To My Dear Congregants

The very fact that I am sharing with you a written version of a shabbat hagadol derasha speaks to how vastly different this year’s Pesach is from past years. We are stressed, tired, mentally and physically exhausted, but also scared and alone. We are living in doubt. We switch back and forth obsessively from the TV to the radio, to social media, to whatsapp, to Youtube all in search of some relief - but the picture is all the same and it’s pretty grim. Coronavirus is a dangerous foe and it is not going away very soon. This foe has brought of a tsunami of logistical, occupational, financial, medicinal, social, psychological, and existential challenges, the likes that we have never experienced before (and the world since WWII), and it’s all landing on our doorstep between Purim and Pesach - הגאולה וזמן זום. All the more strange is the fact that amidst all this uncertainty we are required to sit at the Seder table (some among family and some alone) and sing and feast like kings about a redemption story that took place many thousands of years ago, but that seems awfully far away right now. To not call this out for what it is would be pollyannaish. Let’s call a spade a spade. This hardly feels like a Pesach of redemption, it is more like a Pesach of exile - spiritual and physical, in which we must adhere to the laws of social distancing from our loved ones in the same way that we stay away from Chametz.

How will this all end? I wish I knew. I wish I could offer you assurance that it will all work out for the best and it probably will, for the majority of people. The world will return to normalcy, or at least a new normal. I just hope this new normal will not come at great loss and suffering to the Jewish people and the world at large. And yet, I do believe that we are experiencing something bordering on the historical here.1 There has never ever been a Pesach quite like this one with zoom, zoom and more zoom, no pesach programs in Greece or Italy and social distancing - מה שבתנו הלילה הזה miền הילולות! Some of these things we can easily do without, but not having Saba and Savta or close family at the Seder table, that is wholly unprecedented. That is like taking a knife to the whole notion of the Seder in which we are supposed to connect future generations to past ones. No doubt, future generations - our children and grandchildren, will one day sit at our Seder tables and ask us what it was like in the year 2020 (תש”פ) as we celebrated Pesach. What was it like? How was that year different from all other years?

Though we don’t know the outcome of this year’s Pesach, it is a story that must be told. We owe it to future generations to tell this story. And if it is still unfolding, then we must create the story - the beginning, middle, and end. We must craft the plot, imagine the scenes, develop the characters and weave a narrative that will shape future generations. But first, in order to do this, we need to understand something very deep about the human psyche....

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1 Historians and halakhists will no doubt one day look back at the Halakhic responsa being composed at this moment by the likes of Rav Asher Weiss, Rav Hershel Schachter, and Rav Yossi Tzvi Rimon and study them in order to understand the meaning of this particular moment.
Part I - It’s Storytime

Why do we tell stories? Why are human beings so enamored with stories? This is not only true of children, also adults. Rabbis see congregants slouching in their chairs as they doze off every Shabbat morning, but the moment they utter the words, “I have a story to tell,” they suddenly pipe up and are fully engaged. Notice the hush in any space when a good story is being told. Despite our ever diminishing attention-spans in the age of social media, we can still be gripped and enthralled by a good story.

But we not only love to hear stories, we love to create stories. We make up stories when stories don’t even exist. We weave together narratives out of seemingly random events. We connect the dots, whether there is truly a hidden pattern or not. Stories, with their inherent patterns and structures, help us to create order out of chaos; they help us to create meaning. But skeptics will argue that meaning-make is a denial of reality. Life is one continuum, an uninterrupted film script; one scene just bleeds into the next. It is we who create a middle, beginning, and end. It is we who impose the narrative structure. We are the ones who cut and paste, edit, delete, and even exaggerate in order to create stories out of our lives.²

This point can be demonstrated through a landmark study conducted in 1944, in which thirty four students were shown a short film and asked to describe what happened in the film. The film showed two triangles and a circle moving across a two-dimensional surface. The only other object was a rectangle, partially open on one side. According to Frank Rose, in an article titled The Art of Immersion: Why Do We Tell Stories?, the study yielded the following results:

Only one of the test subjects saw this scene for what it was: geometric shapes moving across a plane. Everyone else came up with elaborate narratives to explain what the movements were about. Typically, the participants viewed the triangles as two men fighting and the circle as a woman trying to escape the bigger, bullying triangle. Instead of registering inanimate shapes, they imagined humans with vivid inner lives. The circle was "worried." The circle and the little triangle were "innocent young things." The big triangle was "blinded by rage and frustration."³

Part II - The Ultimate Story

I raise this question about why we love stories and create stories because the Jewish people are storytellers par excellence and this is the raison d’etre of the Seder night. We possess the single greatest narrative in human history; it’s called the Tanakh. And the first major scenes in this story take us back to Egypt, servitude, Moshe Rabbeinu, the Burning Bush, and the splitting of the sea. This story of our transformation from slavery to redemption, is the greatest story ever told on earth. It is simply riveting. This is precisely why we keep remembering and telling this story on a daily basis to fulfill the mitzvah of מצות מצות מצות מצות מצות מצות מצות bumpers and the annual mitzvah of elaborating on the story - מצות מצות מצות מצות מצות מצות מצות. We keep telling this story because it’s a damn good story. It is the story that eclipses all stories.

What is the essence of this story of the Exodus from Egypt? It is the ultimate story of the underdog, the weak overcoming the strong, the slaves rebelling against their masters. It is the story of spiritual strength overcoming military might. It is a story that starts really badly. It begins with servitude and ends in

² Perhaps this is precisely why Postmodern thinkers are skeptical of meta-narratives. Jean-François Lyotard writes in his The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge - “Simplifying to the extreme, I define postmodern as incredulity toward metanarratives.”
³ https://www.wired.com/2011/03/why-do-we-tell-stories/
redemption. It is a story filled with drama - the Ten plagues, the killing of the firstborns, the splitting of
the Sea; it has great props - staffs that turn to snakes, frogs in ovens, blood smeared on the doorpost; and
it has great characters - Moshe, Aharon, and even Pharaoh. Its conclusion, while foreshadowed, is only
revealed at the very end as the Egyptian army drowns. God is holding all the keys.

Part III - How We Tell the Story

But how we tell this story is as important as the actual story itself. The Mishna in Pesachim (10:4) teaches
us the manner in which we must tell the story - He begins with disgrace and concludes with praise; and expounds from “A wandering Aramean was my father” (Deuteronomy 26:20-25) until he completes the whole section. What is the disgrace and what is the praise? Here, a
debate emerges between two of the preeminent Babylonian scholars, Rav and Shmuel. Rav said that one
should begin by saying: “At first our forefathers were idol worshippers” (עבודה עובדי אבותינו), before concluding with words of glory. And Shmuel said: “The disgrace with which one should begin
his answer is: “We were slaves (עבדים היינו לפרעה).”

What is the crux of this debate? It is likely not a debate at all, just two sides of the same coin. Rav
emphasizes the spiritual dimension of the Exodus story. We were original idolaters, dating back to the
times of Terach, father of Abraham, and then we became monotheists through the story of the Exodus.
Shmuel, in contrast, focuses on the political aspect of redemption. We were once slaves, now we are free.
Proof that these two scholars are not really arguing can be found in the Haggadah itself where both of
their statements appear in the Haggadah.4

The logic of Shmuel’s opinion is self-evident. The story begins with the first chapter of Shemot, which
describes how we arrived in Egypt as guests of Pharaoh and evolved into slaves. However, Rav’s decision
to begin the story with Terach is harder to comprehend. How far back does one really want to go? Is Rav
questioning the whole concept of a structured narrative with a neat beginning, middle and end? Does he
believe that beginnings and ends are just an artificial human construct? Why not just begin the story at
the beginning of Sefer Shemot?!

