

THE HAGGADAH IMITATES THE DIVINE

The Passover Haggadah is a spiritual power tool. Its function is to assist us in fulfilling the biblical commandment to recount the Exodus at the Seder and to impart our sacred tradition to future generations. The Haggadah's sources extend back to Mount Sinai, but the first written version was probably composed fourteen to sixteen centuries ago. This commentary argues that the Haggadah we use today was arranged and composed by **Rav Achai Gaon** א"ח, author of the *She'ilotot*, who lived in the 8th century CE, first in Babylonia (Iraq) and later in Northern Israel. We know Rav Achai wrote our Haggadah because he signed his name in it at least twice.

Rav Achai was the master of the Haggadah (a.k.a. the *Baal Haggadah*), as well as a superlative expert in the Torah, Talmud, Midrash and Jewish law. From the intricate patterns he wove into the Haggadah, we see that he was also a mystic. His extraordinary ambition was to emulate his Creator by fashioning his own small creation, the Haggadah, in the image of the Torah and the universe.

Our tradition teaches that when God created the world, He looked into the Torah and used its letters to build heaven and earth. And from what did He assemble the Torah itself? In his introduction to Genesis, the Ramban (Nachmanides) explains that the Torah is comprised of God's holy names, recombined in innumerable, unfathomable ways. In imitation of this Divine plan, the Haggadah was constructed from allusions to sacred names, as well as to biblical verses and their exegesis in the Midrash. And just as every letter in the Torah, and every person, is beloved and indispensable to God, Rav Achai endeavored to make every word and letter of his creation indispensable. The pages ahead present evidence of this from the Haggadah's own text.

THE HAGGADAH IS INDESTRUCTIBLE

The text of Maggid used today is remarkably close to the version shaped by Rav Achai 1,300 years ago. We can say this because of the many patterns and symbols woven into it that remain intact. And impressively, for much of that time, the Haggadah was not preserved only by elite scholars or trained scribes (like a Torah scroll), but by ordinary people who received it from their parents and passed it on to their children over centuries of Passover Seders. So it isn't the Haggadah that's indestructible, but the community responsible for its faithful transmission. Tonight, it's our turn.

ALL IN ONE VERSE

The source of the commandment to recount the Exodus on Seder night is a single verse:

וְהַגַּדְתָּ לְבִנְךָ | בַּיּוֹם הַהוּא לֵאמֹר | בַּעֲבוּר זֶה | עָשָׂה יְהוָה | לִי בְצֵאתִי מִמִּצְרַיִם
Tell your child | on that day saying | for this | the Lord did | for me as I went out of Egypt

These twelve words from Exodus 13:8 were later elaborated into about ninety words of instruction in the Mishnah, the concise collection of Jewish oral law compiled by Rabbi Yehudah HaNasi around 200 CE. The Mishnah's instructions are the basis for the approximately 1,600 words of Maggid, the section of the Haggadah that recounts the Exodus. Maggid's different sections also correspond to different phrases in the verse.

A major theme of the Haggadah is personal gratitude: God redeeming *us*—not only our ancestors—from Egypt. This is encapsulated in the last five words of Ex. 13:8, עָשָׂה ה' לִי בְצֵאתִי מִמִּצְרַיִם, *The Lord did for me as I went out of Egypt*. Rav Achai Gaon amplified this phrase by echoing each of its words fifty-fold in Maggid (from *Ha Lachma Anya* until the end of the concluding blessing). Therefore, fifty words in Maggid refer to deeds God performed for our forefathers (corresponding to עָשָׂה), God's names (in different forms) occur exactly fifty times, terms that personalize the slavery and redemption occur one hundred times (corresponding to the two words לִי בְצֵאתִי), and the word Egypt (not including Egyptians) also occurs exactly fifty times. Thus, a total of two hundred and fifty terms correspond to this five-word phrase.

