Change is Tradition: An Analysis of the Passover Seder

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CHANGE IS TRADITION: AN ANALYSIS OF THE PASSOVER SEDER

by

AVIVA D. MILLER

SUBMITTED TO SCRIPPS COLLEGE IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE DEGREE OF BACHELOR OF ARTS

PROFESSOR EISENSTADT
PROFESSOR GILBERT

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**Introduction**

I used to think that tradition was stagnant – that tradition and change were harsh opposites. This is why, when I first learned about the evolution of Passover traditions over time, I was quite intrigued. It had never occurred to me that there had been a time in Jewish history when the familiar traditions of the Seder had been invented to take the place of previous Passover rituals. In writing this thesis, my grasp of Judaism in relation to the idea of tradition has completely changed. I have learned that change *is* tradition, and tradition *is* change. In order for the Jewish tradition to maintain a sense of relevance over the course of thousands of years, it has had to adapt to changing historical circumstances, and grow with the people who find meaning in Judaism. Finding meaning in the tradition sometimes requires changing the tradition to meet the needs of those participating in it. I would argue that these changes do not mean a departure from the tradition, but an increased commitment to it. Instead of ceasing to be engaged in the tradition when it loses its historical relevance, those who change the tradition to meet the historical times are committing themselves to ensuring that the tradition lives on.

These changes are particularly observable and relevant to the Passover Seder. No two Seders are alike. The content of the Seder and the discussions that occur during it are, to a certain extent, up to whoever is leading and/or participating in the Seder. As long as the Seder includes the essential elements of a Seder, the rest is up to the Seder leader’s discretion. Because of this, there are so many different examples of what a Seder can look like. In fact, it is common to customize and make changes to the Seder. These adjustments are how it remains relevant to those who are participating in it.

Change, however, was one of the things that used to make me dread Passover. The prohibition on eating leavened bread during Passover was (and still is) a huge challenge for my
neurodivergent brain. As someone whose brain is wired to need consistency and structure, changing my usual routines for the eight days of Passover is a very big ask. My mom will never let me forget the one year when I was a kid that I refused to eat anything other than smoothies during Passover! While it has always been hard for me, keeping kosher for Passover is something that connects me to my traditions. It feels wrong not to keep kosher for Passover. So, I have done it every year, and have dreaded it every time. This year, however, I found myself smiling once or twice at the thought of Passover approaching. This could be due to the fact that, by the end of Passover, I will have completed both of my theses. However, I would like to believe that writing this thesis has played a part in allowing me to get the tiniest bit excited for Passover. In writing this thesis, I have learned about the origins of the holiday, and how it was celebrated during ancient times. Being able to see the remnants of these ancient traditions in the modern day Seders I am familiar with has allowed me to truly feel like, in participating in the Seder, I am continuing to add to a centuries long, unbroken chain of tradition. This is what made me smile about Passover’s imminent arrival – that I will get to participate in a tradition that is so deeply rooted in Jewish history. In participating in the Seder, I sit alongside my ancestors.

Despite this year being the first time I have been slightly excited for Passover, in writing this thesis, I have realized that I am far more connected to the holiday than I had realized. Throughout my college career, I have consistently been engaging with the Passover story and traditions through my activities and academics. Each year of college, I have done a major project that has been somehow connected to Passover! During my first year of college, I wrote a research paper about Miriam’s song (both the biblical version and Debbie Freidman’s version), which was the first college research paper I ever wrote! I remember feeling incredibly proud of this paper. It was one of the first times I realized that I love writing. That same year, I was away
from the Jewish community for the first time. While doing classes online, I chose to go on an adventure by moving to the forest with 60 other college students who were also doing classes online! I was so excited to go on this adventure, but it had never occurred to me that I would be one of only two practicing Jews there. When Passover came around, I was faced with the question – how will I attend a Seder? The answer was that I had to make one myself. This Seder was one of the first times I truly took my Judaism into my own hands. I decided that I would not feel complete without creating a Passover Seder – so I did! My sophomore year, I continued my academic ventures in Seders by writing a research paper about feminist Seder rituals. I covered the orange on the Seder plate, and the Cup of Miriam ceremony. When I was a Junior, my Passover connection moved beyond my Jewish Studies classes, and into my theater classes! For my introduction to theatrical design class, we were tasked with creating a concept for a show using a pre-existing story or folk tale. I chose to focus on Miriam’s story in conjunction with the story of the four children. The idea was that, instead of asking questions about the Exodus story as a whole, the four children would interact with Miriam’s story.

I would also like to call attention to another way in which I connect to the holiday of Passover, which can be seen in my name! One of Passover’s many names is chag ha’aviv, which means “the spring holiday.” Therefore, because my name is Aviva, the Passover holiday and I share a name! This adds all-the-more meaning to my connection with the holiday. Because of all of the ways in which I have connected with Passover and Seder rituals throughout college, this thesis feels like a culmination of my college career.

It is clear that I have subconsciously been leaning into my many connections to Passover. The question that arises is, “why?” If I have always dreaded the holiday, why have I gravitated toward it so much? One possible answer I have come up with is that the Seder represents a point
where my passions for theater and Jewish Studies meet. The Seder feels to me like an interactive piece of theater, in that it requires a community to come together to tell a story in an immersive and experiential way. We are asked to read the script of the story, sometimes acting as narrators, and sometimes characters. Throughout the Seder, we periodically make gestures, sing songs, and eat symbolic foods that aid in the storytelling of the evening. For an evening, we are asked to put ourselves in the shoes of our ancestors.

Growing up, I used to take the Seder very seriously as a performance opportunity! There were two parts of the Seder that I took on as my own – the four questions (I was always the youngest), and the song Chad Gadya. I would painstakingly practice my rendition of the four questions, making sure the song fit well in my voice, and that I could read the Hebrew correctly. One year, I decided that it would be a fun change of pace to rap the four questions. Therefore, I asked the Seder participants to “give me a beat!” and rapped a spirited rendition of the questions. The young theater maker in me also took responsibility for staging Chad Gadya to perfection.

One year, I attended a Seder where each character in Chad Gadya was given a sound by the Seder participants! I was so entertained by the grown-up members of our congregation bleating like a goat, barking like a dog and meowing like a cat. I knew that was something I would have to implement in our family Seder the next year. From there on out, Chad Gadya became a fun family tradition! I used to comb through my copious plush animal collection to find the perfect characters to match each part of the song. When it was time to sing the song at our Seder, I spiritedly ran around, holding up my characters and props for all of the Seder participants to see. Even as a child, I could sense that the Seder was more than just a ritual, but a combination between ritual and theater!
My affinity for Passover has always been there, even amidst the dread, and writing this thesis has allowed me to grow more of a personal appreciation for the holiday. It has allowed me to reflect on my own relationship to Mitzrayim, and the things in my life that I need to celebrate a personal Exodus from. I have also grown to appreciate that the holiday focuses on learning through questions and storytelling, much like I do! I have always been someone who loves learning through asking questions – a facet of my Jewish education that I carry with me everywhere I go. I love that the Seder caters towards a learner who, like me, has a lot of questions to ask! I also appreciate the Seder’s emphasis on the fact that there are varying learning styles, and that educators should meet students where they’re at. This idea can be especially seen in the four children. As someone who discovered they were neurodivergent in college, I have grown to fully understand the importance of recognizing that not everybody learns in the same way. For an educational setting to truly be inclusive of neurodiversity, educators must be able to adjust to the educational needs of their students. In writing my chapter on the four children, I was overjoyed to learn that those who compiled the Seder prioritized this type of adjustment to meet the needs of the learner.

While I may not have been fully cognizant of it when I began to write this thesis, choosing to write about the Seder is a choice that makes a lot of sense in regard to my past and current connections to the ritual. This thesis truly does feel like the perfect way to culminate this stage of my journey with Jewish studies. But culminating this journey was not the only thing I had in mind when choosing a thesis topic. It would be remiss not to acknowledge the complications that this current historical moment brings to my being a Jewish Studies major. Since October 7th, the Jewish world has been changed in ways I never could have imagined. Ongoing violence in the Middle East has brought about immense grief and division within the
Jewish community. For me, it has been difficult to grapple with what it looks like to be Jewish during this historical moment. As a Jewish Studies major who has been tasked with creating a piece of Jewish Studies scholarship in a post-October 7th world, I have thought very deeply about what I would like to put out into the world at this time. I ultimately came to the conclusion that I wanted to create something that speaks to why I feel so connected to my Jewish identity – something that speaks to what a joy it is to be part of the centuries-long chain of Jewish tradition. In this thesis, I speak toward Judaism’s relationship with tradition, change, and what it looks like to carry on the Jewish tradition. I have written something that makes me feel more connected to my Jewish identity, and I hope it can do the same for others. While we are in a time of immense division and pain, I hope this thesis can act as a reminder of some of the shared history and core values that hold the Jewish people together.

**Chapter 1: The Origins of the Passover Seder**

The Passover rite originates in Exodus 12 with a commandment to commemorate the exodus from Egypt and a description of how to do so. The commandment regarding the annual Passover celebration comes from Exodus 12:14 – “This day shall be to you one of remembrance: you shall celebrate it as a festival to יהוה throughout the ages; you shall celebrate it as an institution for all time” (Exodus 12:14). This commandment has been practiced in a variety of ways over the course of Jewish history. It began as a home ritual based on the description provided in the book of Exodus. Later, when the temple was built in Jerusalem, the Passover rituals were adjusted to take place in the temple. During the temple periods, Passover was practiced as a pilgrimage holiday, where Jews would travel from near and far to make their paschal sacrifice at the Jerusalem temple. There is also some evidence that some diasporic

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1 Translation via Sefaria.org from JPS, 1985
Jewish communities chose to celebrate Passover within their own communities, as opposed to traveling to Jerusalem. The destruction of the temple brought about the end of the paschal sacrifice, and Passover rituals eventually evolved into a domestic practice once again – a practice that is now known as the Passover Seder. In this chapter, I will discuss the origins of the Seder by drawing on frameworks set forth by Baruch Bokser’s *The Origins of the Seder: The Passover Rite and Early Rabbinic Judaism*, in addition to Vanessa Ochs’ *The Passover Haggadah: A Biography*.

Pre-Temple Period Passover Rituals

In order to understand how the destruction of the temple impacted how Passover is observed, it will be helpful to understand what the Passover rituals looked like prior to and during the temple periods. Vanessa Ochs proposes that before the temple periods, Passover rituals were split into two parts, which were later combined – the paschal sacrifice and the feast of unleavened bread. The paschal sacrifice was a home ritual based on a description in Exodus 12:

Speak to the community leadership of Israel and say that on the tenth of this month each of them shall take a lamb to a family, a lamb to a household…You shall keep watch over it until the fourteenth day of this month; and all the assembled congregation of the Israelites shall slaughter it at twilight (Exodus 12:3-6).

The ritual revolved around the slaughter of a lamb, which was to be performed at twilight on the fourteenth day of the month. The household would then eat the sacrifice over the course of the evening, making sure to not break any of its bones. The sacrifice was meant to symbolize God’s mercy when God spared Jewish first-born children from the death of the first born – God’s tenth plague against the Egyptians. The sacrifice also symbolizes the exodus from Egypt in general,
and the Jewish people’s gratitude to God for their redemption from slavery in Egypt. Ochs argues that the paschal sacrifice was separate from the festival of unleavened bread, in which people were commanded to eat unleavened bread for seven days, as also instructed in Exodus 12:

This day shall be to you one of remembrance: you shall celebrate it as a festival to יהוה throughout the ages; you shall celebrate it as an institution for all time. Seven days you shall eat unleavened bread; on the very first day you shall remove leaven from your houses, for whoever eats leavened bread from the first day to the seventh day, that person shall be cut off from Israel … You shall observe the [Feast of] Unleavened Bread, for on this very day I brought your ranks out of the land of Egypt; you shall observe this day throughout the ages as an institution for all time (Exodus 12:14-17).

The Feast of Unleavened Bread was commanded as a seven day festival during which the Israelites were meant to eat unleavened bread, and were forbidden from eating leavened bread. This festival was meant to commemorate the exodus from Egypt, because, in their hurried escape from the Egyptians, the Israelites did not have enough time to allow their bread to leaven.

Ochs offers insight into why these two rituals should be understood separately, despite them both being written in Exodus 12. As Ochs understands it, Exodus 12 contains a description of how the Israelites were meant to prepare their homes for when God enacted the death of the first born onto the Egyptians. This is what later became known as the paschal sacrifice. According to Ochs, this description is separate from the later description in Exodus 12 of the “Passover of Generations” which was meant to commemorate the Exodus from Egypt. This “Passover of Generations” is another term for the feast of unleavened bread. The queer thing about these ritual instructions is that the instructions for how to commemorate the Exodus from Egypt were given to the Israelites before the Exodus had even happened! This is one example in
a trend of time being warped in relation to Passover rituals; an idea I will return to in the next chapter. Despite this time anomaly, the commandments are clear – a sacrifice had to be performed on the night of the tenth plague, and the subsequent Exodus from Egypt needs to be commemorated for all time in the form of a feast. Aside from the paschal sacrifice, the Matzah (unleavened bread) and Maror (bitter herbs) were also eaten as a part of these rituals. Evidence for this can be found in Exodus 12:8 – “They shall eat the flesh that same night; they shall eat it roasted over the fire, with unleavened bread and with bitter herbs.”

