

Defining Mesorah

Every year, on the night of Pesach, Jewish people around the world convene at their seder tables and collectively, we share our story with the next generation. This transmission of our heritage, its laws and values, ensures the continuity of our Jewish community and creates a bond of tradition we call *mesorah* — tradition. The full import and meaning of this Hebrew term is lacking somewhat in the English translation. Beyond “tradition,” the overarching character of *mesorah* connotes a connection to a narrative, movement, and mission that transcends generational boundaries. *Mesorah* is expressed in the transmission of living teachings, character, and profiles of a Torah community, and is an essential component of Judaism. Hence, while *mesorah* has seventy faces, its basic and universal qualities transcend all boundaries and unite all segments of the Torah community.

Yet over the generations we struggle with the question: how do we define our *mesorah*? What are its features and parameters? Which practices fit within its broad parameters and how do we apply it in every generation? Surely, there are notable differences between various specific practices at the seder that vary from community to community and from time to time, so how are we to determine what developments fall within our *mesorah*? It is fascinating that the Hagadah can be a helpful guide in addressing these



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issues. The Hagadah is not only a traditional text — it is a paradigmatic text of tradition including elements that, as we study it, give us insight into the nature, character and key components of *mesorah*. Although these reflections are not ironclad proofs to a full definition of *mesorah*, we can still gain insight into this crucial concept.¹ With the Hagadah as our guide, we can learn timeless lessons.

The concept of *mesorah*, which reflects and represents continuity of generations, is primarily focused on the Oral tradition. The Written Torah — the Tanach — is the backbone of our relationship with Hashem, while the Oral Torah provides spirit, depth, context, and meaning. At Sinai, Hashem instructed that we interpret the Written Torah through the Oral Torah, to guide how our Jewish lives take shape and form. It is this oral transmission that is the shared covenantal bond between us and Hashem.²

Our Hagadah dedicates its largest section — *Tzei Ul'mad* — to the midrashic interpretation of the story of *yetziat Mitzrayim*. It is because this is the primary expression of *mesorah* — the Oral tradition and its transmission of the methodology

and understanding of Torah analysis from teacher to student and parent to child in each generation. The Hagadah is teaching that our *mesorah* and our collective story is built on the internal logic of the halachic system taught to us by our sages, expressed in this selection of midrash.

Perhaps this is also the reason why the selection in Devarim was chosen as the Biblical text for discussion at the seder. As opposed to verses in Shemot, these four verses in Devarim lend themselves to deep midrashic explication, while the narrative in Shemot is understood on its primary, *pshat* level.

We can also understand why the seder includes many Rabbinic mitzvot. The Rambam, in the introduction to his commentary on the Mishna, explains that our *Torah Sheba'al Peh* includes both the exegetical interpretations of Torah, which are binding on a Biblical level, and the Rabbinic aspects of Jewish life including Rabbinic mitzvot, enactments, and restrictions. Hence our seder includes many Rabbinic requirements that play a prominent role, such as drinking four cups and leaning in a luxurious manner, which express this dimension of our *mesorah* of *Torah Sheba'al Peh*.

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However, it is not only the legal, learning aspects of Torah that comprise *mesorah*. There is a second, core aspect of *mesorah*. It transmits the behaviors and practices of generations over time, reflecting the contours of the Torah community. Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik developed this notion at length in a Yahrzeit shiur in memory of his father:

שתי מסורות ישנן: א) מסורה אחת המתיחסת כולה למסורה של לימוד, יכוח, משא ומתן והוראה שכלית, זה אומר כך וזה אומר כך, זה נותן טעם לדבריו וזה נותן טעם לדבריו, ועומדין למנין, כמו שהתורה מציירת לנו בפרשת זקן ממרא. ב) מסורת מעשית של הנהגת כלל ישראל בקיום מצוות וזו מיסדת על הפסוק "שאל אביך ויגדך זקניך ויאמרו לך." שיעורים לזכר אבא מרי ז"ל חלק א' עמ' רמ"ט