עָשָׂה	did	50 terms for deeds	250 total words
יהוה	the Lord	50 Names of God	
לי	for me	100 terms personalizing the Exodus	
בְּצֵאתִי	as I went out		
מִמִּצְרַיִם	of Egypt	50 times <i>Egypt</i>	

The number fifty is notably connected to Passover, and its five-fold multiplication is explored at the climax of Maggid. For convenience, the one hundred terms personalizing the Exodus are numbered throughout this Haggadah with the symbol (#). Another valuable word to keep track of is בְּרִיךְ *blessed*, which occurs 18 times, a number particularly associated with blessing. The 18 evocations of blessing in Maggid are numbered thus (#).

FOUR CUPS OF WINE FOR AN UNFINISHED SEDER

The Mishnah instructs us that the four cups of wine, associated with the four main stages of the Seder, are an essential part of the evening. The Midrash¹ records several reasons why we drink four cups of wine on Passover. The most famous explanation connects the four cups to *four expressions of redemption* used to announce the nation's deliverance in Exodus 6:6-7:

Say, therefore, to the children of Israel: I am the Lord. I will *free* (וְהוֹצֵאתִי) you from the labors of the Egyptians and I will *deliver* (וְהוֹצֵלְתִּי) you from their bondage. I will *redeem* (וְגִאֲלֶתִּי) you with an outstretched arm and through extraordinary chastisements. And I will *take* (וְלָקַחְתִּי) you to be My people, and I will be your God.

But notably, there is also a *fifth expression of redemption* in Ex. 6:8, which appears to correspond to the final stage of this process:

And I will *bring* (וְהִבֵּאתִי) you into the land which I swore to give to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, and I will give it to you for a possession, I am the Lord.

Tellingly, most of the other reasons for drinking four cups mentioned in tradition also refer to groups of four that conspicuously omit a fifth member. The unmentioned fifth element is a recurring theme throughout the Haggadah.



¹ Jerusalem Talmud Pesachim 10:1; Bereshit Rabbah 88:5

Revealed Haggadah

MAGGID / מגיד

Raise the matzah

הָא לַחְמַא עֲנִיָּא דִּי אֲכָלוּ אֲבוֹתָנָא בְּאַרְעָא

This is the bread of affliction that our forefathers ate in the land

דְּמִצְרַיִם כָּל דְּכָפִין יִיתִי וְיִכּוֹל כָּל דְּצָרִיד יִיתִי וְיִפְסַח

of Egypt. All who are hungry, come and eat. All who are in need, come and make Passover.

הַשְּׁתָּא הָכָא לְשָׁנָה הַבָּאָה בְּאַרְעָא דִּישְׂרָאֵל הַשְּׁתָּא עַבְדֵּי

Now here, next year in the land of Israel. Now as slaves,

לְשָׁנָה הַבָּאָה בְּנֵי חוֹרִין

next year as free people.

HA LACHMA ANYA: A DISPOSABLE INTRODUCTION FOR A HAGGADAH COMPOSED IN EXILE

Unlike the rest of Maggid and most of Jewish liturgy, the introductory passage, *Ha Lachma Anya*, is written mainly in Aramaic rather than Hebrew. During late antiquity and the Gaonic period, Aramaic was the everyday language of most Jews. *Ha Lachma Anya* is also the only part of Maggid that explicitly mentions the current exile, declaring: *this year we are here, next year in the Land of Israel*.

The exquisite care taken in composing the Haggadah demonstrates that it was not built for the short-term, but with an eye toward the future. This is one likely reason that *Ha Lachma Anya* was written in a common spoken language instead of Hebrew: to mark it for deletion when the Haggadah is updated upon the ultimate redemption.