Temple Period Passover Rituals

Passover rituals during first and second temple periods shifted away from the domestic realm. Deuteronomy 16 reframes the Passover rituals as being a national ritual, as opposed to domestic. Bokser writes of this shift, saying “As part of a review of the three seasonal festivals, Deuteronomy 16:1–8 locates the Passover rite in the sanctuary which ‘God will choose.’ It therefore changes the character of the celebration, which is no longer to be a domestic rite but instead part of a national gathering – though families might celebrate together in that central location” (Bokser, 17). The paschal sacrifice, which had previously been practiced in the home, moved to being performed in the Jerusalem temple, the location seen as God’s permanent residence. However, despite this shift from domestic to national, the paschal sacrifice remained at the center of the Passover celebration.

The temple Passover rituals also took into account that people may have experienced challenges in performing the paschal sacrifice at the correct time due to ritual impurity and travel time. In these cases, it was permitted for the paschal sacrifice to be performed one month after the original date. This can be seen in Numbers 9:
Speak to the Israelite people, saying: When any party—whether you or your posterity—who is defiled by a corpse or is on a long journey would offer a passover sacrifice to יהוה, they shall offer it in the second month, on the fourteenth day of the month, at twilight. They shall eat it with unleavened bread and bitter herbs, and they shall not leave any of it over until morning. They shall not break a bone of it. They shall offer it in strict accord with the law of the passover sacrifice (Numbers 9:10-12).

This account in Numbers outlines the same ritual of the paschal sacrifice that is described in Exodus, with the only difference being that it is practiced a month later due to the inability to practice it at the correct time. There is evidence from Philo that this exception was used during the temple period to accommodate those who were living far away to still be able to participate in the sacrifice at the Jerusalem temple. Bokser summarizes Philo, saying “He states that, among the multitudes who make a pilgrimage to Jerusalem, those who are too far away to reach Jerusalem on time are given the dispensation to come a month later” (Bokser, 23). The fact that the accommodation for those in the diaspora still requires one to perform the sacrifice at the Jerusalem temple speaks to the prominence of the temple in Passover rituals. It is clear that what had once been a ritual that was performed in a multitude of spaces because of its domestic setting, became a ritual centered around the Jerusalem temple, even if it meant the ritual had to be performed one month late.

A key part of the Passover rituals was that they could not be done in solitude. Josephus’ observations about the Passover rituals note, “a little fraternity, as it were, gathers round each sacrifice, of not fewer than ten persons (feasting alone not being permitted), while the companies often include as many as twenty” (War 6:423-424). As Josephus’ observation demonstrates, it was required that the paschal sacrifice be enjoyed while in the company of others. The shift from
the ritual being performed in a domestic versus a national setting has implications for the communal aspect of the ritual. In the domestic setting, being in community with others involved being surrounded by close family and friends, all of whom one would personally know in some capacity. The domestic setting requires an invitation into someone’s home, which therefore implies a level of intimacy among those who were gathered to perform the paschal sacrifice. The shift to the national scale changed what this communal aspect meant. While some domestic gatherings were still surely held, the sacrifice revolved around gathering at the temple. Instead of the main event being community members inviting each other into their homes, the ritual shifted to the nation being invited into God’s home in the temple. This act of community gathering was shared with the entire Jewish community, strangers and companions alike. This demonstrates a shift toward cultivating a communal identity among the entire Jewish population.

While there were accommodations for those who needed to travel far in order to reach the Jerusalem temple, some Jewish diasporic communities had already started to transition away from temple rituals. As Jews spread out, they built prayer houses to accommodate some of their religious needs. Bokser informs the reader, “Archaeological and epigraphic evidence indicates that prayer houses or places for reading of the Torah and instruction in the Commandments did exist before the temple's destruction; in fact, Philo even refers to a synagogue in Alexandria” (Bokser, 5). Another famous example of Passover rituals being celebrated away from the Jerusalem temple happened in the city of Elephantine Egypt, an example that has “achieved special attention because of a letter from Hananiah to Jedaniah and the Jewish garrison which apparently refers to the festival” (Porten, 128). From this, it can be assumed that Jewish people who did not live close to the Jerusalem temple had already been thinking of ways to practice Judaism when the temple was not accessible. Bokser supports and adds nuance to this claim
saying, “It is also not clear to what degree these institutions were more than community centers or places for personal prayer. Nevertheless, they do attest to some kind of decentralization or democratization, which would indicate a response to people's need for meaningful religious experiences and accessible ways of participating in them” (Bokser, 6).

As mentioned above, the ancient city of Elephantine has become a famous example within academic discussions about ancient Passover practices because of a letter that was found, which is commonly referred to as “The Passover Letter.” This letter was written by Hananiah, and addresses the Jewish community of Elephantine. Hananiah seems to be informing the Jews of Elephantine how they should celebrate Passover. Marvin Miller, author of *Performances of Ancient Jewish letters: from Elephantine to MMT*, offers his interpretation of the letter’s purpose:

The subject of the letter appears to be the proper celebration of Passover and Unleavened Bread. There is no introduction explaining the festivals; therefore the purpose of the letter is not to inaugurate a new celebration, but presupposes that the recipients are familiar with the practices. It appears that the purpose of writing this letter is either to standardize the observance of the festivals or to consolidate public opinion. Obscure is where they are to be celebrated, whether in a home, or in a temple, or at some other location (Miller, 129).

Miller suggests that the letter was written in order to help clarify how Passover practices should be upheld in the diasporic community of Elephantine. Miller’s idea implies that, due to the central nature of the Jerusalem temple in Passover traditions, diasporic communities such as Elephantine needed particular instructions for how Passover could still be celebrated when the temple was not an available resource. This letter suggests that, even before the destruction of the
Jerusalem temple, diasporic Jewish communities were forced to grapple with the absence of the temple, and the implications of this on their Passover practices.

Another letter from Elephantine, involving the destruction of a local temple, offers additional insight into how the celebration of Passover was dealt with in ancient diasporic communities. This letter, deemed the “Petition to Authorize Temple Reconstruction,” was written on behalf of the Elephantine Jewish community to the leader of the Jewish community in Yehud. The letter explains that the Jewish temple in Elephantine had been destroyed. This letter in conjunction with the “Passover Letter” suggests that guidance on matters impacting Jewish affairs was often deferred to the leaders of the central Jewish community in Yehud. Despite living in the diaspora, the Jewish community of Elephantine still saw the leadership in Jerusalem as holding the decisive position in regard to Elephantine’s local Jewish affairs. It is significant to note that the Jerusalem priests responded to the Elephantine community’s request for guidance regarding the destruction of their temple, concurring that the temple should be rebuilt but no animal sacrifices should be performed at the rebuilt temple. From this response, it seems as though animal sacrifice, which would include the paschal sacrifice, may have been a practice that was limited to the Jerusalem temple.

While the diaspora physically separated many Jewish people from the temple, the temple remained a unifying symbol, reminding Jewish people of their shared identity even across long distances. The temple became a model through which to look at Jewish communities and religious practices in the diaspora. Bokser argues, “The practical facts of the Diaspora also contributed to the temple's transcendent role; for it was through the temple that widely dispersed groups of Jews maintained their sense of unity and identity” (Bokser, 8). He backs up his claim by citing E. Mary Smallwood’s work that even Jews in the diaspora who could not make the
pilgrimage to the temple were responsible for monetarily contributing to the temple’s upkeep.

Even Jewish communities who did not utilize the physical temple space were mentally and monetarily invested in the temple. The temple was what unified the Jewish people. For these reasons, the destruction of the temple would have been a life altering event even for Jews living in the diaspora.

The Implications of the Destruction of the Temple for Passover Rituals

The Jerusalem temple was destroyed twice – first by the Babylonians, who also exiled many Jewish elites from the region at the same time (the Babylonian Exile), and second by the Roman army led by General Titus. The destruction of the second temple brought an end to how Passover rituals had previously been practiced, and solidified the Judaism-wide shift away from sacrifice and toward text study and prayer. This shift required that a new Passover ritual be created; one that preserved both the exodus story and the temple period rituals associated with Passover. The Seder that eventually formed symbolically represents the old sacrificial rituals that could no longer be practiced physically.

Central to the framework of this thesis is the idea that the creators of the Seder responded to the changing circumstances brought about by the destruction of the temple by using religious precedent to create a new ritual that maintained its foundations within the Jewish tradition. Bokser states:

When a temple-based religion finds its foundation destroyed, several responses are possible. Early rabbinic Judaism chose to lay out a system in which one could serve God and enact the highest forms of piety without a temple. … While early rabbinic authorities worked out these developments, they also had to correlate the new foundations for
religious life with the old structure and to demonstrate that any new means of piety were as effective as the earlier ones (Bokser, 1).

According to Bokser’s premise, two ideas are at play – that the Passover rituals had to evolve so they could be practiced within post-temple circumstances, and that the evolution of the Passover rituals had to be based in precedents set forth by the Jewish tradition. These precedents, Bokser argues, were the key to the Seder being legitimized in the Jewish tradition.

Ochs expresses a similar sentiment to Bokser, emphasizing the need for continuity with the past amid changing circumstances. Ochs adds how this was achieved, saying, “through study, deliberation, and debate, generations of rabbis needed to develop alternative ceremonies so that Jews could continue to experience connection to God” (Ochs, 25). This change happened over the course of many generations through careful and meticulous discussion. It was important for Jews, who were enduring the trauma of their religious center being destroyed, to commemorate the exodus in order to feel a connection to God. Much of Judaism had previously revolved around the temple, thus making its destruction an extreme and traumatic rupture in Jewish life. Fostering a connection to God through commemorating the exodus, Ochs argues, was crucial to uplift the spirits of the Jewish people. Ochs poses a question that was likely asked as a part of the formation of new Passover rituals – “What could protect against a desperate feeling of abandonment by God in times of exile or despair?” (Ochs, 25). The rabbinic response to this question was a new domestic ritual that brought the meanings of Passover directly into people’s homes. The themes of the Exodus story were surely meant to help those grappling with the traumatic event of losing the temple and being exiled from the place they had called home. Particularly, the partnership between God and the Jewish people that is represented in the Exodus story would have been a hopeful and empowering narrative during a time of crisis.
The destruction of the second temple created a vacuum in the Jewish tradition. The temple bound rituals could no longer exist in their previous forms. Jewish leaders were faced with a choice – to abandon these rituals or to transform them. This is the context in which the Seder was born: as a transformation of the rituals that had once come to depend on the temple.

This chapter’s earlier discussions of the pre-temple domestic paschal sacrifice raises the question: If there was already a precedent for the paschal sacrifice taking place outside of the temple, why did the temple’s destruction bring about the end of the paschal sacrifice? Recall that “Passover was originally not a pilgrimage feast, but a domestic ceremony consisting of the slaughtering and eating of the paschal animal” (Encyclopedia Judaica, 680). One would think that in the absence of the temple, a return to home sacrifice would be the obvious way to maintain the tradition while also responding to circumstance. However, this is not what happened. The shift away from the paschal sacrifice was part of a wider shift within Judaism away from sacrifice altogether. It is hard to say exactly why this shift occurred, but it could have to do with the concurrent shift in authority from the priests to the rabbis. Perhaps the new rabbinic authority saw it as regressive to return to the domestic cultic rituals after Judaism had become an organized religion. As the Encyclopedia Judaica puts it, one thing is known for certain – “With the destruction of the Temple, the offering of the paschal lamb came to an end, although it is possible that for a time the sacrifice was continued in modified form in some circles” (Encyclopedia Judaica, 678). While it would be interesting and relevant to understand why this shift occurred, this is a far larger discussion that would fall outside the scope of this thesis.
Driving Forces that Shaped the Seder

In the following excerpt, Bokser lays out three driving forces he sees as having shaped the Passover Seder:

The first force was the Bible, which presented several models that could be drawn upon. The second was the historical situation which meant that Jews in general and early rabbinic authorities in particular had to adjust to the end of the temple cult while maintaining a sense of continuity with the past and a faith in the viability of essential cultic elements. … The third force was that Jews naturally participated in the wider culture, employing and adapting various Hellenistic forms, which to them may not have seemed foreign (Bokser, 12).

Bokser is essentially saying that the Seder was created with these three forces in mind – biblical precedent, the historical situation brought about by the destruction of the temple, and the fact that, during this time, Jewish people were a people living among other cultures, specifically Hellenistic cultures. Of these driving forces, the one that is most relevant to this thesis is the second – that the historical context required adjustments to be made to the tradition.

Each of these driving forces represent complications that the Seder was meant to respond to with the historical context in mind. The Tanach presented the complication of continuity and precedent. The destruction of the temple brought about the elimination of the possibility to perform the ritualistic precedents set forth in the Tanach, which had been adapted to be performed in the temple for hundreds of years. The new historical situation presented the necessity for change. Identifying which changes would be most appropriate within the confinements set forth by the traditions was a serious question that the rabbis had to face. As Bokser’s analysis shows, the rabbis had to confront the demands of tradition while living within
a broader society. They had to balance how to adapt to the wider culture while also maintaining a sense of distinction from the wider culture.

The creation of the Seder was the rabbinic response to historical circumstance, with biblical precedent and participation in the wider culture in mind. The Seder maintained precedent and continuity with the Tanach in a variety of ways. Firstly, it offered a way for Jewish people to celebrate Passover in the absence of the temple, and without having to give animal sacrifices. Creating the new Seder ritual was the rabbis' way of ensuring that the Jewish people could continue taking on the imperative set forth by the Tanach in Exodus 12:14 – “This day shall be to you one of remembrance: you shall celebrate it as a festival to יהוה throughout the ages; you shall celebrate it as an institution for all time” (Exodus 12:14).1 As Ochs puts it, “Rabbinic sages forged new practices, maintaining continuity with the past through encounters with text, seen as a source of ongoing revelation” (Ochs, 25). The only way that continuity could be achieved was through the creation of a new ritual. The biblical imperative to remember and celebrate the exodus could not be practiced until a new ritual, one that was disconnected from the temple, was created.