There are two types of mesorah: 1) One type of mesorah that wholly relates to learning: the debate, the exchange and the logical instruction; one says this and one says that; one provides his reasoning and the other provides his reasoning and they come to a consensus as the Torah describes in the section about the rebellious elder. 2) There is a mesorah

based on the [actual] practices of the Jewish people and this is based on the verse "Ask your father and he will relate it to you, the elders and they will tell you." Shiurim L'Zecher Abba Mari z"l Vol. I pg. 249

Therefore, our seder includes not only paragraphs of *limud* and Rabbinic requirements derived through *limud*, it also shares a vision of the way a seder should take shape. These traditions of *mesorah* include various *minhagim* — customs. Some customs are the *mesorah* of a particular community that develop over time, such as which specific vegetables to use for dipping and how to arrange the seder plate. Other traditions are universal and remain unmoved. One example is the practice of leaning as an expression of freedom. The overwhelming tradition is to maintain our fealty to the Talmudic practice of reclining even though its rationale is no longer operative today.³

The Hagadah also teaches by example that the sages of the generation — the *chachmei hamesorah*, in the words

of Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, are crucial to defining *mesorah*. In his brief introduction to the *Mishne Torah*, the Rambam enumerates the names of forty sages who transmitted the tradition from Moshe at Sinai to Rav Ashi at the close of the Talmud. This list is not merely a historical record; it serves to identify the stewards of the *mesorah* over the generations. *Mesorah* is not only transmitted by communal practice — it is shepherded and defined by the Rabbinic stewards of each generation. Rabbi Soloveitchik discussed this idea in a talk he delivered on June 19, 1975 to the RIETS Rabbinic alumni:⁴

The truth in talmud Torah can be achieved through singular halachic Torah thinking, and Torah understanding. The truth is attained from within, in accord with the methodology given to Moses and passed on from generation to generation. The truth can be discovered only through joining the ranks of the chachmei hamesorah.

This idea was expressed by Rabbi

There are two types of *mesorah*, one that wholly relates to learning: the debate, the exchange and the logical instruction and there is a *mesorah* based on the [actual] practices of the Jewish people.



Soloveitchik more than thirty years earlier based on conversations and teachings that he received from his own father:⁵

פעמים רבות הרצתי לפני אבא מרי הגאון החסיד, זצ"ל, והוא שבח את הדברים מאד וגם חזר עליהם בשיעוריו, כי מדברי הרמב"ם מוכח, שמסורה מהוה חלות שם בפ"ע בנוגע לתורה שבע"פ, ואינה רק דין נאמנות וברוה ונראה, דבעיקר של אמתת תורה שבע"פ נאמרו שתי הלכות מיוחדות: א) דחכמי המסורה ממשה ואילך נאמנים למסר את התורה שקבלו מסיני, ותורה שבע"פ, המצויה עכשיו בידינו, היא, היא, אותה התורה, שנתנה למשה מפי הגבורה; ב) דעצם הקבלה אינה רק מעשה ברור בעלמא, אלא מהוה חלות שם בפ"ע של מסורה וקבלה, דתורה שבע"פ נתנת להמסר כמו תורה שבכתב, שנתנה להכתב, ועצמה של תורה שבע"פ נתפס במסורה כמו זו שבכתב — בכתיבה.

Many times I presented this idea to my father, the pious scholar, zt"l, and he greatly praised this idea and presented it in his lectures — that from the language of Rambam, it is clear that the mesorah has its own unique status when it comes to the Oral Tradition. It is not merely a means of verifying the information. It seems that there are two distinct laws regarding the verification of the Oral Tradition. 1) The scholars of the mesorah from Moshe Rabbeinu and on are the authorities to transmit the Torah that was received from Sinai and the Oral Tradition that is now in our hands is the same Torah that was given to Moshe by the Almighty. 2) The actual transmission is not just a means of verification but has an independent status of mesorah. The Oral Tradition was intended to be transmitted the same way that the Written Torah was intended to be written. The actual Oral Tradition achieves its status through mesorah just as the Written Torah achieves its status through writing it.

