

Passover Haggadot

By Dvors Waysman

The word 'Haggadan' simply means a story or narration, but we have come to associate it with Passover, and the Seder which we celebrate on Passover eve. This, of course, goes back deeply into the roots of Jewish history and tradition. In Ex: 13:18 we are told, "And thou shalt tell thy son in that day saying: "It is because of that which the Lord did for me when I came out of Egypt." Hosephus, the famous ancient historian, tells us that in Second Temple days, not less than 3,000,000 people gathered in Jerusalem at Passover.

The Passover 'Haggadah' is a special book in Hebrew (with a few passages in Aramaic), telling the story of the Exodus from Egypt, and explanations for the use of the symbolic objects of the Seder table, and certain prayers, psalms, hymns and songs. The book is really an answer to the four questions asked by the youngest child at the beginning of the Seder. In effect, it presents a religious philosophy of Jewish history, and much of the text dates back to the Temple period. It probably received its present

LAS VEGAS ISRAELITE HAPPY PASSOVER

form at the time the Mishnah was compiled (200 C.E.).

Translations and Versions

'Haggadot' have been the most popular works in Jewish religious literature. Mostly they are lavishly illustrated, perhaps as a means of holding children's interest during the long Seder service. Many have been preserved dated from 13th - 15th century, originating in all countries in which Jews have lived, and translated into most languages including Jewish vernacular - Yiddish, Ladino, Judeo-Greek, Judeo-Arabic and Judeo-Persian. Since the 15th century, there have been more than 2,700 editions of 'Haggadot' published. Because of its comparatively small size, it was not too expensive to commission or purchase, and not too laborious for a scribe to write or an artist to illuminate.

The genre scenes of medieval Jewish life depict the customs of various European communities, by portraying their daily and festive dress, household utensils, furniture and architecture. The "Matza" and "Maror" (bitter herbs) seem to be the earliest textual illustrations - some very witty such as the one of the man pointing at his wife while reciting "maror ze" - "this bitter herb."

Many illustrated editions are of great artistic value and have found their home in museums and private collections around the world. Certain communities use their own versions, particularly the Central Conference of American Rabbis (Reform) - from 1905, and the London Union of Liberal and Progressive Synagogues (from 1953). Also original haggadot exist in Israel in the kibbutzim, where the haggadot are compiled by the kibbutz movement or by the kibbutz in question. The kibbutz Seder is renowned for its high standard of presentation, the reading being interspersed by a choir, an orchestra and dramatic readings, with the Seder culminating in a presentation by children of 'Had Gadya.' Anyone who has a relative, however distant, in a kibbutz tries to wangle an invitation for the kibbutz seder right. Com-

bing the old and the new is an example of the Israeli national renaissance at its best and most creative.

In Jerusalem

An Emergency Haggadah of the Israel Defence Forces was produced for soldiers on front line duty in 1967. It has large print and an abridged ritual, and a copy is in the Ansbacher Collection, Jerusalem, which also has a 'Haggadah' issued in 1948, illustrated by A. Alweil, specially published for soldiers of the Haganah.

Many of the most beautiful and ancient 'haggadot' are on display in Jerusalem. The Israel Museum houses the Bird's Head Haggadah, an illuminated manuscript published in S. Germany c.1300. This is the first 'Haggadah' in which the baking of matzot is introduced into the Exodus story. In the illustrations, the faces are distorted to conform with the biblical prohibition against graven images, and also the angels are shown with blank faces. The Israel Museum also houses the Venice Haggadah, published 1609, which has the Hebrew text in the center and the Ladino translation in columns at the sides.


Displayed at the Jewish National University Library in Jerusalem is the earliest known printed 'Haggadah,' and the only known copy in existence. It was produced in Guadalajara, Spain, in 1482 by Solomon B. Moses Alkabez. In the private Jerusalem collection of Michal Kauffman, is the Amsterdam Haggadah, printed in 1712, and the first to use copper engraved illustrations. The Golden Haggadah, which is probably from Barcelona in early 14th century, has many Biblical illustrations.

A Book for All Times

In the Sassoon Collection in Letchworth, England, is the 14th century Sassoon Spanish Haggadah. The passage: "And the Lord brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm" is illustrated by the children of Israel in medieval dress, leaving a walled town.

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