The Seder also maintained the overall message and purpose of the Passover holiday. Bokser and Ochs both share a similar sentiment that the themes of redemption and hope for liberation from difficult historical circumstances would have been quite powerful to those who had just experienced the destruction of Jewish life as they knew it. Ochs expresses the Seder’s need to “protect against a desperate feeling of abandonment by God in times of exile or despair” (Ochs, 25). Similarly, Bokser states that “the memory of the exodus gave people hope that their imperfect present situation would end and a new liberation would occur” (Bokser, 9). As Bokser and Ochs point out, the themes from the Exodus story were beacons of hope for those who had
just experienced the traumatic destruction of the temple. Themes from the Exodus story were necessary for these people to be able to carry on living in tumultuous times. Therefore, the Seder’s creation was not only because of the biblical imperative, but because those who created the Seder strongly resonated with the themes of the Exodus story.

The rabbis did not necessarily have to create a new ritual. They could have abandoned the Passover rituals in the absence of the temple. However, instead of allowing the tradition to be destroyed with the temple, the rabbis chose the path of adaptation in the face of tragedy. Instead of shying away from the lack of continuity with previous traditional ways of celebrating Passover, the rabbis turned to the text as a way of bridging the gap between past and present Passover rituals. Through the creation of the Seder, the rabbis responded to historical circumstances by acknowledging that the previous ways of performing the Passover ritual could not occur anymore due to the temple being destroyed, and by creating a symbolic alternative.

After the temple was destroyed, the rabbis called upon diasporic models for practicing Passover rituals. Jewish people who had already been living in the diaspora, even while the temple was still standing, had begun to adapt the Passover rituals to meet their needs. Elephantine being an example of this, many Jewish communities had struck a balance between practicing Judaism in their individual communities and homes, while also maintaining a feeling of unity to the rest of the Jewish population through their connection to the temple in Jerusalem. After the temple was destroyed, the rabbis utilized this model when creating the new Passover rituals. Without the temple there to act as a unifier among all Jewish people in regard to the Passover rituals, the story of Passover itself became the unifier in the absence of the temple. Passover no longer needed a specific physical space, but could exist symbolically within Jewish individuals and communities. Ochs proposes that “Possibly, the rabbis anticipated that being
aware of Passover observances taking place simultaneously in other households might cultivate the feeling of connectedness and peoplehood” (Ochs, 25). According to this concept, the temple no longer had to be the unifier among the Jewish people, but the idea of practicing the new Seder rituals concurrently with the rest of the Jewish community would have been unity enough. While the Jewish people may not have been in the same physical space during the holiday, as many would have been at the Jerusalem temple, they were unified in the same spiritual space by commemorating the Exodus simultaneously with the rest of the community.

Bokser and Ochs both agree that the Passover Seder was modeled after the symposia of the Hellenistic period, which was a social event that involved dining and partaking in conversation. From this assumption, it can be inferred that the rabbis sought to use the framework of an already existing event that Jewish people at the time would have been familiar with. Doing this, however, may have come with another set of challenges – how can the Jewish tradition maintain its distinctiveness while also borrowing from the wider culture? The rabbis utilized the symposium framework and transposed the Jewish stories, customs and sentiments onto said framework. They used the precedents from the Tanach and earlier Passover traditions in tandem with the symposium methodology to create a ritual that was unique to its time. The Seder ritual the rabbis landed on came about as a response to balancing pre-existing tradition, historical circumstance, and wider cultural norms.

**The Components of the Seder**

The Passover Seder has 15 parts, each to be done in a particular order. The term Seder itself means order. Before discussing some of the intricacies of the Seder, I will define the parts and order of the Seder as they are practiced today.²

² This section is based on the Encyclopedia Judaica’s description of the Seder in its Passover entry. Page 679. I have also drawn from sefaria.org
1. **Kaddesh** (“sanctification”): The blessing over wine is recited.

2. **Urchatz** (“wash”): The Seder goers wash their hands, but without saying the ceremonial blessing.

3. **Karpas** (“greens”): Each person in attendance dips a piece of parsley in salt water and consumes it. The salt water is meant to symbolize the tears of the enslaved Israelites.

4. **Yachatz** (“break”): The middle matzah is broken into two pieces. The larger of the two pieces is hidden and becomes the afikoman.

5. **Maggid** (“recitation”): The retelling of the Exodus story and various related stories.

6. **Rachzah** (“washing”): The Seder goers wash their hands, this time with the ceremonial blessing.

7. **Motzi** (“bringing forth”): The blessing before the meal is recited.

8. **Matzah** (“unleavened bread”): Pieces of the top matzah are broken and eaten.

9. **Maror** (“bitter herbs”): The bitter herbs are dipped in the haroset and eaten.

10. **Korech** (“Wrap”): A sandwich is made with the matzah and bitter herbs to commemorate Rabbi Hillel’s practice of creating this sandwich to fulfill the commandment of eating these foods with the paschal offering.

11. **Shulchan Orech** (“prepared table”): The festive meal is eaten.

12. **Tzafun** (“hidden”): The afikomen is found and eaten.

13. **Barech** (“blessing”): The blessing after meals is recited.

14. **Hallel** (“psalms of praise”): Psalms 115-8 are sung/recited. These Psalms stem from the customary songs that accompanied the paschal sacrifice during the temple period.

15. **Nirtzah** (“acceptance”): The Seder is completed, and optional songs may be sung.
Dissecting the Mishnah and its Implications

The Seder ritual that the rabbis eventually created is described in the Mishnah. The Mishnah is commonly referred to as a part of the Oral Torah, meaning that it began as an oral tradition that was presumably passed down from generation to generation. Including 63 tractates, the Mishnah offers commentary on and supplements Jewish scripture. One of these tractates is called Pesachim, and focuses entirely on guidelines for celebrating Passover. In order to understand the Mishnah’s authority and significance, I will provide a quote from Jacob Neusner’s book *The Mishnah: A New Translation*:

> The Mishnah is important because it is a principal component of the canon of Judaism. … Why should the Mishnah have been received, as it certainly was received, as a half of the “Whole Torah of Moses at Sinai”? The Mishnah was represented, soon after it was compiled, as the part of the “whole Torah of Moses, our rabbi,” which had been formulated and transmitted orally, so it bore the status of divine revelation right alongside the Pentateuch (Neusner, xiv).

Neusner explains one of the common concepts that assigns the Mishnah its authority – that it represents half of the Torah that was received at Sinai, and should therefore be read with the same respect the Written Torah is given. The Mishnah has become an integral text to understanding the Jewish tradition. It is studied intensely by Jewish scholars, and is treated with a great level of authority by many.

The fact that the Mishnah is an oral tradition serves to help one understand Mishnah’s description of the Seder. In his analysis of the Mishnah’s thoughts about the Passover Seder, Bokser discerns that the Mishnah’s aim is to frame the Seder “as if the elements of the celebration had not changed since temple days” (Bokser, 1). Piecing together the Seder’s
precedent through textual and historical analysis is the Mishnah’s way of justifying the Seder’s belonging as a Jewish ritual. The Mishnah’s goal is aided by the Mishnah’s status as Oral Torah. Given that the Mishnah comes from an oral tradition, when reading the Mishnah one does not know how long each of the Mishnah’s teachings have been passed down. One does not know what aspects of the tradition changed and what remained the same prior to the Mishnah being written down. This serves to support the Mishnah’s goal of making it seem like the Seder has been practiced in the same way since the temple period. Ochs supports this, saying:

What we do know is this: in the first centuries after the destruction of the Temple, there was still no definitive Haggadah, no written script explaining what to do and what to say. Lawrence Hoffman maintains that “the entire liturgy was orally delivered. We should abandon the search for an original (and therefore authentic) text; celebrants followed the structure of the night’s drama without being bound by it” (Ochs, 26).

Ochs and Hoffman argue that the tradition was being molded and shaped during the period before it was written down. We cannot know what the tradition looked like during this period, so we must trust that the Mishnah’s written instructions came as a part of a natural evolution of the tradition.

While the Mishnah is an oral tradition that was written down, the rabbis established it as being of equal significance to the Written Torah – thus establishing it as an incredibly well thought out text. The Mishnah documents intergenerational conversations about the Jewish tradition, so that one may trace the thought process behind rabbinic decisions, and analyze the winning arguments alongside the losing arguments. Ochs supports this idea saying, “These are oral traditions of rabbinic deliberation; when they were eventually redacted and written down, an enduring conversation speaking across generations was created, one that remains alive today”
(Ochs, 24). The Mishnah’s status as Oral Torah allows for the reader to bear witness to and participate in the interpretation of the Jewish tradition.

There is a famous story in Bava Metzia 59b, which follows a rabbinic debate regarding the purity of an oven. Rabbi Eliezer calls on divine miracles to validate his stance, but the other rabbis do not accept this divine intervention as a valid method of proving his stance. The rabbis cite two biblical verses to validate their stance against Rabbi Eliezer’s method of calling upon divine intervention to prove his correctness. The first text is Deuteronomy 30:12, “It is not in heaven,” and the second is Exodus 23:2 “After a majority to incline.”

The rabbis argue using these two biblical verses that decisions about the law are no longer in God’s realm, and must be decided by a majority. Even though Rabbi Eliezer was backed by God and God’s miracles, the majority of rabbis opposed Rabbi Eliezer’s position, thus rendering it invalid. When God heard of this ruling, God smiled and said, “My children have triumphed over Me.” This story is part of the basis for the Oral Torah being given equal importance to the Written Torah. It encourages the Jewish people to engage in meaningful debate about Jewish law, and empowers the people to make decisions, as long as they have a basis in text.

This interlude into the Mishnah’s role within Judaism is meant to provide context for the ways in which the creation of the Seder was documented and discussed. Rabbinic authorities did not simply create a new ritual. They participated in deeply intentional discussions, sometimes spending paragraphs discussing the interpretation of one word. This set the precedent for how Jewish law would be handled by rabbinic authorities after the destruction of the temple and the shift in authority from the priests to the rabbis. Judaism became a tradition of asking questions, and immersing oneself in text.

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3 Translation from William Davidson Edition - Vocalized Aramaic via Sefaria.org
The Seder developed into a ritual that became based on the principle of asking questions. Exodus’ original commandment to remember the exodus includes the instruction, “And you shall explain to your child on that day, ‘It is because of what יהוה did for me when I went free from Egypt’” (Exodus 13:8). The verse comes after Exodus’ description of the Feast of Unleavened Bread. Therefore, the meaning of this verse is that a parent should explain to their child the meaning of the feast, and what it is commemorating. Based on this verse, the Mishnah formulates the idea of “The Four Questions”. “The Four Questions” are a series of questions a child might ask during the Passover Seder. As the formal asking of these questions became a permanent part of the Seder, each question became based on the idea of “why is this night different from all other nights?”

Just like the Jewish tradition as a whole, the Seder became a ritual of asking questions and discussing their implications. Ochs emphasizes this point – “Study was the evening’s centerpiece for the whole family, a main course of words, and the form of nourishment that replaced the paschal lamb and constituted a substitute form of worship” (Ochs, 29). The Oral Torah’s method of asking questions and participating in intergenerational discussions is what helped form the Seder into what it is today.

With this understanding of how the Mishnah functions within the Jewish tradition, I would now like to dive more deeply into some of the intricacies the Mishnah provides in regard to the Seder, and the ways in which these intricacies allowed the Seder to evolve while maintaining continuity with the past. Rabban Gamliel writes of an imperative that one must discuss three things at the Seder – Pesach, Matzah, and Marror. Without this discussion, R. Gamliel argues, the Seder is not valid. Both Bokser and Ochs argue that this imperative is
created in order to symbolically replace the physical aspect of the paschal sacrifice. In this regard, Bokser states:

In giving significance to what the three foods represent, rather than to the literal act of eating, [R. Gamliel’s imperative] reflects a greater, though not yet total, acceptance of the changes in Judaism. Relating to an activity symbolically is a way of coping with its loss, for its physical presence is no longer as consequential (Bokser, 42).

At the root of this statement, Bokser implies that the symbolic participation in an activity is adequate when physical participation is not an option. This would mean that the Seder, being a symbolic representation of the paschal sacrifice, is equally legitimate within the Jewish tradition as the paschal sacrifice itself. Bokser even goes so far as to say that these new representations become more consequential than the rituals they are representing. Ochs agrees with this argument. Recall Ochs’ statement – “Study was the evening’s centerpiece for the whole family, a main course of words, and the form of nourishment that replaced the paschal lamb and constituted a substitute form of worship” (Ochs, 29). While surely Ochs’ Seder includes eating delicious foods, Ochs regards the mental nourishment provided by words and discussion to be the replacement for the physical nourishment that the paschal lamb used to bring. To Ochs, both are still regarded as worship, just in different equally valid forms.

Intentionality is a key component of the argument that symbols can become more important than the previous physical rituals. Intentionality, meaning that a symbol cannot simply replace a ritual without proper reasoning, discussion, and connection to the prior ritual. Judaism is a religion of intense discussion and questioning. Therefore, this intentionality behind symbols is what allows them to replace rituals. In order for a symbol to be a valid way of replacing a ritual, one must find a way for it to connect to the original ritual. Matzah and Maror had
previously been connected to the holiday because they were eaten with the paschal sacrifice.
Now, they take on the symbolic meaning of the sacrifice itself. This intentionality of assigning new meaning to foods that had been a part of the old ritual is what allows this symbolic replacement to happen. Ochs explains:

One fulfilled the duty of Passover by looking to three items on the table, speaking about them, and interpreting them anew … The paschal lamb now referred only to the memory of God’s passing over their ancestors’ homes in Egypt. The bitter herbs, no longer recalled as the condiment eaten with the lamb, were repurposed as reminders of the Egyptians who embittered their ancestors’ lives. The matzah, with its multiple historical evocations, now stood for one thing alone: God’s ultimate redemption (Ochs, 30).