We now appreciate why our Hagadah introduces the story of the Exodus with the story of five Tanaim (rabbis

of the Mishna) in Bnei Brak, who discussed *yetziat Mitzrayim* all night. We open our seder with this anecdote not just to show the extent to which we should aspire to perform this great mitzvah, but also to frame it in the context of our *chachmei hamesorah*. We recognize that there are great sages, people who devote themselves so fully to Torah that their study would continue unabated had they not been interrupted by their students, to whom we look for direction when shaping our story of *vehigad'ta levincha* — you shall tell your children.

This story also alludes to the community's role in guiding the *mesorah*. While the Rabbinic luminaries of each generation are the arbiters of *mesorah*, they do so with sensitivity to and in concert with the community. Hence it was the students, the populace, who reminded the sages that it was time for Shacharit, and the Bnei Brak seder then ended. The Rabbis' students, who comprise and are immersed in the general population, reflect the realities and needs of the people of that time so that the sages can lead in a way that meets the needs of the specific time and place.⁶ In addition, the students' presence was also important to establish a communal precedent that *sippur yetziat Mitzrayim* may be fulfilled all night, in accordance with the view of Rabbi Akiva. It is up to the *chachmei hamesorah* to determine normative practice, and it is the community that carries the responsibility to maintain the *mesorah* and continue its practice. It is precisely due to this fealty, that the *chachmei hamesorah* give significant weight to the practices of the community as they reflect the *mesorah*.⁷ Therefore, even Hillel the elder, when faced with a Pesach-related question about which he was

unsure, instructed his questioners to inquire how people practice to clarify what the ruling should be:

אמר להן הלכה זו שמעתי ושכחתי אלא הנח להן לישראל אם אין נביאים הן בני נביאים הן למחר מי שפסחו טלה תוחבו בצמר מי שפסחו גדי תוחבו בין קרניו ראה מעשה ונזכר הלכה ואמר כך מקובלני מפי שמעיה ואבטליון. פסחים סו.

"I have heard this law," he answered, "but have forgotten it. But leave it to Israel: if they are not prophets, yet they are the children of prophets!" On the morrow, he whose Passover was a lamb stuck it [the knife] in its wool; he whose Passover was a goat stuck it between its horns. He saw the incident and recollected the halachah and said, "Thus have I received the tradition from the mouth[s] of Shemaiah and Abtalyon."
Pesachim 66a (Soncino Translation)

We learn an additional lesson from the next section of the Hagadah: that an individual rabbi alone does not establish *mesorah*. The Hagadah relates that although Rabbi Elazar ben Azaryah viewed himself as a sage of seventy, he did not merit to teach the obligation of reciting *yetziat Mitzrayim* at night until Ben Zoma taught it. Rabbi Elazar ben Azarya was convinced of his view in the halacha and knew he was a great scholar. Yet it wasn't until his idea was recognized and accepted by the great Rabbinic authority of the generation (Ben Zoma was the senior Darshan, see *Sotah* 15) that it became normative *mesorah*.⁸ When a question regarding a significant change in practice or approach in *mesorah* is raised, only a Rabbinic luminary, who is recognized by the Torah community as a giant of the generation, can establish a precedent for the *mesorah*. It is then that the practice becomes an accepted *mesorah* by the community.

Simultaneously, the great sages of the generation do not shape the contours of *mesorah* through the exercise of power or authority, rather through the weight and merit of their views. Perhaps this is why Rabban Gamliel, who was the most senior Rabbinic personality during the Yavneh period, is noticeably absent from the aforementioned seder of the five sages; according to the Tosefta, he was celebrating the seder in Lod. The seder scene we describe likely occurred while Rabban Gamliel was removed from his role as Nasi of

the Beit Din due to his overly harsh imposition of authority over his disciple, Rabbi Yehoshua. The Gemara (*Berachot* 27) relates that the Rabbinic community removed Rabban Gamliel from his post and replaced him with Rabbi Elazar ben Azarya. For this reason, Rabbi Elazar ben Azarya is seated at the head of the table in Bnei Brak, in the center of the Rabbis.⁹ We learn that no matter how great a sage one may be, the halacha and *mesorah* cannot be determined by force, only by consensus of sages.¹⁰

In closing, we can readily understand why *mesorah* plays such a central role in the seder and the Hagadah, since its focus — the mitzvah of *sippur yetziat Mitzrayim* — is primarily an educational one. Ideally, it entails sharing our story with the next generation. It is precisely through a fealty to *mesorah* that we have a connection that transcends generations and a collective story to share.