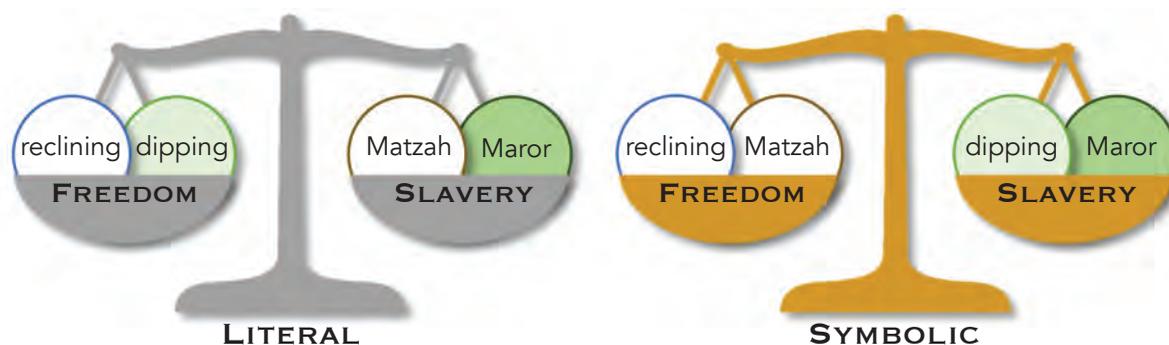
Remove the Seder plate and pour the second cup

מה נשתנה הלילה הזה מכל הלילות

What distinguishes tonight from all other nights?

THE FOUR QUESTIONS: UNWELCOME BALANCE

A common understanding of the Four Questions is that they balance the Seder's dueling themes: freedom versus slavery. The first two questions are about foods associated with slavery and affliction—Matzah and Maror—followed by two questions about practices associated with freedom and comfort—dipping food and reclining. But since Matzah is also a symbol of the redemption, and the Charoset we dip the Maror into symbolizes toil, the four questions balance freedom and slavery in two dimensions at once, *literal* and *symbolic*.



		LITERAL	
		FREEDOM	SLAVERY
SYMBOLIC	FREEDOM	<p>Reclining to eat is <i>literally</i> a free and affluent behavior and <i>symbolizes</i> settling in the Holy Land as free people.</p> <p>Similarly, the roasted meat of the Pesach (Passover) and Chagigah offerings is <i>literally</i> the food of affluence and <i>symbolizes</i> both the redemption from Egypt and the Temple service.</p>	<p>Matzah is <i>literally</i> the bread of poverty but it <i>symbolizes</i> our rapid redemption from Egypt.</p>
	SLAVERY	<p>Dipping one's food in a rich fruit mixture is <i>literally</i> an affluent behavior but the Charoset (and salt water) <i>symbolizes</i> toil and misery.</p>	<p>Maror is <i>literally</i> bitter and also <i>symbolizes</i> the bitterness of slavery.</p>

שֶׁבֶּכֶל הַלַּיְלוֹת אָנוּ אוֹכְלִין חֲמִץ וּמִצָּה

That on all other nights we eat leavened and unleavened bread;

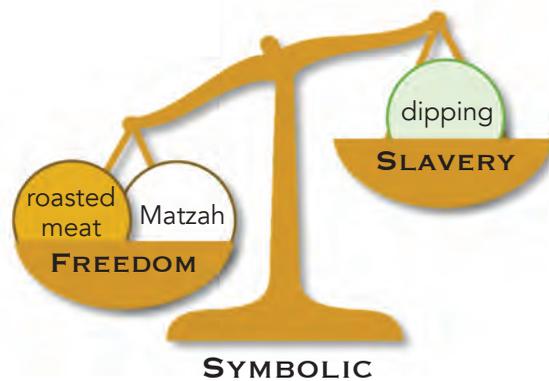
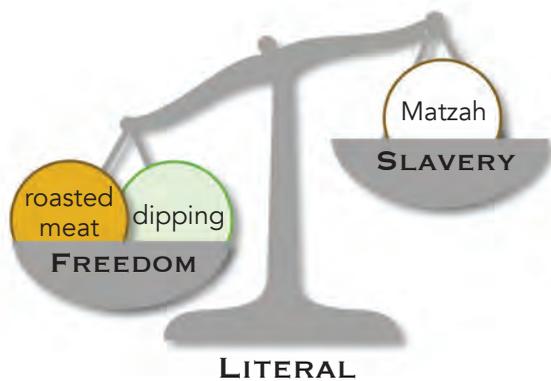
הַלַּיְלָה הַזֶּה כֻּלּוֹ מִצָּה

tonight, all unleavened.