Ochs points out the previous and new implications of each of the symbols, citing their connections to the past while reinterpreting their meanings in a post-temple context. The physical purposes these foods used to have now transformed into symbolic purposes, each with their own distinct meaning.

Bokser relates his argument about symbols to the concept of loss. As he states, “relating to an activity symbolically is a way of coping with its loss” (Bokser, 42). For Bokser, the symbol becomes a way of coping with the loss of the actual. As I have alluded to previously, the rabbis did not have to create a new Passover ritual. The destruction of the temple could have been the destruction of Passover rituals. However, the rabbis chose not to abandon the Passover rituals. In the absence of the physical temple space, a symbol had to suffice, otherwise the entire tradition would have been destroyed with the temple. Rabban Gamliel’s imperative acknowledges the loss that occurred, and offers the Seder as a way of coping with this loss. Grappling with the loss of
the paschal sacrifice is intertwined with the symbols through which the sacrifice can be remembered in the absence of the temple.

Further, as Bokser mentions, Gamliel’s imperative emphasizes the significance of what the Pesach, Matzah and Maror represent, rather than emphasizing the act of eating the three foods. By emphasizing the meaning of the foods over the action of eating them, Rabban Gamliel emphasizes that the meanings of the new Seder ritual are the key to grappling with the loss of the paschal sacrifice. Intentionality in the meaning behind the symbols overshadows the action of doing the paschal sacrifice. This reframes the Seder less as a ceremony meant to stand in for a ritual that was lost and more as a ceremony that stands on its own while also drawing precedent from the prior tradition.

Ochs has a slightly different take on the matter. While Ochs and Bokser agree that the meanings of the symbols allow them to replace the physical sacrifice that used to occur, Ochs’ thoughts about how the symbols cope with loss differ from Bokser. While Bokser views R. Gamliel’s imperative as a way of coping with and thus acknowledging the loss of the paschal sacrifice, Ochs sees the imperative as a diversion from the loss of the paschal sacrifice. Ochs states, “Attention was strategically diverted from yearning for past rituals and past times of sovereignty” (Ochs, 30). Ochs is saying that the Mishnah wants these symbols to take on meanings separate from the paschal sacrifice in order to distract from the immense pain and yearning for past ways of life. Therefore, in order to serve as a diversion, the connections these symbols have to the past are not through symbolizing the paschal sacrifice, but each through their own means. Regardless of how these scholars view R. Gamliel’s imperative in terms of loss, both Bokser and Ochs see the symbols as replacing the paschal sacrifice. Bokser sees this replacement as happening through the acknowledgement that the sacrifice is gone, and Ochs sees
this replacement as happening as a diversion from thinking about and yearning for what has been lost.

We are now moving away from the discussion of the nature of R. Gamliel’s symbols and toward a discussion of authority and who gets to perform the Passover rituals. Another instruction set forth by the Mishnah is that people must sing the Hallel during the Seder. The Hallel that is performed during the Seder is commonly understood to be a reference to the songs that used to accompany the paschal sacrifice in the temple. During the temple period, the psalms of Hallel were sung by professional singers. Therefore, it is significant that the Mishnah instructs that Hallel should be sung at the seder by ordinary congregants, even without the expertise of professional singers. This marks a shift in ownership of the Passover rituals. While the Hallel during the paschal sacrifice at the temple may have been conducted by experts, the Seder leans away from the need for expertise in order to partake in it.

This transition from professional singers to the singing being done by lay people is emblematic in numerous ways. Firstly, this switch made the Passover rituals more accessible. One could still partake in the singing that had previously been performed by professionals, even without these professionals present. The tradition of singing as a part of Passover rituals transitions into the hands of the general public, as opposed to a group of elite singers. It is now up to the public to decide how they would like to take on the imperative to sing at the Seder. This singing may not be done with the same level of expertise as the professional temple singers, but this is now permissible for the songs to be sung by people without professional experience.

The transition from songs being sung by professional singers to songs being sung by the general public is also emblematic of a general shift that occurred during the transition from the paschal sacrifice to the Seder. While the paschal sacrifice was centralized, and its matters were
handled by the priests at the temple, the Seder is quite decentralized, with its matters handled by the individual participants of the Seders. The Mishnah granting permission for lay people to perform Hallel without expertise extends to the performance of the entire Seder without priestly expertise. Ochs describes the transition from professional singers to the singing that occurs during the Seder – “In the Temple, the Levites chant psalms of praise and rejoicing. Their psalms provide the first liturgical materials the Haggadah draws on, and their musicianship presages the spirit of song that will eventually characterize the seder” (Ochs, 22). The Levite’s singing is one of bases for the Haggadah, and this singing, even when done at a Seder without professional singers, sets the tone for the entire Seder.

To me, this shift from expert to lay person also represents a shift away from perfectionism. It matters less that the songs be sung perfectly, than for them to be sung with intention. Ochs seems to echo this sentiment. In her conversation about Passover celebrations hosted by Kings Josiah and Hezekaiah, Ochs shares, “When kings are concerned, we do not hear concern about the efficaciousness or permissibility of their Passover innovations. They reflect their power and also the capaciousness and flexibility of this holiday, a sensibility the Haggadah will incorporate” (Ochs, 23). While Ochs is talking about royal celebrations and not necessarily lay person celebrations, she does connect the lack of concern afforded to royal Passover celebrations to the way in which the Haggadah was formulated. She mentions that the Haggadah incorporates similar flexibility to that which was afforded to royal celebrations. To Ochs, the Haggadah features an element of forgiveness for the ritual not being done in the “perfect” way, as long as it is being done in an intentional way. I presume that when the Mishnah suggests that the singing during the Seder be done by lay people instead of professionals, the Mishnah’s
compilers knew that this would come with an element of imperfection. This, to them, was okay, if the ritual was still being done with intention.

Concluding Thoughts

I used to associate the term tradition with a lack of change. To change a tradition would be to create an entirely new tradition. What I have come to realize, however, is that sometimes change is tradition. The Seder is a ritual built from changes that needed to occur in order to keep the tradition alive. This embrace of change in the tradition is part of what makes the Seder so fascinating. The Seder’s history frames it as somewhat of a customizable tradition. It came about from changes in historical circumstance, and transitioned from being a centralized ritual to being one that takes place in individual homes. The Seder’s stance as being part of the Oral Torah means that it is a living tradition. Debate and questioning the Seder is a large part of the Seder’s basis! Additionally, the decentralization of the Passover rituals allows them to be practiced slightly differently from household to household. The Seder’s origins make it clear that the customization of the Seder should be seen as encouraged and as a part of the tradition itself.

My goal with this thesis is to use the framework set forth by the Seder’s origins to look at modern customized Seders that respond to their historical circumstance. A phenomenon that has occurred in many modern Seders is to take the Seder and use it as a framework to talk about a particular issue or theme. In the following chapter, I will look at how a number of modern Seders address the story of The Four Children. I will explain the significance of the four children, and analyze the ways in which each of the modern haggadot customizes the story to suit the intentions of the haggadah’s compilers.
Chapter 2: The Four Children

The following chapter will discuss the section of the Haggadah that tells the story of the four children. This section of the Haggadah presents a story of four children, who each have particular attributes which point toward their degree of knowledge and engagement with the Exodus story. In this chapter, I will outline the biblical origins of the Haggadah’s section on the four children, and I will discuss the varying interpretations of the four children and their attributes. Following this discussion, I will examine how three modern Haggadot customize the idea of the four children to fit the narrative that each respective Haggadah is telling.

“As Though He Personally Left Egypt”

The Seder’s central purpose, as dictated by the Haggadah, is to create an intergenerational dialogue which relays the story of the exodus from Egypt to the younger generations. This theme stems from a commandment that is given four times throughout Exodus and Deuteronomy – Exodus 12:25-28, Exodus 13:1-10, Exodus 13:14-16 and Deuteronomy 6:20-25. In each case, the commandment requires one to tell the Exodus story to their children as an explanation for why they are taking part in the Passover rituals. For example, Exodus 13:8 commands, “and you shall explain to your child on that day, ‘it is because of what יהוה did for me when I went free from Egypt.’”¹ The Mishnah takes this commandment to a new level by emphasizing that “In each and every generation a person must view himself as though he personally left Egypt” (Talmud, Pesachim 116b).² The Torah’s use of the words “me” and “I” in reference to the Exodus imply that the reader themself participated in the Exodus.

Because of the Mishnah’s imperative to tell the story as if one had been there themself, the Seder is more than a reading of a story. It becomes a transformative experience in which the

¹ Translation from The William Davidson Talmud - (Koren Steinsaltz) via Sefaria.org
² Translation from The William Davidson Talmud - (Koren Steinsaltz) via Sefaria.org
participants take on the role of someone who has exited Egypt. It becomes an experience of collective memory for the sake of educating the younger generations. The Mishnah is not clear about how one is meant to view themself as if they had come out of Egypt. Are the participants meant to perform this role in order for their children to understand the gravity of the story? Or perhaps one is meant to suspend their belief in time and history in order to truly believe they participated in the Exodus.

This would not be the first time we have been faced with the discontinuity of time in regard to the commandment of the Passover rituals. Recall in Chapter 1 my point about the instructions for how to commemorate the Exodus being given to the Israelites before they had even been brought out of Egypt. I interpret this discontinuity of time as being a literary device used to depict the Israelites’ faith and trust that they would be brought out from Egypt – so much so that they could begin to think about how the Exodus would be commemorated even before it had physically happened to them. There are several other examples in Exodus of similar conflations of time when it comes to the Israelites’ faith and relationship to God. One such example can be found in Exodus 15:20, where Miriam is seen dancing with a timbrel after the Exodus. Scholars ask a question about this verse – why did Miriam and the other women pack timbrels with them when it was not certain that the Israelites would escape from Egypt? Rashi’s interpretation of Exodus 15:20 addresses this idea, explaining that these women had been so “confident that God would perform miracles for them and accordingly brought timbrels with them from Egypt” (Rashi on Exodus 15:20). Similarly, Exodus 24:7 contains the famous phrase נעשה ושמע, which roughly translates to “we will do and we will listen.” This sentence poses a challenge for the rabbis, as it flips the typical order in which one receives a commandment.

5 Translation from Pentateuch with Rashi's commentary by M. Rosenbaum and A.M. Silbermann, 1929-1934 via sefaria.org
Typically, one listens and then they act, however in this verse the Israelites promise to act and then listen. Rashbam interprets this phrase to mean “we will carry out what God has said already, and we are also prepared to listen (obey) to what God will command from here on in.”6 This phrase is said in response to receiving God’s commandments at Mount Sinai. Rashbam’s interpretation implies that the Israelites have complete faith in God and are committed to fulfilling God’s commands even before knowing what they are. With these examples in mind, it would not be incorrect to presume that the authors of Exodus used the disruption of time in order to portray the Israelites as a faithful people.

However, these biblical examples apply to circumstances in which time is disrupted in a way that brings an understanding of the future to the past. In the case of the Mishnah’s recommendation that one must retell the Passover story as if they experienced it themself, time is being disrupted in a way that requires an understanding of the past in the present, and for those living in the present to have experienced distant historical events. Author Sarah Shoub offers some insight: “The main idea is that each generation must ask itself: ‘What is my Egypt, in my own time and place, and what is the meaning of slavery and freedom here and now, in the present historical circumstances’” (Shoub, 76). This idea suggests that perhaps the Mishnah’s suggestion can be fulfilled through reflecting on how the present evokes similar emotional circumstances as the Exodus in the past. The feeling of experiencing the Exodus does not have to come from participating in the literal Exodus, but the manifestations of it in each of our present day lives. In his book, And You Shall Tell Your Son, author Yitzchak Peleg offers an example of how one might experience the Exodus, saying “The individual should personally identify with our forefathers: ‘In every generation each person must see himself as if he had left Egypt.’ In other words, the individual must feel empathy for the narrative of our people’s past” (Peleg, 125).

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6 Translation from Eliyahu Munk, HaChut Hameshulash via sefaria.org
Peleg’s statement argues that the Mishnah’s imperative can be achieved by feeling empathy for those who exited Egypt because of a shared history with them. The two scholars agree that fulfilling the Mishnah’s imperative comes from connecting with the past through the present. The two scholarly arguments work well together. One can feel empathy for those who left Egypt by relating the Exodus experience to their own present circumstances.

The Seder’s disruption of time can be seen as an act of faith much like the examples in Exodus. In Shoub’s interpretation of the Mishnah, one is supposed to think about their own present day Egypt as a way of fulfilling the Mishnah’s imperative for everyone to view themself as if they had exited Egypt. In looking for present day moments of oppression and injustice through the lens of the Seder, there is an implication that, just like the Israelites were saved from Egyptian oppression, the present day participants in the Passover Seder will be saved from their own injustices. In empathizing with the past, the Seder’s participants foster hope for a better future, and faith that God’s redemption will extend into the future. In telling the story about past redemption using a modern lens, the Seder inherently brings the Israelites’ faith in God’s redemption into the present day.