Alternatively, I would argue that Rav is trying to teach us to search out the story of the Exodus earlier on
in the Torah. After all, the seeds of exile were planted generations before, in Sefer Bereishit. How did the
Jews get to Egypt in the first place? Because the brothers sold Yosef. And who is Yosef and these
brothers? For that we need to go back to Yaakov. And so on and so forth.... all the way back to Terach. In
a way, the Exodus story functions like a magnetic force field that draws everything towards it; it is the
pretext and the subtext of all of Sefer Bereishit. All roads lead to Mitzrayim - the story of Avraham,
Yitzchak, and Yaakov all point in this direction. Avraham is told in a prophetic dream, “Know well that
your offspring shall be strangers in a land not theirs, and they shall be enslaved and oppressed four
hundred years; but I will execute judgment on the nation they shall serve, and in the end they shall go
free with great wealth.” And all roads lead from Mitzrayim. Countless mitzvot connect us back to
Mitzrayim - Tefillin, Shabbat, Tzitzit, Helping the destitute, Kiddush, Birchat Hamazon, the Shema, Pidyon
Habein, Brit Milah, Pesach, Sukkot, Shavuot etc.5 We are told to remember that we were slaves in Egypt

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4 See Rishonim such as Rabbeinu Chananel who says that today we act in accordance with both views. See Rav Rimon’s
Haggadah (pgs 23-38) for an extensive analysis of the structure of the Haggadah. He contends that our Haggadah is actually
composed of four different voices, two of which are Rav and Shmuel.

5 See Ramban, end of Parshat Bo, where he addresses this issue of the paramount importance of Yetziat Mitzrayim in Jewish
Thought.
thirty six times in the Torah. The ultimate punishment of the Tochacha is that we will return to Egypt and history will be undone. We left Mitzrayim in order to enter the Land of Israel, and until we have fully arrived in Israel, we are technically still exiled in Egypt.

But who is to say these two possibilities of understanding Rav are mutually exclusive? Perhaps Rav is teaching us the deeper spiritual truth that if the beginning and end of a story is just a human construct, then it is also true that all stories are ultimately connected. So, Rav eschews a story of the Exodus that begins very neatly with Sefer Shemot. Everything is interconnected. Like the roots of a tree which spread far beneath the surface of the Earth, creating a complex web of symbiotic interaction, one story is really part of other stories - they are all one story. They all go back to the One Source of Being. After all, isn’t God the ultimate storyteller? Did not He Himself weave the first story to create the universe - הבשר ו yayın ממימרות בראשית והעולם במלאך הנברא שמו? Perhaps we simply need to unearth the roots to see the all-encompassing spiritual framework which lurks right beneath the surface? Rav is teaching out not just to seek out the spiritual dimension of the Exodus story, but also the spiritual and concealed dimension of all reality, perhaps most importantly, in our own lives as well.

Part IV - It’s Our Personal Story

The Seder Pesach has another (undisclosed) agenda as well. For a Jew in any age, telling the story of the Exodus is really about recognizing that this story is not just any story, it is our story. We quoted the Mishnah Pesachim 10:4 which commands us to tell the story through expounding upon verses in Devarim 6:20-25 which begins with the phrase ביכורים - אבינו אבימלך את ארמי. We are commanded to bring our first fruits each year to the Beit Hamikdash and recite this special passage. How ironic that we tell the story of the Exodus through six pesukim that don’t even appear in the Book of Exodus! These pesukim are specifically chosen because they tell a story about how to tell the story of Yetziat Mitzrayim. These pesukim are worth reading inside because they constitute the most essential text on the Seder night:

When you enter the land that the LORD your God is giving you as a heritage, and you possess it and settle in it. You shall take some of every first fruit of the soil, which you harvest from the land that the LORD your God is giving you, put it in a basket and go to the place where the LORD your God will choose to establish His name. You shall go to the priest in charge at that time and say to him, “I acknowledge (הגדתי) this day before the LORD your God that I have entered the land that the LORD swore to our fathers to assign us...You shall then recite as follows before the LORD your God: “My father was a fugitive Aramean. He went down to Egypt with meager numbers and sojourned there; but there he became a great and very populous nation. The Egyptians dealt harshly with us and oppressed us; they imposed heavy labor upon us. We cried to the LORD, the God of our fathers, and the LORD heard our plea and saw our plight, our misery, and our oppression. The LORD freed us from Egypt by a mighty hand, by an outstretched arm and awesome power, and by signs and portents. He brought us to this place and gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey. Wherefore I now bring the first fruits of the soil which You, O LORD, have given me.”