Without the *mesorah* of learning, with its internal logic and intellectual rigor, and the *mesorah* of practice,

A Personal Account of The Rav on Mesorah

The old Rebbe walks into the classroom crowded with students who are young enough to be his grandchildren. He enters as an old man with wrinkled face, his eyes reflecting the fatigue and sadness of old age. You have to be old to experience this sadness. It is the melancholy that results from an awareness of people and things which have disappeared and linger only in memory. I sit down; opposite me are rows of young beaming faces with clear eyes radiating the joy of being young. For a moment, the Rebbe is gripped with pessimism, with tremors of uncertainty. He asks himself: Can there be a dialogue between an old teacher and young students, between a Rebbe in his Indian summer and students enjoying the spring of their lives? The Rebbe starts his shiur, uncertain as to how it will proceed.

Suddenly the door opens and an old man, much older than the Rebbe, enters. He is the grandfather of the Rebbe, Reb Chaim Brisker. It would be most difficult to study Talmud with students who are trained in the sciences and mathematics, were it not for his method, which is very modern and equals, if not surpasses, most contemporary forms of logic, metaphysics or philosophy. The door opens again and another old man comes in. He is older than Reb Chaim, for he lived in the 17th century. His name is Reb Shabtai Cohen, known as the Shach, who must be present when *dinai mammonot* (civil law) is discussed. Many more visitors arrive, some from the 11th, 12th and 13th centuries, and others harking back to antiquity – Rabbeinu Tam, Rashi, Rambam, Raavad, Rashba, Rabbi Akiva and others. These scholarly giants of the past are bidden to take their seats. The Rebbe introduces the guests to his pupils, and the dialogue commences. The Rambam states a halacha; the Raavad disagrees sharply, as is his wont. Some students interrupt to defend the Rambam, and they express themselves harshly against the Raavad, as young people are apt to do. The Rebbe softly corrects the students and suggest more restrained tones. The Rashba smiles gently. The Rebbe tries to analyze what the students meant, and other students intercede. Rabbeinu Tam is called upon to express his opinion, and suddenly, a symposium of generations comes into existence. Young students debate earlier generations with an air of daring familiarity, and a crescendo of discussion ensues.

All speak one language; all pursue one goal; all are committed to a common vision; and all operate with the same categories. A *Mesorah* collegiality is achieved, a friendship, a comradeship of old and young, spanning antiquity, the Middle Ages and modern times. This joining of the generations, this march of centuries, this dialogue and conversation between antiquity and the present will finally bring about the redemption of the Jewish people.

After a two or three hour shiur, the Rebbe emerges from the chamber young and rejuvenated. He has defeated age. The students look exhausted. In the *Mesorah* experience, years play no role. Hands, however parchment-dry and wrinkled, embrace warm and supple hands in commonality, bridging the gap with separates the generations. Thus, the “old ones” of the past continue their great dialogue of the generations, ensuring an enduring commitment to the *Mesorah*.

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with its traditional values and profile, Judaism would have no future. It is precisely due to our commitment to *mesorah* that enables each of our seder stories to unite as one eternal story of Knesset Yisrael.

Addendum

Perhaps the role of *mesorah* in the Hagadah explains an overarching peculiarity about the Hagadah. The mitzvah of *sippur yetziat Mitzrayim*—retelling the Exodus from Egypt—is derived from the verse (Shemot 13:8) בעבור זה עשה ה' לי בצאתי ממצרים — Because of this, God did this for me when I left Egypt. The Mishna (*Pesachim* 116b) takes notice of the first-person language of the verse and requires each one of us to personalize the story. The Hagadah itself emphasizes this point when it cites the aforementioned verse toward the culmination of *maggid* charging us with the responsibility that we must see ourselves as if we personally and individually had left Egypt.