Peleg further adds to the idea that the Seder is an intergenerational dialogue by suggesting that the Haggadah is a “tool for establishing memory” (Peleg, 121). I believe that this idea of establishing memory is closely tied to the empathy through which one is supposed to tell the Exodus story. “Establishing memory” is a rather interesting concept. Most memories come naturally as one navigates life. However, in the context of the Seder, the memories of the Exodus that the Haggadah is meant to establish are not memories that can be acquired in the typical way. Because present day Jews did not experience the exodus for themselves, but are still expected to have memories of the Exodus, these memories need to be created for them via the Seder’s
transformative communal process. Peleg describes how the holiday of Passover relates to the act of remembering: “The holidays—and especially Passover—remind us of past events in a celebratory, experiential way: in order to remember our past, we must know what it was!” (Peleg, 124). Peleg’s idea of remembering experientially points toward the idea that the Seder is not merely a retelling of the Exodus story, but an act of remembering. In sharing the stories that have been passed down from generation to generation in an experiential way, the Seder becomes an act of remembering the Exodus despite not participating in it. Not only do the Seder’s participants recall the memory of the Exodus, but they recall the memory of all of the previous Seders that have come before. The Seder becomes an act of preserving the memory of the Exodus, and of the many years of intergenerational dialogue that have happened surrounding it. By participating in the Seder, the participants are able to naturally form memories of the tradition they have participated in, and add to the long chain of memories that leads all the way back to the Exodus itself. Thus, the Seder’s participants from the past, present and future are all linked together by memory.

A Deep Dive Into the Biblical Texts of the Four Children

Recall the commandment in Exodus 13:8 – “and you shall explain to your child on that day, ‘it is because of what יהוה did for me when I went free from Egypt.’” There are numerous interpretations that attempt to define what parties this commandment is referring to. Because of Exodus 13:8’s use of the word “לבנך”, the commandment is often interpreted as referring to “sons,” which would be the most direct translation of the word “בן.” Many scholars, however, broaden their interpretation of “לבנך” to mean “to your children” rather than “to your sons.” Peleg supports this broader interpretation, saying “The ‘son’ is also an inclusive term, applying
to daughters, granddaughters, and following generations” (Peleg, 132). To Peleg, the term לָבָנִים represents a generation of young learners as opposed to a male student.

Peleg also offers an interpretation on who qualifies as the educator in Exodus’ commandment, saying, “The educators are not only the biological father and mother, but include the whole of the parents’ generation” (Peleg, 132). Peleg’s interpretation suggests that the educator, too, does not need to be strictly defined. According to Peleg, the commandment in Exodus 13:8 is not referring to a particular familial structure, but to the responsibility of the older generation to pass down information to the younger generation. He articulates this idea by saying “To sum up, the commandment ‘And you shall tell your son’ must bridge the gap between what is known and obvious to the older generation, and what is not obvious to the younger generation. The parents’ knowledge and understanding of their heritage does not pass on automatically to their children. The Jewish calendar and holidays fill this gap” (Peleg, 123). Peleg therefore understands the idea of the parents telling the sons to mean the older generation educating the younger generation about the knowledge that would not come naturally to them. This knowledge is passed down experientially and in the form of memories through the vehicle of the Seder. In his article, “The Educational Pedagogy of the Four Sons,” Russel Hendel seems to agree with Peleg’s broad interpretation by referring to the commandment as “a commandment for humans to communicate to other humans about the Exodus from Egypt” (Hendel, 99). While Peleg’s interpretation of the son and the parent are interpreted very broadly, for the purposes of this thesis I will continue to use language referring to specific people in my discussion of the biblical imperative, so as not to cause confusion.

Because of the biblical imperative to tell one’s son about the reasons for celebrating Passover, the Seder has become an educational practice. The biblical imperative is mentioned
four times throughout the Torah, each with slight variations in how it is described. From these differences comes the idea of the four children. Hendel writes in his article that each of the four children represents a different type of learner. Hendel sees each of the children as representing an extreme version of the learning variations that are present in every learner. The remainder of this section will focus on a close reading of the verses that represent each of the four children, through Hendel’s educational lens. The order I will be discussing these verses is the order in which they appear in the Torah. The biblical order is different from the order in which each child appears in the Haggadah.

The first instance of the biblical imperative is seen in Exodus 12:25-28. The key verse of this excerpt is: “And it will be, when your children say to you: What does this service [mean] to you?” (Exodus 12:26). The verse comes as a part of the commandment to observe the Passover rites, and is referring to the moment when the children ask why the rite is being observed. The key words in this verse that have implications for the interpretation of the four children are the words “say” and the second “you.” Interpreters such as Hendel find the first word, “say” to indicate a lack of respect for the parent the child is speaking to. Instead of asking, the child says the question, which could have implications of the question being said in a rhetorical or even accusatory way. By “saying” the question instead of asking it, the child is not searching for a response from the parent to help them understand something. The child is instead seen as perhaps pointing fingers. The second key word, the “you” that occurs at the end of the question, provides more clarity and backing to this unfavorable interpretation of the word “say.” Hendel and other interpreters find it interesting that the child uses the word “you” instead of “us” when referring to the Passover story. The usage of the word “you” is seen as the child attempting to distance

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7 This translation comes from the Schocken Bible, Everett Fox, 1995. I used this translation as opposed to The Sefaria JPS I have been using for other quotes because the JPS did not capture the language nuances that were necessary for this discussion.
themself from the Passover story, as if it does not have implications or significance for themself. When this verse is read within the context of the Haggadah, the usage of the word “you” goes directly against the Mishnah’s notion that each generation must view itself as if they had personally exited from Egypt. Because the child says the question in reference to their parent and does not include themself, the child does not seem to view themself as though they are a part of the community that had exited Egypt. It is for these reasons that this child is deemed by Hendel as the cynical child.

It is important to note that there is disagreement among scholars regarding what to call this child. While Hendel sees the son as cynical, another common word used to describe the child is “wicked.” Hendel’s article references a quote from the Rav, Rabbi Dr. Baer Soloveitchik, who favors the term wicked to describe the child. Peleg, however, represents another common translation by his use of the term “evil” when speaking about this child.

One may ask, why is this child viewed so negatively by scholars of Judaism and in the traditional text of the Haggadah? What is so bad about the way this child poses their question? I would like to offer some possible explanations. Recall my earlier discussion in Chapter 1 of the importance of Oral Torah to create intergenerational dialogue, and the importance of asking questions. Asking questions and passing down stories orally are an integral part of the Seder’s foundation, and one of the foundations of modern Judaism. Therefore, the ability to respectfully participate in the passing down of stories and asking questions would have been seen as integral to being an active member of the Jewish community by those who compiled the Haggadah. After all, the Haggadah’s main purpose is to pass down stories and ask questions. Therefore, the fact that this child “says” their question and refers to the tradition in a manner that excludes themself carries immense weight. Not only does the child neglect to see themself as a part of the tradition
of the Passover rite, but they fail to ask their question in a way that pairs well with the Jewish tradition of asking questions in order to learn. Instead, the child “says” their question, thus implying that they do not intend to learn from the answer that is given to them. Additionally, the child’s use of the word “you” in order to separate themself from the tradition could be seen as this child breaking the chain of oral tradition and intergenerational dialogue. If the child does not see themself as part of the tradition, they likely do not intend to pass on the story, thus bringing an end to an multi-generational chain of storytelling. Within the larger context of the Jewish tradition, this child warrants a negative title because of the ways in which they show disrespect toward the Jewish tradition of asking questions and telling stories.

The next occurrence of the biblical imperative to tell the story of the Exodus to one’s children is present in Exodus 13:1-10. The verse in reference to one of the four children is as follows: “And you shall explain to your child on that day, ‘It is because of what the LORD did for me when I went free from Egypt’” (Exodus 13:8).¹ The significance of this verse is not in the words that are present, but the words that are not. In every other occurrence of the parent being commanded to explain the story of the exodus to their child, the child asks the parent a question which the parent responds to. In this example, however, there is no example of a child inquiring about the tradition. From this, scholars such as Hendel interpret this verse as being an example of a child who does not know how to ask a question. This explains why the parent offers an explanation despite no previous inquiry about the tradition from a child, as the other verses depict.

There is also debate in regard to how this child should be referred to. Many scholars, such as Peleg and Dr. Fred O. Francis, refer to the child according to the child’s inability to ask a question, respectively referring to them as “the son who does not know enough to ask” and “one
who does not know to ask” (Peleg, 139; Francis, 281). Hendel and the Rav, Rabbi Dr. Baer Soloveitchik, however, make an argument for the child to be referred to as the apathetic child. They make this argument because they see each of the four children as representing an educational extreme. If this is the case, the simple child and the child who does not know how to ask would represent extremes that are too similar. Instead, the apathetic child represents a more deliberate and intentional form of simplicity, which differentiates them from the simple child, who is simple by nature and not necessarily by intention. I would like to point out that the term “apathetic” has a negative connotation, while “the child who does not know how to ask” objectively explains the child’s characteristics.

Exodus 13:8, the verse referring to the child who does not know how to ask, showcases the parent using the word “me” in reference to participating in the exodus, which makes it so that the parent is referring only to themself in regard to participating in the exodus. The usage of the word “me” therefore excludes the child. In the case of the cynical/wicked/evil child, the child excluding themself from the exodus story is seen as a negative thing. Now, the parent is perpetuating this exclusion. It could perhaps be argued that this child’s inability to ask a question puts them in a position of disfavor because of similar arguments I have provided as to why the cynical/wicked/evil child is seen unfavorably. Because asking questions and telling stories is such an integral part of the Seder and Judaism as a whole, the inability to ask a question shows a level of inability to participate in Jewish tradition. While this child may not deliberately separate themself from the Jewish tradition as much as the cynical/wicked/evil child does, their inability to ask a question similarly creates a degree of separation between the child who does not know how to ask a question and the Jewish tradition. If this child is unable to ask a question, they will not be able to participate in the Jewish tradition of asking questions, and the line of oral tradition
might die with them, just as it would with the cynical/wicked/evil child. This could be a possible explanation as to why the parent excludes the simple child from their description of the Exodus, something that the parent only does when speaking to the child who does not know how to ask a question and the cynical/wicked/evil child.

Exodus 13:14 contains information regarding the next child, saying “And when, in time to come, your child asks you, saying, ‘What does this mean?’ you shall reply, ‘It was with a mighty hand that the LORD brought us out from Egypt, the house of bondage.’” The child’s question shows inquisitiveness, but is not specific. One has to gather information on what the child is asking through the context in which they are asking the question. Therefore, this child requires some assistance in assuring that their question is understood. It is clear that the child is inquisitive and wishes to understand more about the tradition, but they are not ready to ask questions in a self-sufficient manner. This is why this child is commonly referred to as the “simple” child.

The parent’s response to this child in comparison to the prior two children is quite intriguing. While the child who does not know how to ask and the cynical/wicked/evil child both receive a response from the parent that excludes them from the tradition, the simple child garners a response from the parent that includes them as a part of the group of people who were saved from Egypt. The simple child is therefore seen as more of a part of the Jewish community than the child who does not know how to ask and the cynical/wicked/evil child. It seems that formulating a question, regardless of if it is a specific or well-formed question, is the deciding factor for whether someone can be seen as a member of the group of people who exited Egypt. As with the child who does not know how to ask, the decision on whether to include the simple child within the group or not is reliant on the parent’s answer. These two children do not decide
for themselves whether or not they would like to be deemed part of the group, but their action of asking or not asking a question determines this status for them.

The final key verse in this discussion is Deuteronomy 6:20, which says “When, in time to come, your children ask you, ‘What mean the decrees, laws, and rules that our God יהוה has enjoined upon you?’” There are multiple aspects of this question that set this child apart from the other children. Firstly, the question is incredibly detailed. The child directly outlines the areas they are asking a question about. This level of detail suggests that the child is somewhat versed in the ways in which Passover is observed, and wants to know the deeper meaning behind these observances. The child therefore has already shown prior commitment to the tradition by knowing the requirements to participate in it. Another key element of this child’s question is that they refer to themself as being part of the tradition. They use the word אֶלְהֵנִי, meaning “our God,” which therefore situates them as being a member of the community that was saved by God during the exodus. For these reasons, this child is typically referred to as the “wise” child.

I would like to call attention to the use of the word אתכם in the biblical text of the wise child, and offer an interpretation. As seen in the above translation, אתכם is often translated as “you,” and within the context of this sentence, the term would be referring to the commandments being enjoined on a party that the wise child does not see themself being a part of. This personal exclusion is similar to that of the cynical/wicked/evil child. However, the key difference between the two cases is that the wise child indicates that they are within God’s community, whereas the cynical/wicked/evil child does not indicate this. This bodes the question of why the wise child would not see the commandments as being enjoined upon them if they see themself as a member of God’s community. I would like to interpret this as being a part of the intergenerational component of the commandment. Recall Peleg’s point that “the commandment ‘And you shall
tell your son’ must bridge the gap between what is known and obvious to the older generation, and what is not obvious to the younger generation. The parents’ knowledge and understanding of their heritage does not pass on automatically to their children. The Jewish calendar and holidays fill this gap” (Peleg, 123). According to this premise, the commandment must be passed down from generation to generation. Therefore, the wise child has not had the commandment passed down to them yet. Because they consider themself as a part of God’s community, and are expressing interest in wanting to know more about the commandments, this exchange between parent and child is what ultimately passes down the commandment to the child, who will practice it when they come of age.