6 Mishna Pirkei Avot 5:1 - God created the world through ten utterances of אשוב וה-president.
This confession or story told by the Israelite (הגדתי) is not just dry history. As the Torah envisions it, the recitation of this passage is a moment of profound religious vision. It is the moment when an Israelite farmer is able to see beyond the “four amot” of his own life, to peer into the divine scheme and recognize how that story of the Exodus from Egypt about his distant ancestors is his personal story. He becomes a witness to the interconnectedness of all reality. Had the Exodus not happened, this Israelite would not be in the land promised to Abraham, and certainly not presenting the fruits of his labor in the Temple. Notice the recurring plural language littered throughout this passage - “The LORD freed us from Egypt.... He brought us to this place.” On the Seder night, the Exodus is no longer objective history, it takes on personal meaning; it becomes real. On Seder night, we recognize our own place in this great story. By passing on the story, we become instrumental in it’s fulfillment.

A friend of mine told me about his grandfather who struggled to speak about his tragic experience after losing his four siblings in the Holocaust. His family knew very little about his story until one Pesach, the year before he passed away, he was able to see for the first time, while sitting around the Seder table with his five grandchildren, the larger picture of his life - the darkness and the light, all in one broad vision. This is what is supposed to transpire when a person brings their Bikkurim to the Beit Hamikdash. This is what we aim to accomplish on Seder night. This is what Jews have been doing for generations.

Take for example, Don Isaac Abravanel, head financier to King Ferdinand and Isabella and leader of the Jewish community in Sepharad at the time of the inquisition and Expulsion. In his commentary on the Haggadah, Abravanel argues that the notion of seeing ourselves as if we left Egypt is not just some act of make-believe, of trying to feel as if we left Egypt. Rather it demands that we recognize that the suffering that Jews experience in each generation is in reality an extension of the מצרים גלות. The same is true of the moments of salvation - these too are an extension of מצרים יציאת. This is the true meaning of the notion מצרים יצא הוא איכ randomness - it means to personalize the Exodus story and to recognize it in the vicissitudes of our own lives as well.

Another striking example comes from Rabbi Eliezer Rokeach of Worms, a 12th century Ashkenazi scholar who writes about an unusual custom that his father would observe every Pesach. While reciting the words שהיא והנה, which speaks about the eternal covenant between Hashem and the Jewish people, his father would tell the story of their own communal survival - how the whole community had nearly been wiped out from a blood libel after a Christian girl was found dead in a well and the Jews were accused of murdering her. Somehow, through miraculous intervention, the community was saved.

But it is not only the past that we narrate. We also narrate the future. We take our faith which is anchored in the past and apply it to the future. We take our faith which is anchored in the past and apply it to the future. The story of Exodus provides the blueprint for all future redemptions. Every story we will ever tell as Jews will somehow be a microcosm of the Exodus story. Think about Chanukah, Purim, Yom Hazikaron coupled with Yom Haatzmaut. המתייל בהנה פרסיים בשבעה is the template of every Jewish story - light follows after darkness, Geulah follows after Galut, Medinat Yisrael comes into existence after the Shoah.

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7 Thanks to Rabbi Menachem Leibtag and Rabbi Dovid Silber for their insights on this passage.
8 Haggadah of the Rokeach
9 This phase taken from Berachot 4b teaches us about the concept of semicha geulah letefilla - not pausing between the recitation of ישראל גאל and the recitation of the Amidah. It is interesting that the gemara specifically points out that one who does this will merit the World to Come, emphasizing the future.
But there is more to this narrative of עַזִּי אָבִיד אֵלִי. Because the ability to tell a story, to weave a tale, to share a narrative, to see the whole breadth of history in one panoramic view, that is the sign of a free man, a true חורין בן חוֹרִים. To be able to extricate oneself from one’s daily pettiness and narrow-mindedness and to see the grandeur of history is to be free. To recognize how one is part of this larger narrative, is part of the redemption process itself. After all, storytelling is an act of faith, especially Jewish story-telling, which is founded on the premise that no matter how bad things are, we will prevail and the redemption will come - בְּשִׁשָּׁהוֹן וְמְסֵיָּהּ בְּגָנְתָּהּ וְמְסֵיָּהּ. When the Israelite is offering up his Bikkurim stands in the Temple, he is first and foremost telling a story. He is connecting the dots of his own life and those of his ancestors. By building this narrative, he partners with God. God orchestrated the events; it is our job, anchored in our emunah, to interpret the facts and frame the story.

