א 4. Fifteen Steps from Sinai to the Haggadah ס

The *Maggid* section of the Haggadah we use today did not appear all at once, nor did it arise haphazardly. This chapter summarizes its development in fifteen steps. These steps did not always follow each other in sequence; often they unfolded in parallel. But, taken together, they show that the arrangement of Maggid represents a sustained response to a single mitzvah, anchored in one foundational verse.

1. Tell your child

The source of the mitzvah of *Sippur Yitziat Mitzrayim*—the obligation to recount the Exodus at the Seder—is a single verse (**Ex. 13:8**):

וְהִגַּדְתָּ לְבִנְךָ | בַּיּוֹם הַהוּא לֵאמֹר | בַּעֲבוּר זֶה | עָשָׂה יי | לִי בְּצֵאתִי מִמִּצְרָיִם

Tell your child | on that day, saying | for this | God did | for me as I left Egypt.

These twelve words declare not only *what* must be done, but also provide a framework for *how* to do it: three main approaches, each emphasizing a distinct and complementary method of fulfilling the obligation.

2. The first approach: Answer *your* child

The first is the most straightforward. In addition to **Ex. 13:8**, there are three Torah passages that instruct parents to recount the Exodus—Ex. 12:26–27, Ex. 13:14–15, and Deut. 6:20–23. They present similar scenarios: a child asks a question about the rituals and his parent answers by citing the Exodus from Egypt. The subtle differences in the wording of these questions and answers give parents the license and responsibility to tailor the retelling to each child's ability and disposition. The children's questions are treated not as a problem, but as the ideal initiator of the mitzvah. Thus, the first approach to *Sippur Yitziat Mitzrayim* is simple: prompt the child to ask, and respond by recounting the Exodus in a way he understands. It corresponds directly to the first two words of **Ex. 13:8**, **וְהִגַּדְתָּ לְבִנְךָ**, tell *your* child.

3. *Avadim Hayinu*

Among the four Torah passages that instruct parents to tell their children about the Exodus, the most complete synopsis appears in **Deut. 6:20-23**. The answer begins: *Avadim Hayinu*, עֲבָדִים הָיִינוּ לְפַרְעֹה בְּמִצְרָיִם וַיּוֹצִיאֵנוּ יי מִמִּצְרַיִם בְּיָד חֲזָקָה, *'We were slaves to Pharaoh in Egypt and the Lord took us out of Egypt with a strong hand'*. Yet, from ancient times, Jews have begun their retelling on Seder night with another slightly different sentence: עֲבָדִים הָיִינוּ לְפַרְעֹה בְּמִצְרָיִם וַיּוֹצִיאֵנוּ יי אֱלֹהֵינוּ מִשָּׁם בְּיָד חֲזָקָה וּבִזְרֹעַ נְטוּיָה, *'We were slaves to Pharaoh in Egypt and the Lord <u>our God</u> took us out*

of there with a strong hand and an outstretched arm'. This enigmatic sentence does not appear anywhere in Hebrew scripture. Rather, it is an amalgam of **Deut. 6:21** and another verse, Deut. 5:15, part of the Ten Commandments. As explained in chapter 12, evidence from a surprising source indicates that this hybrid verse was a customary byword for the opening of *Maggid* centuries before the destruction of the Second Temple. The line encapsulates the first approach by announcing the story in familiar language that also suggests flexibility, a fitting standard opening for a tailored and *improvised* retelling of the Exodus.

4. The second approach: Expound *Mikra Bikkurim*

A second approach arrives from a very different direction. **Deut. 26:1-11** describes the mitzvah incumbent on farmers in the Land of Israel to bring their first fruits to the Temple and make a public declaration. This declaration, known as *Mikra Bikkurim,* includes a five-verse summary of Israel's descent to Egypt and redemption introduced by language that echoes **Ex. 13:8**, **וְהִגַּדְתָּ לְבִנְךָ בַּיּוֹם הַהוּא**. **Deut. 26:3** begins, **הִגַּדְתִּי בַיָּמִים הָהֵם** וְאָמַרְתָּ אֵלָיו **הַיּוֹם**, *Come to the priest that will be in those days and say to him, I declare today*… Thus, the phrase **הִגַּדְתִּי הַיּוֹם** in **Deut. 26:3** suggests *Mikra Bikkurim* as a framework to also fulfill the mitzvah on Seder night. The explanations of the verses from the declaration that appear in the Haggadah (Deut. 26:5-8) are based on the *Sifrei*[1], an early collection of Midrash contemporaneous with the Mishnah (c. 200 CE). Importantly, this second approach to retelling the Exodus does not simply direct us to recite the verses of Deut. 26 as the farmer did, but to expound them according to received interpretations. The contrast between this and the first approach could hardly be sharper, yet our Sages derived both from the same few words.