To summarize this introduction to the four children, the children are categorized as follows: the cynical/wicked/evil child, the child who does not know how to ask a question, the simple child and the wise child. Two of these children are excluded from the group of people who were saved from Egypt – the cynical/wicked/evil child and the child who does not know how to ask a question, and two of these children are included – the simple child and the wise child. I interpret this inclusion and exclusion to be on the account of their ability to ask a respectful question, and therefore actively participate in the Jewish tradition of asking questions and storytelling. Two of the children decide for themselves whether or not they want to be seen as a member of God’s community – the cynical/wicked/evil child and the wise child, and the status of the other two children, the child who does not know how to ask and the simple child, is decided by their parent.

Hendel provides a helpful chart with various aspects of this information, which I have provided below:
The Text of the Haggadah: Restating and Expanding on the Biblical Verses

The following text is a standard translation of the text of the four children that is included in the Haggadah:

Corresponding to four sons did the Torah speak; one [who is] wise, one [who is] evil, one who is innocent and one who doesn't know to ask.

What does the wise [son] say? "'What are these testimonies, statutes and judgments that the Lord our God commanded you?' (Deuteronomy 6:20)" And accordingly you will say to him, as per the laws of the Pesach sacrifice, "We may not eat an afikoman [a dessert or other foods eaten after the meal] after [we are finished eating] the Pesach sacrifice (Mishnah Pesachim 10:8)."

What does the evil [son] say? "'What is this worship to you?' (Exodus 12:26)" 'To you' and not 'to him.' And since he excluded himself from the collective, he denied a principle [of the Jewish faith]. And accordingly, you will blunt his teeth and say to him, "For the
sake of this, did the Lord do [this] for me in my going out of Egypt' (Exodus 13:8).” 'For me' and not 'for him.' If he had been there, he would not have been saved.

What does the innocent [son] say? "What is this?" (Exodus 13:14)" And you will say to him, "With the strength of [His] hand did the Lord take us out from Egypt, from the house of slaves' (Exodus 13:14)."

And [regarding] the one who doesn't know to ask, you will open [the conversation] for him. As it is stated (Exodus 13:8), "And you will speak to your son on that day saying, for the sake of this, did the Lord do [this] for me in my going out of Egypt." 8

The Haggadah’s description of the four children directly quotes and interprets the biblical text, in addition to including imperatives that are not mentioned in the biblical text. The Haggadah’s text of the wise son follows the typical structure of the biblical verses, including a question posed by the child, and a script for what the parent should say in response. Aside from naming the child “the wise son,” The Haggadah does not add anything in particular beyond the biblical description to the section on the wise son. Next, the description of the evil son differs from the biblical description significantly. Firstly, the Haggadah explicitly explains why the evil son’s question is deemed evil – because this son has excluded himself from the Jewish faith. In addition to the scripted response that is present in the biblical verse referring to this son, the Haggadah also instructs the parent to “blunt his teeth.” I interpret this idea of blunting someone’s teeth to mean dulling the sharpness of someone’s words. The parent’s response of telling the evil son that he would not have been saved from Egypt serves to turn the evil son’s disconnect from his Jewish community against him, and thus dull the blow of the evil son’s words. Next, the account of the innocent son remains consistent with the biblical verses. Finally, the account of the son who does

8 The Sefaria Edition translation
not know how to ask includes some alterations from the biblical text by explicitly stating that the parent should begin the conversation on behalf of the child.

**Passover Haggadah Graphic Novel**

The remainder of this chapter will focus on how multiple modern Haggadot tackle the four children. I will first be dealing with the *Passover Haggadah Graphic Novel* (2019), created and written by former editor at DC comics, Jordan B. Gorfinkel and illustrated by Erez Zadok, with translations by David Olivestone. The Haggadah is framed as “connecting a new generation to our living history by illustrating the fully unabridged authentic text in the sequential storytelling style of comics – a Jewish innovation, you know” (Gorfinkel, 3). This therefore situates the target audience as young Jewish community members who are learning more about the tradition. In order to appeal to this audience, the Haggadah features a graphic novel style, with the original Hebrew of the Haggadah on the right page, and a fully illustrated comic book page on the left. The comic book pages explain in English what is going on at this point in the Seder in a narrative and easy to understand style. I have included images of the pages I will be discussing at the end of this section.

The Haggadah’s description of the four children begins on page 32 with the text from the traditional Haggadah. Page 33 showcases the Haggadah’s first illustration in reference to the four children. The image is a silhouette of a face, with representations of each of the four children inside of it. Each of the representative images and text is inside its own circle, and the circles overlap in a way that resembles a venn diagram. Perhaps the fact that the images are overlapping in the manner of a venn diagram, and that they are all held within the silhouette of one child suggests that the artist, Erez Zadok, interprets the four children as representing qualities that are present in every child. This interpretation would be in agreement with Hendel, who interprets the
four children as “not four real people but rather four extremes or four ideals. In the real world no particular child is ever exactly like one of these four sons. Rather, each child is a mixture of these four extremes” (Hendel, 94). To further this interpretation, the images representing each category are placed in such a way that each category is opposite the category that would be seen as being on the other end of the spectrum. The astute child is opposite the child who cannot even put thoughts into words, and the innocent child is opposite the rebellious child. This presents the children as representing extreme ends of two spectrums – knowledge and willingness to follow the rules.

Before I continue to talk about the Haggadah’s description of each of the children, I would like to point out the terms the Haggadah uses to refer to each child. Instead of using the term “wise,” the Haggadah calls this child “astute.” To me, the term “astute” implies a level of academic wisdom and “book smarts,” whereas the term “wise” can apply to life both in and beyond the academic realm. The Haggadah depicts this academically focused astuteness on page 33, by associating the astute child with images of an open book of the talmud, a bookshelf covered in books, and a telescope pointed toward the moon – thus showing that this child takes their studies quite seriously. Next to this depiction is the depiction of the “rebellious” child. I find that the use of the term “rebellious” implies that this child is actively choosing to be rebellious, as opposed to wickedness, which I view as more of an inherent quality. Rebelliousness is something one chooses to possess. This Haggadah’s depiction of the rebellious child showcases the same room that represents the astute child. However the rebellious room is completely destroyed. Pages of the talmud are ripped up and floating in the air, with the bookcase toppled to the ground and books strewn everywhere. The telescope has been knocked off its legs, and is facing toward a fiery scene outside the window. As for the next child, the Haggadah uses the
term “innocent” to describe the simple child. Whereas the term “rebellious” represents some form of action on the part of the child, the term “innocent” is somewhat of an inherent quality. This child is represented by a scene of a pony surrounded by a serene meadow. It is as if this image is in a completely different world than that of the astute and rebellious children, which could represent the innocent child’s lack of positive or negative connection to the Jewish tradition. The final child is given the title of the child who “cannot even put thoughts into words.” This title does not describe an action like the name of the rebellious child, but the lack of an action. The child may want to put their thoughts into words, but they do not possess the ability to act on this desire. This child is represented by an image of colors and paint splatters that somewhat resemble an abstract painting of the sea. The child’s thoughts cannot be put into words, and therefore they cannot be represented by a concrete image.

On the following pages, the Haggadah outlines the question and answer to each of the four children. Of particular interest to me is this Haggadah’s treatment of the rebellious child on page 37. This child is first depicted as shattering his plate, and swatting away numerous Passover foods. The child then slams the door to his room while shouting, “why do you have to go through all this ritual?” (Gorfinkel, 37). The child’s father suggests the child’s mother “startle” the child, and she proceeds to tell the child that “had he been there…he would not have been rescued” (Gorfinkel, 37). While this does follow the text of the haggadah closely, the images accompanying the words are quite jarring. The bottom of page 37 showcases an image of the child crying while being roughly held back by two large Egyptian men who are keeping the child from entering the split sea with the rest of the Israelites. This image depicts a unique side of the rebellious child – a sense of grief at not being able to be a part of the Jewish people. The child is seen crying out in agony at not being able to join the Israelites in crossing the sea, and wants to
escape the Egyptians’ grasps. When it truly matters, the rebellious child wants to come closer to his Jewish community, but is being held back from doing so. This sentiment is furthered on the next page of graphics, page 39, which begins with the child returning to the table with his mother’s arm wrapped around him. The child, despite being rebellious and distancing himself from his Jewish heritage, comes to find it again through the startling remarks of his mother. The child realizes that he would like to participate in the tradition after getting a glimpse at what it would have looked like had he not been rescued from Egypt.

The Passover Haggadah Graphic Novel certainly has a particular interpretation of the Haggadah’s section on the four children. It seems as though this Haggadah has a strong disdain for the rebellious child. This Haggadah also seems to agree with Hendel on the idea that the four children represent four extremes that inhabit every child, rather than representing four particular children. This is evidenced by the initial image depicting the four children, in which all four representative graphics are depicted within the silhouette of one child. Is it interesting to look at this Haggadah’s purpose and intent in relation to the way it customizes the story of the four children to meet these intentions. As mentioned in the introduction to this Haggadah, its purpose is to appeal to a young audience and get them interested in engaging with the Jewish tradition. This could be the answer as to why the creators of this Haggadah emphasize their opposition to the rebellious child so strongly. The Haggadah is meant to present how important it is to engage with the Jewish tradition as a young person. Therefore, the disengaged rebellious child represents the antithesis of the Haggadah’s message. Perhaps, since the Haggadah also implies that the four children each represent character traits that are present in each child to varying degrees, the Haggadah’s treatment of the rebellious child is meant to convince the young people reading the Haggadah to quiet the rebellious part of their minds. In encouraging a young audience to engage
with the tradition, the Haggadah also seeks to discourage any thoughts of disengaging with the tradition. Personally, I do not believe that this is the most effective tactic for engaging a young Jewish audience who is new to learning about the traditions. Nevertheless, the creators of this Haggadah believed it was necessary to take these creative liberties in order to further their message.
The Wandering is Over Haggadah: Including Women’s Voices

The Wandering is Over Haggadah: Including Women’s Voices, was created in 2011 through a partnership between the Jewish Women’s Archive (JWA) and JewishBoston.com. The creators of the Haggadah contextualize its purpose by including a note preceding the text of the Haggadah. One key element of this note states: “There’s really no one right way to celebrate Passover. The important thing is to explore the story, raise questions, and share the experience with others.” (Jewish Women’s Archive, 2) This aligns with some of the themes that have come up throughout this thesis, namely the theme of asking questions, and of there being many ways to practice the Seder. The creators of the Haggadah further state their intentions by saying, “The
Jewish Women’s Archive (JWA) is devoted to making known the stories, struggles, and achievements of Jewish women in North America. Weaving women’s words and stories throughout this Haggadah will enrich your understanding of the past and help ensure a more inclusive future.” (JWA, 2) This note makes it clear that this Haggadah is intended to go beyond the typical Haggadah by including stories and wisdom that focuses specifically on Jewish women.

The Haggadah has two sections portraying the four children. The first section is similar to that of a typical traditional Haggadah, and the second focuses on four daughters whose descriptions differ from those of a typical Haggadah. I will first look at this Haggadah’s interpretation of the four children. The section begins on page 11 with a prologue stating:

As we tell the story, we think about it from all angles. Our tradition speaks of four different types of children who might react differently to the Passover seder. It is our job to make our story accessible to all the members of our community, so we think about how we might best reach each type of child (JWA, 11).

This shares the Haggadah’s commitment to treating each of the descriptions of the four children not as a judgment on the child, but as an indication of what type of learner they are. This could potentially be seen as a departure from the typical Haggadah’s apparent judgements on each of the four children. I view this Haggadah’s statement as being tied closely to the idea that “in every generation one must see themself as if they had personally left Egypt.” In order for the four children to see themselves as though they had personally left Egypt, they need to be brought into the story and tradition by means of the learning styles that work for them. This Haggadah’s emphasis on making “our story accessible to all the members of our community” is also part of what it means to ensure that every generation feels connected to the story (JWA, 11).
including women’s voices, the creators of this Haggadah seek to create a future where women see themselves as an integral part of the Jewish history that is talked about at the Seder. The Haggadah is not passive about the childrens’ education, but frames it as “our job” to ensure that the story is accessible to each of these children, regardless of their learning style. Only when the Haggadah is accessible will each generation be able to “see themself as if they had personally left Egypt.”

Following the introductory statement, the Haggadah proceeds to provide the account of the four children in a fairly typical manner. The children are deemed “wise,” “wicked,” “simple,” and “the child who doesn’t know how to ask a question.” (JWA, 11) The section on the four children ends with a question posed to the Seder participants: “Do you see yourself in any of these children? At times we all approach different situations like each of these children. How do we relate to each of them?” (JWA, 11). Including this question makes the Seder more interactive, and allows the participants to put themselves in the shoes of the four children. This invitation to empathize with and explore the identities of the four children furthers Hendal’s point that the four children are representative of different learning styles which can be exhibited by any learner of any age.

The Haggadah also contains a section called “The Four Daughters,” which draws on the typical four children, but through a feminist lens. The text of the first daughter, the wise daughter, is as follows:
Wise Daughter

The Wise daughter understands that not everything is as it appears.

She is the one who speaks up, confident that her opinion counts. She is the one who can take the tradition and ritual that is placed before her, turn it over and over, and find personal meaning in it. She is the one who can find the secrets in the empty spaces between the letters of the Torah.

She is the one who claims a place for herself even if the men do not make room for her.

Some call her wise and accepting. We call her creative and assertive. We welcome creativity and assertiveness to sit with us at our tables and inspire us to act.

JWA, 12

This daughter is framed as being confident. Her wisdom comes from her interest in the Jewish tradition and ritual, and her strong ability to study it. The wise child being associated with a love for the Jewish tradition is a common interpretation, as we have seen in prior sections of this chapter. What this Haggadah’s interpretation adds is the wise daughter’s willingness to assert herself because of her love for the Jewish tradition. It also adds an element of creativity in her interpretations of the traditions and ritual. Despite not always feeling included in the Jewish tradition, the wise daughter does not let this deter her from it. Instead, she “claims a place for herself” as a part of a tradition that she loves.