It is, therefore, interesting that the main text of the Hagadah — the means by which we tell this story itself — is fixed and rigid. While seder tables vary widely in their style, character, and experience, the traditional core text of the Hagadah remains standard throughout the Torah world and has attracted more commentaries than perhaps any other Torah work. Why would a mitzvah which is supposedly so individual and personal be limited to a specific text? How can it be that the core of each and every person's story at the seder is

the same the world over?

In light of our understanding of the role of *mesorah* in the Hagadah, we can appreciate this as well. Without a unifying *mesorah* text, each generation would be a standalone unit, disjointed from previous and subsequent eras, and every individual would be merely an individual, without a connection to the greater Knesset Yisrael.¹¹ If every person at their seder table would fulfill the mitzvah of *sippur yetziat Mitzrayim* by creating their own text, then their story would be personal and unique, but it would be theirs alone. By sharing a *mesorah* text, the story that I share in my unique way at my unique seder table is not only my story, but it is part of a larger story of the entire Jewish people.¹² Yes, every person's retelling of the Exodus is unique, in fulfillment of the principle כל המרבה הרי זה משובה — which encourages an individual to add their personal touch to the story. At the same time, through a shared *mesorah*, my personal story is transformed into a transcendent, eternal story of the ages.

Notes

1. See Ramban's introduction to his commentary *Milchamot Hashem* regarding the difficulty of creating an irrefutable proof.
2. See Talmud Bavli, *Gittin* 59b.
3. See the Rama, *O.C.* 472:4 who notes that women did not have the practice to recline because they relied on the opinion that since today reclining does not reflect freedom it should not be done at all.
4. The full audio of the shiur is available at: <http://www.yutorah.org/lectures/lecture.cfm/767722/>.
5. This talk was delivered at the Anshei Brisk synagogue in Brooklyn, New York on Shabbat Parshat Behaalotecha 5703. It was

transcribed by Rabbi Shmuel Aharon Pardes and published in *Hapardes* no. 17. Vol. 11.

6. For this reason, the Rambam (*Hilchot Mamrim*, Perek 2) places clear limits on the ability of the sages to exact rules on the community unilaterally. The sages may not enact a decree that majority of the community cannot follow and if they do enact such a decree, it is not binding.

7. There is a symbiotic relationship between the communal practice and Rabbinic leadership that establishes *mesorah*. In some cases, it is unclear which came first, the communal practice or Rabbinic enactment, such as the practice of Jewish women to observe seven clean days (see Ritva and Meiri, *Berachot* 31a).

8. This explanation is similar to those of the Ri ben Yakar, *Siddur Rashi* and *Meyuchas LiRashi* commentaries on the Hagadah, in the *Toras Chaim* edition of the Hagadah.

9. Rabbi Elazar ben Azarya also refers to himself as being “like seventy years old,” which Ritva and many other Hagadah commentaries in the Rishonim understand as a reference to the Talmud's tradition that he grew a hoary beard once appointed as the new Chief Rabbi. See also Hagadah of Rabbi Jonathan Sacks.

10. The Talmud (*Shabbat* 59b) suggests that even a heavenly voice and Divine intervention do not establish normative communal practice without consensus of the sages, as occurred in the dispute between Rabbi Eliezer and the sages. This concept was taught by Akavia ben Mahalalel to his son in his final hours, as described by the Mishna in *Eduyot* chapter 5.

11. This concept is true of other core *mesorah* texts, such as the Talmud Bavli, whose words and pages have survived and thrived for centuries and it connects all those who have studied it throughout the generations. Obviously, the text of the Hagadah developed over generations, much like the Talmud; the uniformity and ubiquity of the text that coalesced matched the increasing need for stronger *mesorah* with increased dispersion.

12. This suggestion was offered by Rabbi Dr. Avi Oppenheimer.



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