5. Two interpretations of *Arami Oved Avi*

In **Deut. 26:5**, *Mikra Bikkurim* begins with an ambiguous but pivotal phrase: *Arami Oved Avi*, **אֲרַמִּי אֹבֵד אָבִי**. Our Sages understood these three words in two very different ways, connoting either **גְּנוּת** *disgrace* or **צַעַר** *distress*[2]. The root of this uncertainty concerns the identity of the **אֲרַמִּי** *Aramean* and how the verse should be divided. According to one understanding, the phrase describes our ancestor himself: *My father was a lost Aramean.* Read this way, it points to our degraded origins, a beginning marked by **גְּנוּת**, disgrace. According to the other understanding, the Aramean is an antagonist, *An Aramean sought to destroy my father,* describing a situation of **צַעַר**, distress and suffering. The *Sifrei* adopts the latter reading and identifies the Aramean as Lavan. As detailed below, the precise meaning of these three words became very consequential for the development of the Haggadah.

[1] Devarim 301, see also Midrash Tannaim
[2] Sotah 32b

6. The third approach: Seder plate symbols

The third way of fulfilling *Sippur Yitziat Mitzrayim* is attributed to the Tanna Rabban Gamliel and is derived from the clause **בַּעֲבוּר זֶה** in **Ex. 13**:**8**, i.e., *tell your child on that day, saying,* ***for this*** *God did for me.* ***This*** refers to the three other major mitzvot/symbols of the Seder which one may point to as he speaks—the Pesach offering, the Matzah and the Maror (bitter herbs). Each is connected to a key stage of the Exodus, and Rabban Gamliel declared that one should use them to explain and even demonstrate the events. All opinions agreed that **בַּעֲבוּר זֶה** refers to the three Seder mitzvot, but Rabban Gamliel understood the phrase as also explaining 'how' to recount the Exodus, while others only understood it to explain 'when'. That alternative interpretation of **בַּעֲבוּר זֶה**—that one is only required to recount the Exodus *when matzah and maror are present*, at the Seder—is the exposition beginning יָכוֹל מֵרֹאשׁ חוֹדֶשׁ from the *Mechilta* included in the passage of the Four Sons.

7. Identify with the Exodus

The closing words of **Ex. 13**:**8** introduce a further requirement: עָשָׂה יי **לִי בְּצֵאתִי** מִמִּצְרָיִם, *God did* ***for me*** *as* ***I*** *left Egypt*. From this, our Sages learned that in every generation one must see himself as if he personally left Egypt. This applies to all methods of fulfilling the mitzvah. The composer of our Haggadah may have relied on the doubling of this personal identification (*for* ***me*** *as* ***I*** *left*) to justify including two verses that personalize the Exodus at the end of Maggid (Ex. 13:8 *and* Deut. 6:23). However, this requirement is fulfilled in many ways throughout the Haggadah.

8. The Mishnah

The Mishnah is the comprehensive collection of Jewish Oral Law compiled by Rabbi Yehudah HaNasi in approximately 200 CE. The final chapter of Mishnah *Pesachim* contains a concise set of instructions for conducting the Passover Seder including recounting the Exodus. After listing rhetorical questions regarding the unusual practices of the evening, the Mishnah directs us to fulfill our obligation using the three approaches described above, following the order of phrases in **Ex. 13**:**8**. First, *the father teaches the child according to the child's understanding,* corresponding to **וְהִגַּדְתָּ לִבְנֶךָ** *'Tell your child'*. Then, expound the passage of Mikra Bikkurim beginning from *Arami Oved Avi,* corresponding to **בַּיּוֹם הַהוּא** *'on that day'*. Next comes Rabban Gamliel's instructions corresponding to **בַּעֲבוּר זֶה** *'for this'*. Finally, one is required to make the story personal, citing **לִי בְּצֵאתִי** *'for me as I left'* (**Ex. 13**:**8**). The approximately ninety words of the Mishnah's instructions created the framework for Maggid in our Haggadah, but the first *written* Haggadah probably wasn't arranged until a few centuries after the codification of the Mishnah.