The text of the wicked daughter is written as follows:
**Wicked Daughter**

The Wicked daughter is the one who dares to challenge the simplistic answers she has been given.

She is the one who asks too many questions. She is the one not content to remain in her prescribed place. She is the one who breaks the mold. She is the one who challenges the status quo.

Some call her wicked and rebellious. We call her daring and courageous. We welcome rebellion to sit with us at our tables and make us uneasy.

JWA, 12

Interestingly, this daughter is not painted in a negative light as typical interpretations of the wicked child do. Instead this daughter is a freedom fighter, who refuses to uphold the status quo. Her wickedness and rebelliousness is not a bad thing, but something that allows her to challenge the things that do not make sense to her. While some might view the wicked daughter as wicked because she breaks from societal norms, others would view this as a noble act to expand beyond oppressive societal norms. Especially within the context of this Haggadah, which is centered on uplifting women’s voices, the wicked daughter would surely be seen as someone who is fighting against a society that has tried to dim her light. In this Haggadah, the wise daughter and the wicked daughter are described using similar sentiments.

Next is the simple daughter:
Simple Daughter

The Simple daughter is the one who accepts what she is given without asking for more. She is the one who trusts easily and believes what she is told. She is the one who prefers waiting and watching over seeking and acting. She is the one who believes that the redemption from Egypt was the final act of freedom. She is the one who follows in the footsteps of others.

Some call her simple and naive. We call her the one whose eyes are yet to be opened. We welcome the contented one to sit with us at our tables and appreciate what will is still to come.

JWA, 12-13

The simple daughter is not painted in a particularly positive light by this Haggadah. She is seen as taking what is given to her and not questioning the norms, as her rebellious counterpart does. Contrary to the rebellious daughter, the simple daughter’s way of navigating the world does need to be challenged. The simple daughter is stuck in a mindset that must be changed if she is to be seen in a positive light. This can be seen in language like “eyes are yet to be opened” and “appreciate what is still to come” (JWA, 13). This Haggadah is not comfortable with the simple daughter in her current state. She must ascend her current state by having her eyes opened to the world.

Finally, the daughter who does not know how to ask is presented in this way:
Daughter Who Does Not Know How to Ask

Last is the daughter who does not know how to ask.

She is one who obeys and does not question. She is the one who has accepted men’s definitions of the world. She is the one who has not found her own voice. She is the one who is content to be invisible.

Some call her subservient and oppressed. We call her our sister. We welcome the silent one to sit with us at our tables and experience a community that welcomes the voices of women.

JWA, 13

The daughter who does not know how to ask is also painted in a negative light, perhaps even more so than the simple daughter. This is consistent with the overarching Jewish views on the importance of asking questions, which I have discussed earlier in this chapter. To the creators of this Haggadah, the inability to ask a question renders a woman complicit in their own oppression. Not being able to ask questions means that this daughter is not able to question the systems that are oppressing her. While the Haggadah denies calling this daughter “subservient and oppressed,” the description of the daughter who does not know how to ask does strongly imply that the writer of this passage sees this daughter as subservient and oppressed, using words such as “obeys” and “invisible” (JWA, 13). As opposed to the simple daughter, the daughter who is unable to ask questions is somewhat of a lost cause. Her description comes with little hope for her changing in the future. The only hope this passage presents is that she is able to “experience a community that welcomes the voices of women” (JWA, 13). Perhaps in saying this, the creators of the Haggadah hope that this daughter will learn to be able to ask questions by witnessing a community of other women who are empowered to do so.
The two daughters that are portrayed by this Haggadah in the most positive light are the two daughters who feel comfortable challenging the norms – the wise daughter because she is confident in her ability to comprehend and thus challenge the tradition, and the rebellious daughter because challenging the norms is a part of her nature. The simple daughter and the daughter who does not know how to ask are seen as projects who need to be changed in order to actively participate in the fight against oppression. They are seen as complicit in their own oppression by failing to adequately question the systems that oppress them. It is clear that the creators of this Haggadah seek to uplift the voices of those who are seen as outspoken, and feel a sense of contempt toward those who are quieter in their womanhood. For a Haggadah that is meant to include women’s voices in the tradition, I do not believe that shaming the simple daughter and the daughter who does not know how to ask is the right approach. This Haggadah seems to ignore the potential for change or improvement, while also implying that the simple daughter and the daughter who does not know how to ask must become more outspoken in their womanhood in order to be respected.

By adding an entirely new section to the four children, the four daughters, this Haggadah takes full advantage of the ability to customize the Seder to meet the needs of the Haggadah’s creators. The creators of this Haggadah seem to have seen a gap in the Seder tradition – that the typical Seder does not take into account women's experiences. It seems as though shedding light on women’s experiences is the key to keeping the tradition alive, according to this Haggadah’s authors. The creators of this Haggadah are grappling with the need to see a shift in the way the Jewish tradition is portrayed. The authors are hoping to be part of a “more inclusive future,” a future that needs to center and acknowledge women’s experiences in the Jewish tradition. Therefore, if the section on the four children is the life force of the Seder, then a section
specifically addressing four daughters is integral in order to keep the tradition relevant and alive. Creating an inclusive Jewish future requires one to break away from the previous norms of the Jewish tradition, and remake the tradition to serve more inclusive narratives. This Haggadah’s description of the wicked daughter is doing just that – questioning the norms around her, and daring to create a world that goes beyond the stifling status quo.

The Family Participation Haggadah: A Different Night

The final Haggadah I will be using to discuss modern interpretations of the four children is The Family Participation Haggadah: A Different Night by Noam Zion and David Dishon. The Haggadah was originally published in 1997, and later revised in 2015. In the framing of this Haggadah, the authors explain, “Our Haggadah facilitates a seder that is an educational dialogue between a parent and a child, leader and participant. A Different Night offers stories and readings as well as commentaries and activities that can fuel a dynamic evening of storytelling and discussion, dramas, and singing…We have assembled many artistic portrayals of the Four Children to encourage comparison and debate” (Dishon, Zion, 3). The Haggadah was built specifically to address the themes of this chapter – how to facilitate an intergenerational dialogue between the parent and the child. The statement of intention even takes particular care to note the Haggadah’s section on the four children. The back cover of the Haggadah also features an emphasis on the four children, with a heading saying “A Haggadah for the Four Children in Each of Us” (Dishon, Zion, Back Cover). Needless to say, this Haggadah focuses heavily on the four children, with pages 56-71 dedicated entirely to the topic.

In addition to speaking about the role of the four children themselves, the Haggadah focuses on the parents of the children. At the beginning of the section on the four children, the Haggadah speaks about the importance of a mutual dialogue between the parent and the child,
saying “the rabbis turn the commandment of ‘ve-heegadta’ (you shall tell) into a mitzvah of dialogue – with give and take on both sides. Successful dialogue means that each side, and especially the side anxious to ‘pass on the message,’ be keenly attentive to what the other is saying and feeling – to the particular personality and his or her needs” (Dishon, Zion, 56). The quote’s reference to “the side anxious to ‘pass on the message’” is referring to the parents who eagerly use the Seder as a way of fulfilling the commandment to tell their children about the Exodus (Dishon, Zion, 56). As opposed to the other modern interpretations of the four children, this quote emphasizes the importance of the interaction between parent and child going both ways. The child is not the only one who is responsible for the interaction’s success or lack thereof. Just as the child may begin the interaction with curiosity, the parent has to be equally committed to being attentive to their child and meeting their child’s educational needs. The Haggadah further emphasizes the importance of the parent in guiding the interaction, saying “here lies a dangerous pitfall for the parent educator. The leader of the seder is likely to concentrate on the text of the Haggadah without sufficiently taking into consideration the audience – the younger generation – and their level of interest. Absorbed with the sales pitch, the salesperson often forgets their audience” (Dishon, Zion, 57). Once again, the authors of this Haggadah emphasize the importance of how the parent interacts with their child. The parent cannot get lost in the thrill of telling the Passover story, and must be sure to take into account how the story is being received by the children for whom the story is meant. Lastly, and perhaps most strikingly, the Haggadah states, “Now in our days no child is identified as ‘the offspring of the parent’ and often the parent is identified as ‘the parent of that child.’ We have arrived at an era not of patriarchy or matriarchy but the rule of children. In our age it is then miraculous that our dear, delightful children don't divide us up and categorize us” (Dishon, Zion, 57). This quote
suggests parental responsibility on a new level. Not only is the parent responsible for listening to their child and engaging them based on what suits their needs, but the labels afforded to the children are seen as being more descriptive of the parent’s parenting style than the personality traits of the child. This flips the idea of the four children on its head, and requires the parents to think more closely about the labels given to their children. Perhaps, this suggestion is meant to make parents reflect on the role they play in nurturing their children to fall under a particular label. It is clear that the creators of this Haggadah view the parent’s responsibility as integral to the identities of the four children.

This Haggadah also discusses the four children separately from their parents. This Haggadah is the only one analyzed in this chapter that does not paint the wise child in a completely positive light. On page 59, there is a debate on whether the wise child should be considered a “smart alec.” Don Isaac Abrabanel argues that the wise child is a smart alec. The way the child poses their question, Abrabanel argues, shows that “this ‘wise-guy’ child is arrogant in his ‘wisdom.’ He shows off the distinctions he can make between types of mitzvot… Let the ‘smart-alec’ who appears wise in his own eyes see that there is still much for him to learn” (Dishon, Zion, 59). Abrabanel makes the case that the specificity of the wise child’s question is a tactic used by the child to make themself seem astute, while not also recognizing that they have so much left to learn. Israel Eldad argues the contrary, saying “No! The wise child does not derive his title from the pretense to know-it-all. One who thinks he possesses wisdom already, does not ask at all” (Dishon, Zion, 59). Eldad argues that the wise child is not a know-it-all because if they presumed to know it all, they would not have asked a question in the first place. I disagree with Eldad’s argument, as I believe that it is certainly possible for someone to ask a question with the purpose of showing off their knowledge. The Haggadah brings forward
a final commentary on the matter, which comes from The Chasidic Seer of Lublin – “In my judgment, it is better to be a wicked person who knows he is wicked, than a righteous one who knows that he is righteous” (Dishon, Zion, 59). While this comment does not take a definitive stance on whether the wise child is a know-it-all, it does emphasize the importance of the discussion. If the wise child is truly a know-it-all, The Chasidic Seer of Lublin’s comments should be taken into account when constructing a plan for how to teach the wise child about the Exodus.

One significant factor of this Haggadah’s discussion around the wise child, is that it puts people from different time periods and walks of life in conversation with one another. The Haggadah draws from past and current discussions on the topic, thus rooting modern conversation as a part of the long history of the tradition. In doing this, the creators of the Haggadah add modern ideas on top of a tradition that is still deeply rooted in the past. In my opinion, this represents an important element of this thesis’ discussion of change in relation to tradition. While changing the tradition is part of how one can ensure the tradition’s longevity, in order for something to be traditional it must maintain ties with past iterations of the tradition.

The Haggadah also invites conversation surrounding the wicked child, and implies that the term “wicked” might perhaps be too harsh a title for the behavior the wicked child exhibits. The Haggadah questions whether a child should be considered wicked for feeling alienated from the tradition. To express this sentiment, the authors of the Haggadah state:

The wicked child expresses a sense of alienation from our Jewish heritage. In this age of liberalism and democracy, of pluralistic tolerance for many cultural expressions, should a person who expresses such a feeling be condemned as ‘wicked’ or ‘evil’? Hold a brief discussion on the topic. Would a different characterization be more appropriate to our
contemporary sensibilities? Is setting his teeth on edge the best strategy to deal with such
a person? (Dishon, Zion, 59).

The creators of the Haggadah clearly felt a sense of discomfort toward equating alienation with
wickedness. Instead of seeing this child as being wicked because they have alienated themself,
this Haggadah frames the child as simply feeling alienated from the tradition. The Haggadah
purposefully does not frame this child’s alienation as self inflicted, but a feeling that could have
come from anywhere. After all, there must be a reason why the child feels alienated that does not
come solely from within themself. Using this framework for thinking about the child, the
Haggadah questions the idea that the alienated child should be seen as wicked or evil. Not only
does this Haggadah question how the child is characterized, but it also questions the strategies
that the typical Haggadah gives for dealing with this child. The creators of this Haggadah want
the Seder participants to think deeply about the wicked child’s sense of alienation, and the best
strategies for addressing this alienation. These questions leave space for the Seder participants to
possibly view the wicked child in a more compassionate light.

The Haggadah’s written section on the four children ends with a message about
intergenerational dialogue – “Invite the seder participants to discuss the following: What are the
generational gaps among us, the participants of tonight’s seder? go around the table and have
people relate a particular experience connected with their generation which might be difficult for
a person of a different generation to comprehend” (Dishon, Zion, 61). This message connects the
Haggadah back to the idea of intergenerational dialogue about the Exodus, which is the main
purpose of the Seder. The quote’s place in the four children section serves as a reminder that the
discussion of the four children is ultimately a discussion on how children of different learning
styles relate to the idea of intergenerational dialogue. The invitation to discuss generational
specific experiences and difficulties after having just talked about the four children further encourages the Seder participants to view the difficulties of the four children as reflections of their own difficulties. This sharing exercise is ultimately an exercise in empathy and finding the humanity in people who are different from oneself. Despite what generation each of the Seder participants is in, everyone will have unique difficulties to share about their experiences. Just as each of the four children learns in a different way, each of these generational differences and difficulties makes for a different way of approaching intergenerational dialogue. Ultimately, these generational differences may make for vastly different life experiences, but all generations are tied together by the Passover story. Each generation and individual person might need to be taught this story slightly differently, but it is the job of the older generation to ensure that the younger generation gets to experience the story “as though they personally left Egypt.”