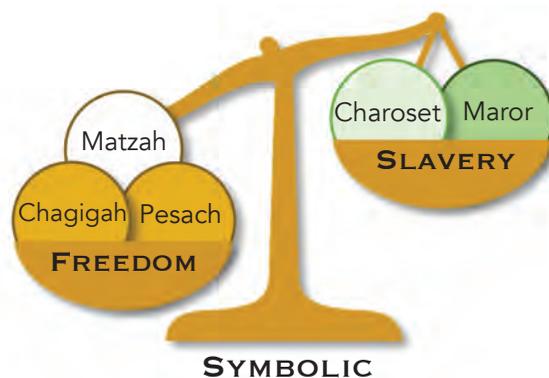
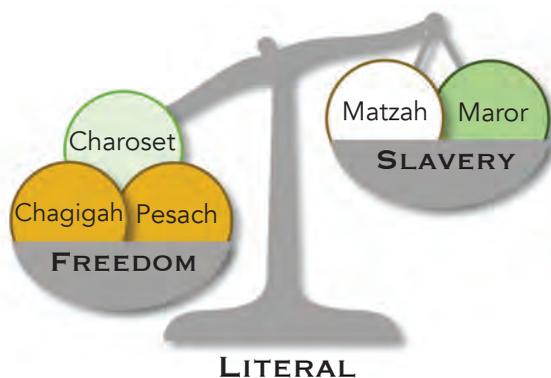
שֶׁבֶּכֶל הַלַּיְלוֹת אָנוּ אוֹכְלִין שְׂאֵר יִרְקוֹת

That on all other nights we eat other vegetables;

However, the supposed ideal of balance is belied by the **original three questions** found in the Mishnah and in the earliest Haggadahs. They were about 1. dipping, 2. Matzah and 3. roasted meat—three questions tilted decidedly toward freedom.



Likewise, the **five core Seder plate symbols**—the Pesach, Chagigah, Matzah, Maror, and Charoset—are also weighted, both literally and symbolically, toward freedom.



Therefore, while the transition from three to four questions brought slavery and freedom into balance, we see that such balance is not necessarily required or desirable.

הַלַּיְלָה הַזֶּה כָּלוּ מָרוֹר

tonight, all bitter herbs.

שֶׁבֶכֶל הַלַּיְלוֹת אֵין אָנוּ מִטְּבִילִין אֶפְּיֵלוּ פַּעַם אַחַת

That on all other nights we do not dip even one time;

הַלַּיְלָה הַזֶּה שְׁתֵּי פְעָמִים

tonight, two times.

שֶׁבֶכֶל הַלַּיְלוֹת אָנוּ אוֹכְלִין בֵּין יוֹשְׁבִין וּבֵין מְסַבִּין

That on all other nights we eat sitting or reclining;

הַלַּיְלָה הַזֶּה כָּלָנוּ מְסַבִּין

tonight, we all recline.

AVADIM HAYINU INVITES US TO IMPROVISE

The Mishnah begins its instructions for recounting the Exodus with a simple rule: teach your child according to the child's ability. This echoes the Torah's charge: *Tell your child* (Exodus 13:8). However, just as stories in English often begin with 'Once upon a time', for over two millennia Jews have begun the Seder story with one particular opening line: עֲבָדִים הָיינוּ (*Avadim Hayinu*) *We were slaves to Pharaoh in Egypt and the Lord our God took us out of there with a strong hand and an outstretched arm.*

It sounds like a verse from the Torah, but it isn't. In fact, *Avadim Hayinu* is a deliberate blend of two similar verses. It begins like Deuteronomy 6:21, *We were slaves to Pharaoh in Egypt and the Lord took us out of Egypt with a strong hand* (better known as the answer to the question of the Wise Son), and mixes in words from Deut. 5:15, part of the Ten Commandments: *the Lord your God took you out of there with a strong hand and an outstretched arm.* Deut. 5:15 is also special because the fourth commandment was announced by God two different ways *simultaneously*¹. Therefore, the fourth commandment uniquely represents layered meaning, another theme of the Haggadah. Deut. 6:21 and 5:15 are so similar that they almost flow into one another. And this is the simple meaning of mixing these two verses together on Seder night: responsible improvisation is encouraged. The Haggadah is our guide to recounting the Exodus, but it's okay to go a little off-script to tailor the story to *your* child.