9. The Four Sons

The passage usually called the *Four Sons* in English is among the most familiar—and misunderstood—sections of the Haggadah. Parallel to the Mishnah itself, at its heart the Four Sons is a sustained exposition of **Ex. 13:8** uniting several midrashim found separately elsewhere (in the *Mechilta*) corresponding to every part of that verse. Masterfully, this treatment is also interwoven with a parallel exposition comparing **Ex. 13:8** to Ex. 12:26-27, Ex. 13:14-15, and Deut. 6:20-23, depicting those four passages as four archetypal children. Briefly, the introduction to the passage corresponds to **לְבִנְךָ**. The section of the *Chacham* (Wise) mentions the Pesach sacrifice and corresponds to **בַּיּוֹם הַהוּא** since the sacrifice was performed during the day on the 14th of Nisan (as mentioned in the section of יָכוֹל מֵרֹאשׁ חוֹדֶשׁ). In response to the provocation 'to you' in Ex. 12:26, the section of the *Rasha* (Wicked) expounds **לִי בְּצֵאתִי** to personalize the Exodus. At the center of the passage, the *Tam* (Simple) receives the narrative itself, Ex. 13:14, the most succinct synopsis of the Exodus given in the Torah (but beginning with praise and ending with disgrace, unlike Deut. 6:21). The *son who does not know to ask* expounds **וְהִגַּדְתָּ** because the midrash says we should initiate the retelling even if no one asks. And the section of יָכוֹל מֵרֹאשׁ חוֹדֶשׁ mentions matzah and maror as it expounds **בַּעֲבוּר זֶה**. Thus, the Four Sons meets all the requirements for a complete version of Maggid derived from **Ex. 13:8**, and it may have been the first. The origins and development of this remarkable piece, and its relationship to other early midrashim, are detailed in Chapter 13.

10. The controversy of *begin with disgrace and conclude with praise*

In addition to the instructions it derived from Ex. 13:8, the Mishnah introduces a novel rule: **מַתְחִיל בְּגָנוּת וּמְסַיֵּים בְּשֶׁבַח** *begin with disgrace and conclude with praise*. These four words appear at a precise point in the Mishnah, and their placement is as important as their content. They stand directly after the section of the first approach, *according to the child's ability, his father teaches him*, and directly before the instruction to *expound from Arami Oved Avi* (**Deut. 26:5**). The rule has a rhetorical objective, but the ambiguity of the Mishnah's language also launched a consequential dispute: what *disgrace* should one begin with?

As explained above, *Arami Oved Avi* was understood by our Sages in two ways. One interpretation, *My father was a <u>lost</u> Aramean,* connotes **גְּנוּת** *disgrace*. The Talmudic Sage Rav understood the Mishnah as endorsing this reading because it says to *begin with disgrace*. Rav further understood the disgraceful beginning of our *lost* Aramean ancestors as an allusion to idolatry. He supported this view by pointing to the parallel language of **Deut. 26:5** and verses in the book of Joshua (24:2-4) that explicitly mention idolatry[3].

[3] Talmud Yerushalmi Pesachim 10:5

By contrast, the alternative interpretation adopted by the Sifrei and other early sources[4] understood the verse as *An Aramean (Lavan) caused our father to be lost,* connoting *distress* rather than *disgrace*. The Sage Shmuel championed this opinion in the Talmud[5]. But if the proper interpretation of *Arami Oved Avi* is one of *distress* rather than *disgrace*, how is the Mishnah's instruction to *begin with disgrace* to be understood? Shmuel answered this with a different reading of the Mishnah. He argued that the clause *begin with disgrace and conclude with praise* does not refer forward to *expound Arami Oved Avi.* Rather, it refers backward to the preceding directive, *according to the child's ability, his father teaches him.* According to this reading, the Mishnah is describing how the telling should begin according to the first approach. And indeed, the traditional opening line used for generations— *Avadim Hayinu* 'we were slaves', which Shmuel cites—begins with disgrace.

Rav and Shmuel, then, were engaged in two related disagreements simultaneously. They differed in their interpretation of *Arami Oved Avi*, and they differed in their reading of the Mishnah. This is not the typical explanation of this key Talmudic passage[6], but we will elaborate and make the case for it throughout this book. Commentators on the Haggadah tend to focus on the contrast between *idolatry* and *slavery* in Rav and Shmuel's opinions. This contrast is also important even if it was not the driving point of contention.