Not only does this Haggadah customize the account of the four children to meet the intentions of the Haggadah, but it also explicitly presents new arguments which add to the long chain of written dialogue pertaining to the Seder. Since the Haggadah is focused on intergenerational dialogue, the text is customized to reflect the thought processes of multiple generations, as opposed to just the youngest generation. The Haggadah compiles modern discussions about the four children, and places them alongside discussions set forth by the Mishnah. In an almost talmudic fashion, the readers of the Haggadah can read the original texts, and follow a modern string of discussion and argument about these texts. This Haggadah calls into question multiple norms set forth by the Mishnah in regard to the four children. The compilers present arguments that could serve to invalidate the wise child, and arguments that question the wicked child’s harsh treatment. The Haggadah also subverts the idea that the focus of the four children should be entirely on the children, and suggests that older generations have
much to learn from the account as well. It is clear that the authors of the Haggadah strove to create an account of the four children that situated the story within a modern context. Through adapting and expanding on the four children to be a more well rounded conversation, the tradition remains alive and relevant in the modern day.

**Concluding Thoughts**

The account of the four children is the life force of the Haggadah. It gives insight into how one is meant to perform the biblical imperative of telling one’s children about the Exodus, and it sets forth a number of ways to share the Exodus story with the younger generation in a manner that will suit the needs of the child one is trying to reach. Ultimately, the account of the four children is focused on keeping the chain of tradition alive – how can one encourage their children to continue the tradition of passing down the story of the Exodus from generation to generation?

Each of the Haggadot analyzed in this section has its own set of intentions and thought processes on how to approach the idea of the four children. In a way, each Haggadah’s treatment of the four children is a commentary on what the creators of the Haggadah view as being the driving force that keeps the Seder tradition alive. The Passover Haggadah Graphic Novel, in its poor treatment of the rebellious child, and it’s intention to create a fun way to engage younger members of the Jewish community, frames the engagement of young audiences as the key to keeping the tradition alive. Getting young people interested in the tradition is how the chain of tradition continues. The Wandering is Over Haggadah: Including Women’s Voices, has a different take on the matter. It seems that this Haggadah views including women’s voices as the key to keeping the tradition alive. According to this Haggadah, women have to see themselves represented in the tradition in order for the tradition to survive and thrive. This is why this
Haggadah has a section specifically focused on four daughters. *The Family Participation Haggadah: A Different Night* views intergenerational dialogue as the key to keeping the tradition alive. This Haggadah does not only focus on the children’s qualities, but on how the parent can best facilitate a good conversation with the child. Intergenerational dialogue, in this Haggadah, is viewed as a two way street. To the creators of this Haggadah, the key to keeping the tradition alive is for generations to learn from one another, as opposed to older generations only educating the younger generations.

Customizing the concept of four children comes down to how each Haggadah creator believes the tradition can remain alive and relevant. Ultimately, the responsibility to pass on the Exodus story will be in the hands of the younger generations as they grow old. It is up to the older generations to make the story feel worthy of continuing to be passed down. In my opinion, the framing of the four children does need to shift slightly away from it’s Mishnahic framework in order for it to grow with the newer generations of Jewish people. While the Mishnah’s tactic of scaring and shaming the wicked child may have been the best course of action during the time when the Mishnah was compiled, I believe that this does not sit well in our modern context. I appreciate the ways in which *The Family Participation Haggadah* calls attention to the estrangement of the wicked child, and I hope/foresee that this will become the predominant framework used when discussing the four children. In my opinion, the best way to keep modern generations of Jews engaged with the tradition is by treating them with respect, as they are the future stewards of the Jewish tradition.

**Conclusion**

From this thesis, it is clear that the Haggadah is inherently customizable. I have established this by discussing the origins of the Seder, and by discussing three modern day
examples of this customization via multiple iterations of the Haggada’s section on the four children, which I consider to be the life force of the Haggadah. Part of this customization means that new Haggadot can be made to meet the needs of whoever is creating them. After these Haggadot are made, however, the responsibility of deciding which Haggadah is used during a particular Seder is left up to the leader of that Seder. The intent of a Haggadah and the ways in which it is customized to fit the creators’ intentions only matter to a certain degree when the Seder is actually performed. The eventual performance of the Seder, while it may be guided by one of these Haggadot, is in the hands of the Seder leader and the participants in the Seder. Each Seder is ephemeral. There will only be one like it, with that particular group of people during that particular historical moment. Even when the text of a particular Haggadah is used, each time it is used, it’s meaning morphs and changes based on the people receiving and interpreting it. This adds an additional layer of customization to the Seder. The ideas of the customized Haggadah get filtered through the minds of the Seder participants, thus creating an entirely unique experience that will only exist in that particular moment.

This customization is what has allowed generation after generation to connect with the ritual and see its relevance during the dramatically different time periods in which it has been performed throughout history. In other words, this customization and innovation is what keeps the Seder tradition alive. Relevance is a key part of the Seder, as it is a key factor that influences those who are deciding whether or not to continue to pass the tradition down. One of the Seder’s central purposes, which I have discussed extensively in my second chapter, is to tell the Exodus story to the younger generation. The younger generation’s engagement with and willingness to pass down the story is not a given. They need to be convinced that the Exodus story, and the Jewish tradition as a whole, is worthy of being passed down. Therefore, part of keeping the
tradition alive is finding new and innovative ways to engage this younger audience! Part of this could be by changing the content of Seder itself to meet the younger generation’s needs, or perhaps the medium and delivery of the Seder can adapt to engage a wider, young audience. In some circumstances, customizing the Seder may be the only option to keep the tradition relevant to a younger generation. Not only is the younger generation an integral part of extending the chain of tradition, but the tradition’s roots in the past must also be firmly planted in order to maintain a sense of continuity with previous tradition. Finding a balance between past precedent and adapting the traditions to fit modern contexts and audiences is, in my opinion, the most effective way to ensure that the tradition persists.

To conclude, I would like to talk about a Seder that I feel exemplifies the many themes I have been discussing in this thesis. Saturday Night Seder (SNS) was uploaded to the BuzzFeed Tasty YouTube channel on April 11, 2020. The Seder, featuring many celebrity guests, was a fundraiser for the CDC amidst the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic. Originally taking place on the fourth night of Passover, SNS is far from being a traditional Passover Seder. It does not follow the traditional order of the Seder, but rather opts for an order that makes sense for theatrical and entertainment purposes. However, SNS’s unconventional order does not detract from its meaning and purpose. SNS was created by artists who, like all of us, were grieving the loss of normalcy during the Covid-19 pandemic. The Seder was meant to bring about a sense of community during a holiday that is focused on bringing people together through storytelling. In my opinion, SNS succeeded in its objective.

The comments section on the video is a good indicator of the Seder’s success. Some of the top comments include: “I’m not even Jewish but this is the energy I needed tonight” from user @sydneyraechin9064, “I feel so utterly deeply connected to my Jewish mishpocha in this
moment...I'm in tears…” from user @Coin945, “I am 70. And I have become that lonely lady. Only for me it’s the problem of having no one to even Zoom Seder. So MANY THANKS! To the creative, superlative performers who wrote and performed. And also to ALL of the many commenters who welcomed this beautiful expression of Jewish tradition. Your warmth made all the difference for me.” from user @msherry0176 and “CAN WE HAVE THIS LIKE EVERY YEAR PLEASE!?” from user @RachelWolman. It is clear from these comments and the many others like them, that SNS succeeded in creating community and providing a moment of catharsis during the difficult early days of the Covid-19 pandemic. I believe that SNS’s success can be attributed to some of the themes I have discussed in this thesis.

Firstly, the creators of SNS were aware of and adapted to the historical moment that was happening at the time. In the face of not being able to perform the Seder in person, the creators of SNS opted for an online format so that the Seder could still happen. To me, this is reminiscent of the types of shifts that needed to occur in order for the Seder itself to be created. The destruction of the temple meant that people could no longer celebrate Passover there, meaning they needed to find an alternative. The solution became the Seder – a domestic, communal practice. The circumstances of SNS also created the necessity for the Jewish community to rethink how to practice the Passover traditions. When communal gathering, one of the essential components of the Seder, is not an option, how do we practice the Seder? The Covid-19 pandemic forced the already spread out and domestic tradition of the Seder to an even further extreme. People needed to remain in domestic bubbles, which in some cases meant that individuals were stuck by themselves. SNS was able to adapt to these circumstances by using technological resources in order to create a Seder that one did not need to be physically present
This allowed the tradition to continue to be practiced, despite circumstances that did not allow for the Seder to be practiced in the ways it had come to be practiced, prior to the pandemic.

Not only did the use of technology allow for the Seder to be practiced amidst limiting historical circumstances, but it allowed for the SNS to create community among a wide audience. Because the Seder was posted on the *Buzzfeed Tasty* YouTube channel, it reached an audience beyond those who would have been seeking the Seder out. In a phenomenon that feels unique to online Seders of this nature, it was possible for Jews and non-Jews alike to stumble upon SNS due to an algorithm, and continue watching out of curiosity and intrigue. The Seder had the power to reach people who may not have been seeking community through the Seder, but who needed that community more than ever during times of hardship. Ultimately, this is what the Seder, in general, is for. It is for being in community with others to reflect on hardship and liberation from difficult circumstances. Those who participated in SNS during Covid-19 had a deeply real relationship with the theme of feeling “as though they personally left Egypt.” During this period of isolation, the Covid-19 pandemic was the Mitzrayim of its time. SNS was a cry for help and liberation from life altering circumstances – the collective trauma of living through a pandemic. SNS was an opportunity to both connect with others who were going through the modern collective trauma of the pandemic, while connecting with the Jewish ancestors who persisted through their own oppressive circumstances. In creating the Seder during the pandemic, SNS connected the modern Jewish community with one another, and with the Jewish ancestors.

As seen by the comments section on the video, SNS truly struck a chord with it’s viewers. By tying together the modern issues with the Passover story, and utilizing the amazing talents of theater and film celebrities, SNS was able to create a unique sense of relevance for the Seder. This Seder was not just a ritual that took place because tradition mandated it. Instead, SNS was a
tool through which a community of people could attempt to grapple with the loneliness, fear and isolation of the pandemic. In finding meaning in the Seder through the lens of the pandemic, the Seder tradition was kept alive.

The themes of the Seder are incredibly powerful. Some of the themes that I have discussed in this thesis have included grappling with oppressive circumstances, which I have showcased in my discussion of the origins of the Seder, and hope for the future, which is one of the dominating themes of my chapter on the four children. Tying together the meaning of these historical themes within modern circumstances is what keeps the Seder tradition alive. To me, the account of the four children is not only about adapting to meet the educational needs of different types of students, but it is about remembering that the long-lasting tradition will cease to exist if there is nobody who is willing or able to pass it on. Therefore, in addition to catering toward the needs of each of the four children, so that they are equipped to learn the Passover story, it is every generation’s responsibility to ensure that the Passover traditions are ones that the younger generations will want to pass down. Those who originally created the Seder did not have to create this new ritual. However, there was something that compelled them to do so. This reason could have been similar to the reason why SNS was created – to find community during tumultuous times. Or, perhaps the rabbis yearned for a ritual that would make them feel more connected to the Passover holiday. Regardless of what their reasoning was, there was something that made the compilers of the Seder want to create the ritual. In creating the ritual, the rabbis were the first link in an intergenerational chain of passing the tradition down. Now, each generation has to ask itself the question – is this tradition worthy of being kept alive? It is the responsibility of the older generations to create a tradition that the younger generations will find worthy of keeping alive.
This is why I believe it is extremely important to understand the elements of creativity and adaptation when it comes to tradition. In order for every generation to choose to continue passing down the tradition, they must view it as relevant and meaningful. For some, the meaning of passing the tradition down will come from reverence for the tradition, and respect toward one’s ancestors. For others, this meaning will come from how the tradition translates into modern day circumstances. Therefore, we must have the ability to creatively adapt the tradition, so that each generation is able to find meaning in it, amidst ever changing circumstances.

In the case of SNS, the creators of the Seder used the Seder as a vehicle to foster community and hope during the pandemic. They creatively used the resources available to them in order to adapt the tradition to be something that the community desperately needed at the time. I bring up SNS as an example of how one can creatively adapt the tradition to bring new meaning during a particular historical circumstance. As is showcased through SNS, there are so many possibilities for how this creative adaptation can look.

In conclusion, this thesis is about how the Seder tradition came to be, and how it will live on. Passover celebrations originated in the Torah, and originally took the form of a domestic, sacrificial ritual and feast. When the Jerusalem Temple was built, the rituals shifted away from the domestic, and began to take place as a national gathering at the Jerusalem Temple. However, the destruction of the temple brought about the end of the Passover rituals as they had been practiced up until that point. The tradition had to change, or it would cease to exist. From this turning point in Jewish history, the Passover Seder was born. The Seder has ties back to the original Passover rituals, but in a completely new form. Now, as the newest link on the chain of tradition, our generation has as much say in the tradition as the rabbis who compiled the Seder. We could choose to abandon the tradition altogether, or we can continue to pass down the
tradition that was given to us. We could also choose to find creative ways to leave our
generational mark on the tradition that was given to us. Ultimately, the tradition is in our hands,
and it is what we make of it.
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