1. Shevuot 20b; Rosh Hashanah 27a

Return the Seder plate and uncover the matzah

עֲבָדִים הָיִינוּ לְפַרְעֹה בְּמִצְרַיִם וַיּוֹצִיאֵנוּ יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵינוּ מִשָּׁם

We were slaves to Pharaoh in Egypt and the Lord our God took us out of there

בְּיָד חֲזָקָה וּבְזְרוּעַ נְטוּיָה וְאִלּוּ לֹא הוֹצִיא הַקָּדוֹשׁ בְּרוּךְ הוּא

with a strong hand and an outstretched arm. And if the Holy One, Blessed is He, had not taken out

אֶת אֲבוֹתֵינוּ מִמִּצְרַיִם הֲרִי אָנוּ וּבְנֵינוּ וּבְנֵי בְנֵינוּ

our forefathers from Egypt, behold, we and our children and our children's children

מִשְׁעֲבָדִים הָיִינוּ לְפַרְעֹה בְּמִצְרַיִם וְאִפִּילוּ כְּלָנוּ חַכְמַיִם

would be enslaved to Pharaoh in Egypt. And even if all of us were wise,

כְּלָנוּ נְבוֹנִים כְּלָנוּ זְקֵנִים כְּלָנוּ יוֹדְעִים אֶת הַתּוֹרָה מִצֹּהַר

all of us had understanding, all of us were elders, all of us knew the Torah, we would be obligated

עֲלֵינוּ לְסַפֵּר בִּיצִיאַת מִצְרַיִם וְכָל הַמְרַבֵּה לְסַפֵּר בִּיצִיאַת

to recount the Egyptian Exodus, and all who increase in recounting the Exodus from

מִצְרַיִם הֲרִי זֶה מְשֻׁבַּח

Egypt, behold, this is praiseworthy.

מַעֲשֵׂה בְּרַבִּי אֶלְיָעָזַר וְרַבִּי יְהוֹשֻׁעַ וְרַבִּי אֶלְעָזָר בֶּן עֲזַרְיָה

Once, Rabbi Eliezer, Rabbi Yehoshua, Rabbi Elazar ben Azaryah,

וְרַבִּי עֲקִיבָא וְרַבִּי טַרְפוֹן שֶׁהָיוּ מְסַבִּין בְּבֵנֵי בְרַק וְהָיוּ מְסַפְּרִים

