make mankind free. It only gave to the Jews the opportunity to create freedom, to change the fugitive into a free man. Freedom is a constant process, a becoming, and that those of us who are fortunate enough to enjoy a large measure of freedom had better take care and beware and give some of our time, of our skills, to that which makes freedom secure.

"We were slaves unto Pharoah in Egypt." That is the opening phrase of the Haggadah, and there are some who say I cannot empathize with the Haggadah. I am not a slave. I am an American. I am free. What has the Seder to do with me? And so as we plunge on into the depths of the Haggadah we come across, if we look carefully, a very interesting statement: "Now each of us is in bondage." But there are no shackles on my feet. There are no cuffs on my hands. There is no whip across my back. Am I really a slave? The Haggadah insists that there are other forms of slavery than tyranny. Haggadah is not only a political document, but a profoundly psychological one. We are slaves to our passions. We are slaves to our fears. We are slaves to relationships. We are slaves to the conventions of our society. We are slaves to the superstitions of our age. We are slaves to those whose approval we seek. We are slaves to the doubt and damning dreams of the night. "This night we are, each of us, in some form or other, in bondage." Each of us requires freedom, but how is that freedom to be secured? And what is freedom? First, we must understand that you are not free simply because you live in a free land. You are free only when

you have a great errand to be about, a sense of your own self-control, a sense that you are a human being and know where you are going.

The piece of driftwood which is caught in the eddy and the swirl in the stream of life, that piece of driftwood is not free. It is moved about by pressures it does not control. Only that man is free who has some sense of useful purpose, who feels himself master of his own fate. And this is emphasized again and again in the Haggadah. The question is asked: why were the Jews, the Hebrews, chosen to be delivered? And the answer is given that they were chosen because they were already free. Political freedom would only complement the spiritual freedom which they had already evidenced. And what was the proof that they were free? But why were they in Egypt? Why were they oppressed, degraded, deviled, beaten? They maintained certain dignities. The Talmud said they refused to destroy, to rupture, the ties of the family. They refused to change their dress or to adopt foreign ways. They refused to act as talebearers, individually, to the taskmaster seeking individual preference. Somehow, the group of Israelites maintained the integrity, the quality, of their existence. They were already free because, in a sense, as you know, the prison bar does not a prison make. Man is free when he senses that he has a rich inner life which gives him satisfaction, that he will not be broken, that he will not be destroyed by another man's will. Man is free when he does not allow himself to be pulled down to the least common denominator, the most coarse and mean level of his society. The Israelites refused to be drawn down into the sensualness and the crassness and the vulgarity and the materialism of the Egyptian society. And so they were free and they merited freedom, and each of us is part slave and part free. Each of us has brought himself out of the bondage of childhood, out of dependence upon other people, out of the darkness of ignorance, out of the simplest of fears. We have won a certain degree of freedom. We can say: I celebrate Passover for that which the Lord did for me when

I came forth out of Egypt, but none of us is completely free. The fifth cup of wine remains untouched. Each of us is a lackey to certain conventions. Each of us has his weakness. Each of us has those habits which pull us down. Each of us recognizes patterns of conduct which are unseemly and unseemingly. And so each year we say: "This year we are slaves. Next year, by strength of will, by discipline, by control, may we be free men." Truly free. And the matzah, the matzah of the Seder, the unleavened bread of the Seder, is, in a sense, a symbol of the way to freedom. Matzah is called the bread of affliction. How does man become free? By afflicting himself, by disciplining himself, by rising above his blood and his lust and his natural desires, by fighting with himself, by denying himself, by gaining mastery and control over himself - and it is never easy to do so. The way is always the way of scourging with whips. We whip ourselves into self-mastery. The matzah is the unleavened bread. It has no leaven, no yeast, nothing to make it rise. It is the passion, the lust of man, which makes the dough of our bodies rise, which causes us to lose control over ourselves, and matzah is symbol of a kind of life in which we know where we are going and why; what is demanded of us and by whom; and in which we are prepared to meet our responsibilities. And there are other bondages than that of the flesh, that of habit. There is the bondage of ignorance, the bondage of darkness. Each of us is, in a way, slave to that bondage.

