

The Struggle to Reconcile Victimhood and Power in the Passover Haggadah

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Many Seder participants are decidedly uncomfortable with the short paragraph which asks that God's wrath be poured out on the nations that do not "call out in God's name." Some modern Haggadot deleted this paragraph, finding it too pregnant with vengeance and revenge. Defying the Seder's universal themes of freedom and liberation, it made their compilers uncomfortable.

I, on the other hand, love it. *Why my infatuation with this hard-hitting paragraph?* I picture the many beleaguered Jews, particularly in Europe, for whom Passover, with its proximity to Easter, was a dangerous time. I imagine Jews who spent much of the year fearful that the non-Jewish world might violently turn on them. They knew they would have little recourse to protect themselves...**Suddenly, for one short paragraph, they opened the door of their homes**—of course, most of their non-Jewish neighbors had by then retired for the night—and publicly told the world what they wished for those who had done them evil. For one brief moment they could let their desire for justice be heard publicly. They did not have to cower in fear.

And yet they did not ask God to let them pour out their own wrath. Even now when Jewish "machismo" briefly appeared, they asked God to render judgment and to punish only those who did not "call out in God's name," that is, those nations that failed to adhere to ethical standards. For one brief, shining moment, the Jew stood tall. The playing field was more than equal as the Jew turned to the Judge of all the world, the same Judge Abraham challenged in Genesis, and called upon that Judge to do justice.

And then, as suddenly as it began, it ended. The door was shut, the Jew sat down, the Seder continued, and all returned as it had been and would remain for too many years.

—Deborah E. Lipstadt, in *A Night to Remember*, 115

שְׁפַךְ חֲמַתְךָ אֱלֹהִים, אֲשֶׁר לֹא יִדְעֹוּךְ
וְעַל-מַמְלָכֹות אֲשֶׁר בְּשֵׁמֶךָ לֹא קְרָאוּ: פִּי אַכְלָ
אָתְּ יַעֲקֹב. וְאַתְּ נָנוּהוּ הַשָּׁמוֹ: שְׁפַךְ עַלְיָהָם
זָעַםךְ, וְחַרְבוּ אַפְךְ יִשְׁיָּהָם: תְּרַדְּ בָּאָתְּ
וְתִשְׁמִידָם, מִתְחַת שְׁמֵי יְהוָה:

Pour out your wrath on the nations that do not know you., and upon the kingdoms that do not invoke your name, for they have devoured Jacob and destroyed his home. (Psalms 79:6-7) Pour our your fury on them; may your blazing anger overtake them. (Psalms 69:25) Pursue them in wrath and destroy them from under the heavens of Adonai!

Pour out your love on the nations who have known you and on the kingdoms who call upon your name. For they show kindness to the seed of Jacob and the defend your people Israel from those who would devour them alive. May they live to see the Sukkah of peace spread over your chosen ones and to participate in the joy of all your nations. (Haggadah manuscript, 1521)

THE STATE OF ISRAEL...will be based on freedom, justice and peace as envisaged by the prophets of Israel; it will ensure complete equality of social and political rights to all its inhabitants irrespective of religion, race or sex; it will guarantee freedom of religion, conscience, language, education and culture; it will safeguard the Holy Places of all religions; and it will be faithful to the principles of the Charter of the United Nations.

—State of Israel Declaration of Independence

In an age in which the State of Israel is strong and American Jewry enjoys unprecedented wealth and power, is *Shfach Hamatcha* still relevant? Should it be stricken from the Haggadah? How do we transform historic victimhood into responsible use of power?

I Won't Teach Our Children to Hate

What do we do with the prayer "Pour out your wrath"? Is it possible to strike it out of our Haggadah? These are awful words! Nowadays there are people who love us. And there are people who don't. But how can we curse even those who hate us even with these horrible words? I can't hate.

And I won't teach our children to hate. I understand the pain of the Jews, the pain and the fury that went into this prayer hundreds of years ago. The ugly face of anti-Semitism exists today, too, but not to the extent where, God forbid, we should teach our children this prayer. The foolish and the malicious can be condemned. They can be pitied. But we can't hate them—and make God part of this hatred.

—Yehiel Weingarten, Kibbutz Ein Harod, 1936 in *A Night to Remember*, 114