11. The ingenious solution that spawned the written Haggadah

Probably late in the Talmudic period, an unknown author composed a fateful passage. The purpose of this passage was to create a kind of rapprochement between the two opinions advocated by Rav and Shmuel, to allow them to sit side by side at the Seder table. It appears that this author relied on an ingenious rereading of the Mishnah's instruction, *begin with disgrace and conclude with praise*. His interpretation understood **מַתְחִיל בִּגְנוּת וּמְסַיֵּם בְּשֶׁבַח וְדוֹרֵשׁ מֵאֲרַמִּי אוֹבֵד אָבִי** to mean: *Begin expounding Arami Oved Avi as disgrace and conclude expounding Arami Oved Avi as praise*. The main portion of the passage he composed—which has no obvious precedent in the Talmud—survives in our Haggadah today. It begins with verses from Joshua 24 (cited by Rav in the Talmud Yerushalmi) and ends at approximately *Tzay U'lmad*, *Go out and learn what Lavan the Aramean attempted to do to our Patriarch Jacob*. The exposition of **Deut. 26:5** given by *Tzay U'lmad* is similar but not identical to the exposition of the Sifrei[7]. These brief sequences are at the center of every Haggadah ever found.

The importance of this innovation can hardly be overstated. Before this passage was composed, the Seder could be conducted by following the instructions of the Mishnah, expounding *Mikra Bikkurim* according to the Sifrei, and reciting Psalms. After the inclusion of

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[4] Targum Onkelos and Pseudo-Jonathan translate it similarly.

[5] The identity of the disputants is also uncertain, and the main advocate of this opinion was likely Rava rather than Shmuel, see chapter 16. Here we follow standard convention by referring to the two opinions as Rav and Shmuel.

[6] Pesachim 116a

[7] The author of the novel passage also introduced the contrast between Lavan and Pharoah, emphasizing the cycle of history, borrowing language from Sotah 12a / Shemot Rabbah 1:13.

this novel section, the Haggadah became something new: a dedicated independent Seder liturgy. Therefore, to distinguish this author from other contributors to the Haggadah—like its final editor, the *Baal Haggadah* (*Master of the Haggadah*)—we propose calling this figure *the Av Haggadah, Father of the Haggadah*. And appropriately, a distinguishing feature of that earliest version of Maggid that he composed was additional sections of praise for *the Patriarchs* that counterbalanced the disgrace of our ancestors' idol worship described in Joshua 24. These praises were omitted by later editors, but early-medieval Haggadahs found in the Cairo Genizah follow this format (see chapter 22, including images of these amazing Haggadahs).

The section of Maggid authored by the Av Haggadah also effectively created a *fourth* approach to recounting the Exodus, centered around verses from Genesis. Importantly, as explained in chapter 21, the passage does not merely juxtapose the two interpretations of *Arami Oved Avi* against one another, but frames them within a miniature debate, advocating for the Sifrei's opinion, and laying out the stakes. The stakes of that dispute are no less than the terms of the covenant between God and Israel and whether we may rely upon it in the future.

12. From directed improvisation to fixed text

The earliest written Haggadahs were likely not intended to replace oral retelling. They functioned as an outline or set of cues rather than a full script. This is most evident from their preservation of the Mishnah's instruction: *according to the child's ability, his father teaches him*. Rather than replacing this with a text, the phrase was simply retained verbatim. Similarly, the section of *Mikra Bikkurim* in the earliest Haggadahs was extremely brief, and often omitted the middle verses (Deut. 26:6-7). As such, the written text was mainly a prompt to Seder participants to fill in the exposition from their own knowledge. But once the novel section authored by the *Av Haggadah* established the kernel of a fixed text, later developments in Maggid focused on filling in the blank spaces. By the advent of written Haggadahs, the hybrid verse *Avadim Hayinu* had begun oral renditions of Maggid for centuries. Similar evidence indicates the great antiquity of The Four Sons. In different ways, both passages correspond to the text they eventually replaced—the Mishnah's instruction, *according to the child's ability, his father teaches him*.

Because the development of the Haggadah was not documented, these additions obscured the direct connection between Maggid and the Mishnah. The fixing of *Avadim Hayinu* in writing also obscured its pre-Talmudic origin in oral tradition. This was further complicated by the later inclusion of introductory words to the verses from Joshua 24 that quote Rav's position in Pesachim 116a: *'Originally our forefathers were idol worshippers'*. When this phrase was then elaborated to conclude *'and now the Omnipresent has brought us into his service'* it effectively made Maggid appear to begin twice. In fact, Maggid begins with *Avadim Hayinu* as it has according to oral tradition from ancient times. This is followed by the exposition of *Mikra Bikkurim* prefaced by both interpretations of *Arami Oved Avi*.

