

D'rash for Chol-haMoed Pesach

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Today's portion – the special one for the Shabbat in the middle of Pesach – strikes me as a kind of mirror image or photo-negative of the Haggadah. It highlights all the issues, insecurities and problems the Haggadah tends to paper over. It's as if to say that, after (or in some years, amid) two nights of feasting and celebrating and congratulating ourselves as a liberated people, we need a dose of realism and some sobering up.

The rabbis' decision to choose these verses for the Shabbat during Passover is to me yet another example of Judaism's tendency to put ideas and moods in tension, of its embrace of dialectics.

So how are the parsha and the Haggadah in tension? First, the parsha foregrounds Moses, who is traditionally largely omitted from the Haggadah. Indeed, the parsha opens with Moses – a reminder perhaps of our need for human leadership. But we encounter Moses at the start of this parsha at a moment of doubt and pleading – so the parsha also illustrates the limits, or foibles of human leadership.

Another contrast: in the Haggadah, the Israelites experience G_d's power very viscerally – through the plagues, the sparing of their houses, the splitting of the sea, the vanquishing of the Egyptian army. The Israelites get to see and feel the power of the G_d of history – indeed, that's the whole point of the story – and we are supposed to live the Israelite's experience with them. But in this parsha, by contrast, we are reminded of G_d's distance from us and G_d's hiddenness – how even Moses cannot fully experience G_d.

Also, in the Haggadah, the Israelites – and we – are portrayed as a people deserving of being redeemed, or at least as having been chosen especially for redemption. We are the victims of unwarranted oppression and suffering, the Haggadah says, both in Egypt and throughout the many generations and countries that followed. But in this parsha, we are reminded of human frailty and of our tendency toward sin, and of the punishment that is destined to ensue. We are not innocent victims. We are even reminded of the historical, collective sin of the Golden Calf through the reference to Moses having had to create a second set of tablets. In the parsha, we are not unjustly persecuted or moving along a simple trajectory from darkness to light.

The parsha even complicates the lure of the Promised Land, listing all the peoples who will have to be displaced, and the temptations they will present to us because of our own weaknesses. We might be brought to the point of saying, "Enough!" but not in the sense of "Dayenu."

So in focus, tone, outlook, message and narrative, this parsha seems to me to be the un-Haggadah, forcing us to recognize aspects of the nature of G_d, of history, of the Israelites, of

ourselves that were very consciously left out of the Haggadah. We can gather joy and strength from the Haggadah but then we have to return to a world described in the parsha.

So, what do we think about that? How does today's parsha change your sense of the Haggadah and of Passover? Should more of today's parsha be included in the Haggadah, and what effect would that have? Is that, in effect, what we're often doing with some of our contemporary additions? Or conversely, should we read a different section of the Torah during Passover, perhaps one that is more in keeping with the mood of the Haggadah?