Part V - Family Narratives

A number of years ago, an article appeared in the NYTimes titled, “The Stories that Bind Us.” The article explored research about family resilience and why some families succeed where others fall apart during times of crisis. What makes some families dysfunctional and others resilient? The author concludes, “The single most important thing you can do for your family may be the simplest of all: develop a strong family narrative...The ones who know a lot about their families tend to do better when they face challenges.” When a child knows they are part of something bigger than themselves, they are more likely to make it through tough times.

But not every family narrative is the same. There are three different models of family narratives. The first one, the ascending family narrative, sounds like this: we came to this country with nothing, now we are very blessed. The descending family narrative is as follows - we used to have it all, but now we lost everything. But the third narrative, the oscillating family narrative makes families the most resilient. It goes like this - “we've had our ups and downs as a family. We've had setbacks, dad lost his job...but no matter what happened we always stuck together as a family.” The author concludes,

When faced with a challenge, happy families, like happy people, just add a new chapter to their life story that shows them overcoming the hardship. This skill is particularly important for children, whose identity tends to get locked in during adolescence.

If there was ever a psychological study that explained the power of a particular mitzvah, this is it! On Seder night, we communicate to our children our own oscillating narrative that swings like a pendulum from גָּלוֹת to גֵּיאוֹת. We teach our children that no matter what comes their way, God will never abandon his people - יהא שֵׁמֶדֶר לָבָטֵי וּלְוֹן and we will not abandon Him.

When we sit at the Seder table, we not only teach our children about our own larger family/national narrative, we also give them the tools to carry this narrative into the future. We educate them to take the paradigm of Yetziat Mitzrayim, the ultimate story of hope and redemption and bring it into their own lives.

Conclusion - The Story We Will Tell about Pesach Corona

10 https://www.nytimes.com/2013/03/17/fashion/the-family-stories-that-bind-us-this-life.html
What story will we tell our children and grandchildren, and great-grandchildren? What story will we leave for posterity? How will we tell the story about Pesach Corona?

For many children this will be their first real seder. Every other seder before this was a game of make-believe - “How can I make it appear like I am leaving Egypt?”

So, what will we tell future generations?

**We will tell our children** how there was one year when we actually had to make Pesach on our own, where everyone was afraid of being infected or infecting others, but we came together as a country, and as a people, and we made it happen.

**We will tell our children** this was a Pesach where the elderly were barred from attending our family seder, but we just redoubled our efforts to connect to them.

**We will tell our children** that we were alone for Pesach and that though it was lonely and strange, the bonds of support that we offered each other leading up to this moment, kept us strong through the night.

**We will tell our children** this was a year where we actually fulfilled the mitzvah of telling our children the story of the Exodus. We played games, asked questions, and studied together. We did this instead of arguing over politics at the Seder with our aunts, uncles, and cousins.

**We will tell our children** how the bonds of love and humanity managed to overcome this cruel and vicious virus that knows no compassion and does not distinguish between different races of men.

**We will tell our children** about the incredible chesed that was performed in our community (at Shivtei) and throughout the whole Jewish world.

**We will tell our children** of the bravery and courage of our doctors, nurses, and paramedics who fought at the front lines saving lives everyday while risking their own, just like the Jewish midwives saved Jewish babies in Egypt.

**We will tell our children** that this was the Pesach where we truly felt what it must have been like to be enslaved in Egypt, not knowing what the future would hold.

**We will tell our children** about our own family history - our own גנות and שבח in order to personalize the Seder and give our children the tools to build strong families of their own.

**We will tell our children** that this was the Pesach where we looked the Angel of death in the eye, as he banged on the door, and if not our door, than our neighbors, or our parents, or our old friends from London, New York, Italy, Joburg, Sydney or wherever, and told the Angel of death, that they better skip over our house because this year we are choosing life over death, hope over despair, and faith over fear.

This story is still unfolding, now is the time to create it for future generations.
הג כשר שמח!
شددך ל anxious שלמה בmahra biミニ אנמי!