Rabbi Akiva and Rabbi Tarfon were dining in Benei Brak and were recounting

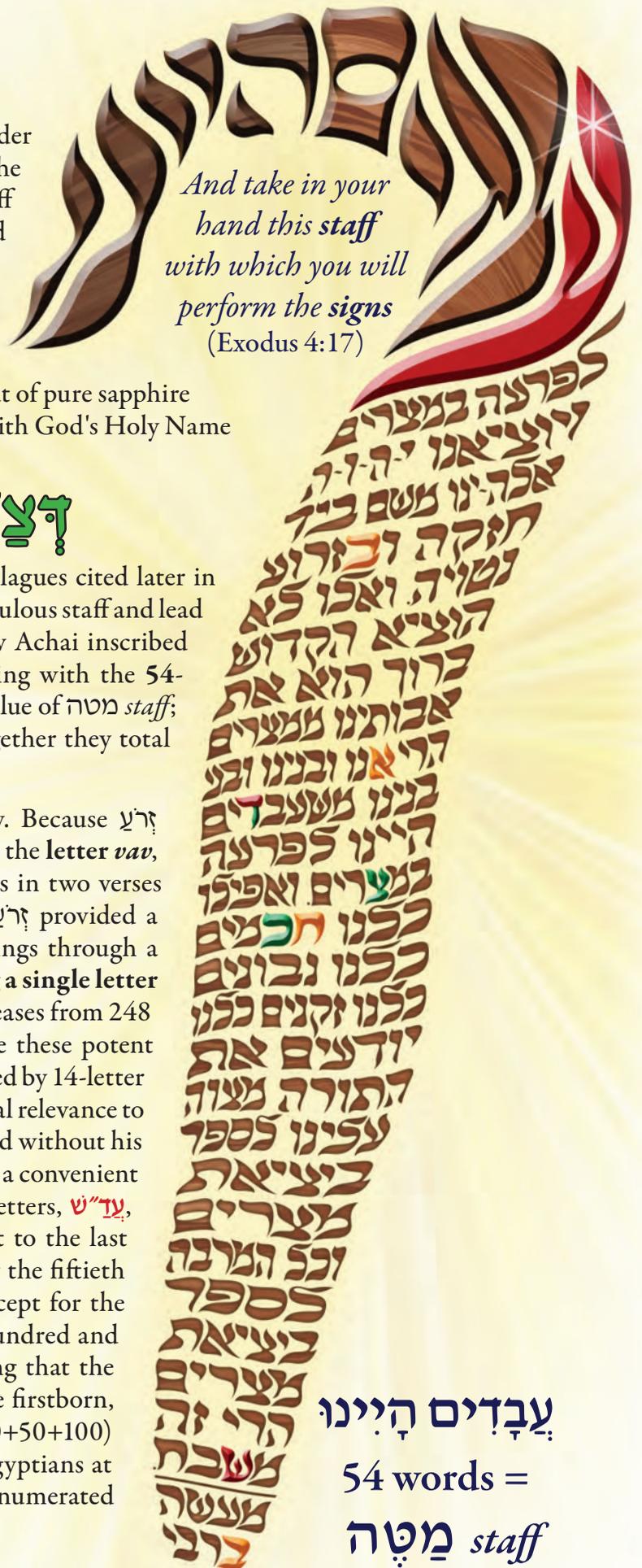
THE HAGGADAH IS OUR STAFF OF POWER

An ancient Jewish tradition, many centuries older than the Arthurian legend of the sword in the stone, tells a similar story about the famous staff of Moshe¹. It recounts that the staff was planted like a sapling in the garden of Moshe's father-in-law, the priest of Midian, and whoever could draw it forth from the earth would lead Israel out of bondage in Egypt. This was no ordinary staff; one opinion says it was carved out of pure sapphire and tremendously heavy. It was also engraved with God's Holy Name and a series of ten cryptic letters:

דָּצִ"דְּ עֲד"שׁ בְּאֲח"ב

This is the three-part mnemonic for the Ten Plagues cited later in Maggid. To grant us the power of Moshe's miraculous staff and lead us to our own redemption on Seder night, Rav Achai inscribed these same *signs* upon the Haggadah, beginning with the 54-word paragraph of *Avadim Hayinu* (54 is the value of *staff*; the next passage contains 36 words so that together they total 90, the value of *מן manna*).

Rav Achai achieved this in a remarkable way. Because *זרע arm* has two possible spellings, with or without the **letter vav**, i.e., זרע or זרוע (in fact, it is spelled both ways in two verses quoted side-by-side later in Maggid), זרוע / זרע provided a perfect opportunity to encode multiple meanings through a tiny, nearly imperceptible difference. **By adding a single letter vav**, the number of letters in the paragraph increases from 248 to 249, sacrificing Rav Achai's name to realize these potent symbols. The first three letters, **דָּצִ"דְּ**, are separated by 14-letter intervals. 14 is the value of *יד hand* and has special relevance to the miracles performed through Moshe with and without his staff. **דָּצִ"דְּ** is also at the center of the paragraph, a convenient place to grasp. The next three equidistant letters, **עֲד"שׁ**, encompass the entire paragraph, from the first to the last word. The final four letters, **בְּאֲח"ב**, begin after the fiftieth letter, and are separated by intervals of 50, except for the final two letters, which are separated by one hundred and extend into the following paragraph, indicating that the last letter, **ב**, which represents the plague of the firstborn, is a group unto itself. These intervals (50+50+50+100) allude to the fifty plagues brought upon the Egyptians at the Red Sea, and the 200 or 250 total plagues enumerated later.



1. Shemot Rabbah 8:3; Pirkei D'Rabbi Eliezer 40