13. Include Deut. 6:23, *He took us out of there to bring us…*

Aside from the pivotal dispute described in step 10, the Talmud Bavli *Pesachim* elaborates very little on the Mishnah's instructions for recounting the Exodus. However, one brief comment from the Sage Rava played an outsized role in the Haggadah's development: *one must say 'He took us out of there'* (Deut. 6:23)[8]. The verse he cited closes the Exodus synopsis in the biblical passage better known as the answer to the question of the Wise Son. As described in chapter 20, at different stages of the Haggadah's history, **Deut. 6:23** was employed in different ways. Like other decisions made by its editors, the varied usage of this verse suggests different interpretations of the Talmud, the Mishnah, and how they governed the arrangement of Maggid.

14. Three, five & four in the *Haggadah of Exile*

Words are the Haggadah's substance, but numbers are its connective tissue. Maggid's final composer and redactor, the *Baal Haggadah*, greatly expanded the role of numbers, but they were already important to the Haggadah's structure from its earliest sources. For example, although it may be hard to imagine after a millennium of asking 'Four Questions', the Pesach Seder was originally organized primarily around the number *Three*. The original text of the Mishnah (also found in modern printings of the Talmud Yerushalmi) included just three questions. Thus, it began with three questions and closed with Rabban Gamliel's three 'answers' about the Pesach, matzah and maror, creating a symmetrical frame.

But later, through an intriguing process that likely began before the advent of written Haggadahs, the primary motif of the Seder transitioned from Three to *Five*. The declaration of *Mikra Bikkurim* contains five verses, and the Midrash connects the number five in particular to *redemption*[9]. Yet, as the Haggadah took shape in exile, five came to be represented as *four*, indicating an incomplete redemption. The most notable case is the omission of the fifth verse in *Mikra Bikkurim*, Deut. 26:9, which speaks of entering the Holy Land. Over the course of the Haggadah's development, the tension between *Three, Four* and *Five* was mainly expressed through the number and content of the initial questions. The earliest written Haggadahs preserved the original three questions of the Mishnah. These three were later expanded to five while simultaneously omitting one question—about the Pesach offering—to arrive at four questions, emblematic of the Haggadah of exile. The deeper symbolic relationships between these numbers are explored throughout this book, especially in chapters 8 and 22.

15. The contributions of the final redactor, the *Baal Haggadah*

The Haggadah we know today was completed during the early Gaonic period by a figure traditionally called the *Baal Haggadah* (master of the Haggadah). Comparison with earlier versions demonstrates his many important contributions, including:

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[8] Pesachim 116b

[9] Pirkei D'Rabbi Eliezer 48

- Reinforcing Maggid's correspondence to the source verse, **Ex. 13:8**, and its exposition by the Midrash.
- Reestablishing Maggid's symmetry (echoing the Mishnah) centered around its core, the verses from Genesis about the *Covenant Between the Parts*.
- Further bolstering the Haggadah as a flagship of the *Oral Torah* through the inclusion of new sections borrowed from *Divre Chazal*, the Mishnah and Midrash.
- Emphasis on *elaborating* when recounting the Exodus, using the language of *sippur*.
- The strategic employment of the verse **Deut. 6:23** to frame all of Maggid as an improvised version of the answer to the Wise son, **Deut. 6:21-23**.
- Elaboration via numbers, especially through *increasing* numbers to reach for higher symbolic meanings, alluded to in the phrase *marbeh lesaper*.
- Precisely editing the text to encode layers of hidden symbolism (and his own name). The sophistication of this system invites a fundamental reassessment of Maggid's composition and of the stature of its final architect.

After the Baal Haggadah

Rav Amram Gaon included a version of the Haggadah very similar to the one we use today in the first complete Jewish prayerbook, composed and distributed during his tenure as head of the Sura Yeshiva (861-872 CE). Even so, other versions remained popular for centuries, especially the version included in the prayerbook of Saadia Gaon. The relative uniformity of Haggadahs used today owes to the influence of two later Torah giants, Rashi and the Rambam (Maimonides), who both transmitted versions like that of Amram Gaon.

Nevertheless, surviving examples of medieval Haggadahs reveal small but consistent differences from our modern version. This suggests that a further process of consolidation happened more recently. There is suggestive evidence that this was facilitated, at least in part, by the influence of Rabbi Yitzhak Luria, the Arizal (1534-1572 CE) and his disciples. How these more recent editorial decisions produced the text used today, which appears to preserve so much of the Baal Haggadah's hidden architecture, is an intriguing question addressed in later chapters.