The night is dark. The Seder is a night-time celebration. We need the light, the lighting of the candles. We sense that it is by knowing, by understanding, that we attain our freedom. The man of impulse is not a free man. He may believe that his acts are just and that they are wise, but they are simply instinctive. Only that man is free who understands what he is doing and why it is worth the doing.

So, on Seder night, as on all of our holidays, we kindle our lights, the light of learning, for we know that only light can dispel the darkness, and the darkness

needs to be dispelled for it is another of that bondage, of the chains, which hold a man down.

And there is another hidden meaning to the Haggadah. We notice it if we notice a strange and unexpected absence in the text. Recall the story of the exodus from Egypt. The story revolves around one figure, the figure of Moses. It is the child Moses who is saved from the Nile. It is the young prince Moses whose blood causes him to destroy, to kill the Egyptian taskmaster. It is the shepherd Moses who is summoned by God to return to Egypt to free the people. It is the man, the leader Moses, who comes to the court and demands the freedom. It is the leader in Moses who brings the people out and brings them to Sinai and binds them to a law and forges the people into a state.

Tomorrow night at Seder look for the name Moses in the Haggadah. It is simply not there. The story of the exodus is told in terms of God's delivery. Moses is omitted. Why? Each of us seeks a leader, a father, a parent, a guide, someone of daring and of courage, someone who will break the ice for us, someone who will cut through the cords that tie us down. Most of us lack the guts to break the ice ourselves, to break through and to break out of the mold, to achieve our own freedom, so we are constantly looking for a leader. We are constantly expecting someone else to do what needs to be done for us. But who can overcome our own habits, our own weaknesses, save ourselves? And in the nation and the world who will establish justice and freedom? Not some feuhrer, not some duce, only we, the world itself, each of us contributing as citizens. The Haggadah is telling us simply and directly: 'You must be your own leader, your own emancipator, your own lawgiver, your own wielder of discipline. You must find the daring. You must find the courage. God will provide.

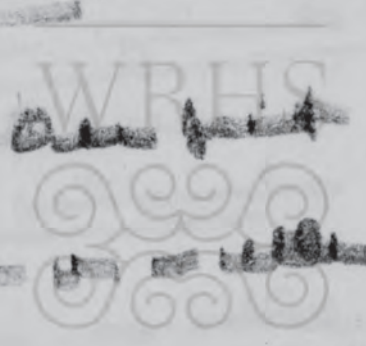
God will sustain. God will support. The potentiality, the talent, all that is in you. You must find the will and the opportunity and the courage to free yourselves from the bondage into which each of us is placed. '

Let us return to the surface. We have examined one of many, many deep passageways within the Haggadah text. Why do we examine the Haggadah? So that tomorrow night at our Seder meals we will look upon this festivity not as a set ritual to be read trippingly on the end of the tongue, easily, and then believe that our responsibility is fulfilled. The essence of the Haggadah is not what is black on white in the book, but what is said face to face by parent to child. The Haggadah was never intended to be a complete ritual. It is very much like that skeleton of a text which the theater of improvisation uses. It provides them a beginning, a middle and an end. Then the actors weave and add and find pointed reference. The Haggadah is the skeleton, the theme, placed before us at the Seder meal, but everyone who leads the Seder and everyone who participates in it is encouraged to diverge, to get off of the track, to close the book for awhile, simply to discuss the theme suggested. And you have in the Haggadah the whole range of ideas involved in the concept of freedom, in the concept of slavery, what is political freedom, how is it sustained, how is it best achieved, how does man find his own spiritual freedom, whether he is free or whether he is a slave - all of these themes are there, deep in this text. And so tomorrow, as we gather, enjoy your Seder. Read the text. Remember the familiar ritual. Sing the happy songs, but, at some time on Seder night, close the book. Discuss the themes. Talk with your children and with your family about the responsibilities of free men. Program a way to freedom for you and for them.

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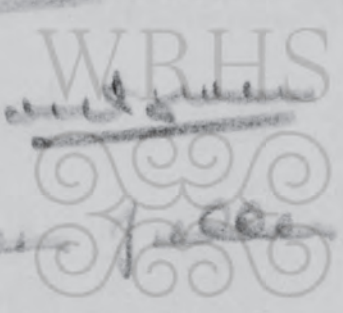
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