

Bicentennial Haggadah

By Robert E. Segal

"Its progenitors were an impoverished London hatter and the repentant son of a Presbyterian minister."

With these inviting words, the Jewish Publication Society in this season of the American Bicentennial, introduces a small but attractive reprint of the first American Passover Haggadah -- "a modest volume in Hebrew and English."

Published in New York in 1837 in Hebrew and English, this first American edition of the Bicentennial Haggadah proclaims that the words therein set down are fashioned to "the custom of the German and Spanish Jews." This is no thumbworn, dog-eared Haggadah, one of the most precious possessions in families of millions of Jewish emigrants fleeing Russia and Poland for America in the late 19th and very early 20th centuries. No, it is a solemn, neat handbook of prayer and supplication and celebration, quite in harmony with the unhurried pace of America's colonial Jews -- the Sephardim and German-speaking, some directed here at the time of the German revolution and some bear-

ing the noble scars of oppression in Spain and Portugal and eventual flight from South America. A different kind of Haggadah, but delightful to peruse as we all now concentrate at festival time on the meaning of our unique history and hold, each in the sacred precincts of his own home, a solemn convocation on the true significance of freedom.

We are much in the debt of the Jewish Publication Society of America for fashioning a distinctly Jewish memento of the American Bicentennial, one of a few dignified, non-commercial undertakings of 1975 and 1976. Heaven knows we have had in America enough Uncle Sam sweat shirts, fire-and-drum hats, and red, white, and blue bric-a-brac oozing patriotism while debasing standards of good taste. "Junk, junk, and more junk!" as James Michener catalogues it in desperation.

The American Bicentennial celebration has been vulgarized, cheapened, and misrepresented as a raucous shout over recollections of the external trappings of the great revolution of 200 years ago; it remains for the Jewish Publication Society, those who have splendidly fashioned the Adams Chronicles, and a few sensitive and creative historians, journalists, and illustrators to evoke for our youth the grand, inner

meaning of the colonial fight for liberty. Let us be grateful that we have this kind of patriotic refreshment, rare though it be.

Let us be thankful, too, that each passing year brings the Jewish community a still more passionate regard for the meaning of that ancient flight from Egyptian overlords who would have kept us all in perpetual bondage. New dangers and threats are, in an eerie way, reminiscent of the tyrannical behavior of the Pharaoh who provoked Moses into leading a flight to and a fight for freedom unmatched in the annals of all people. Here, for example, is President Anwar el-Sadat of Egypt, declaring just a few days ago that Henry Kissinger's step-by-step shuttle-by-shuttle policy for Middle East is dead. Inoperable, one might say. Dashed are the high hopes we had for an end to the Jewish-Arab conflict when Sadat greeted Kissinger at the Cairo airport with a warm embrace and kisses on both cheeks. We are, once again, slaves to the vagaries and whims of an Egyptian strong man.

But we do not despair. The Haggadah -- as ancient as the years can testify and as modern as the one received to mark the American Bicentennial -- speaks to our hearts the undying message: "Every person in every generation must regard himself as having been personally freed from Egypt."

Who among us is so foolish as to quander that blessing of liberty in a land dedicated to freedom? Who is so selfish, he will not redouble his efforts to help break the chains holding Jews captive in Iraq and Russia?

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