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The Pesach Seder as the Antidote to Assimilation

By Rafi Eis · March 30, 2026

The Pesach Seder is not a mere commemoration of ancient Jewish history. It is a profound act of spiritual defiance and national preservation. The Seder transmits Jewish identity to the next generation through millennia of exile, persecution, and the relentless social pressure of assimilation.

To understand the weight of this moment, we must first acknowledge the constant, historical state of Jewish affairs. For the entirety of our history, the Jewish people have lived as a minority immersed within a larger, dominant outside culture. This reality was not merely a byproduct of our exile. As the books of the Prophets testify, the struggle to maintain a distinct identity began in antiquity, when the Israelites lived as a monotheistic minority constantly navigating the pervasive influence of the polytheistic world around them. Whether with a state or bereft of one, Jews have always had to navigate the tension inherent in being part of the broader world and preserving our distinct, covenantal identity.

This is not mere sociology. Our covenantal charge is to be God's chosen people which requires perpetuation of its particularity and being "a nation that dwells apart" (Numbers 23:9) on the one hand, and being "a light of nations, That My [God's] salvation may reach the ends of the earth" (Isaiah 49:6) highlighting the imperative to interact with the world.

In recent centuries, this challenge has changed. Instead of maintaining our minority religion in an environment dominated by another, the Enlightenment fundamentally altered the landscape of Jewish life by championing universal reason and autonomy instead of religion. It suggested that particularistic traditions and binding covenants were obsolete relics. It attacked all religions by being a non-religion (while being unaware of its own religious axioms). While the Enlightenment sought to replace faith with stable, universal reason, that very emphasis on the self eventually dismantled all objective foundations, giving way to a contemporary landscape where truth is personal and all inherited frameworks are viewed with suspicion.

Today, this mindset has evolved into modern progressiveness. While contemporary culture champions many noble ideals, its paramount emphasis on absolute individual autonomy, the

deconstruction of inherited norms, and the fluid nature of truth poses a direct threat to the transmission of traditional Judaism. When the culture insists that the highest good is to forge one's own path completely unburdened by the past, the very concept of inheriting an ancient moral framework from one's parents becomes profoundly countercultural.

The Dilemma of Transmission and the Limits of Reason

Since classical antiquity, philosophers and educators have wrestled with the mechanics of transmitting virtue and a philosophy of life. In Plato's *Meno*, the foundational debate asks whether virtue can even be taught. The ancient Greeks, much like modern educators, recognized a frustrating reality. Transmission is not merely a matter of transferring data, literacy, or competency. A student can possess an encyclopedic grasp of Torah knowledge, or memorize the intricate philosophies of ethics, and yet lack a genuine, lived commitment to them. As we observe in various professional fields, technical mastery does not guarantee moral or personal integrity.

A major hurdle in teaching these deeper truths is the inherent distinctiveness of each child. Parents supply genetic material and raise the child (nature and nurture), but the inclinations, dispositions, opinions, and choices belong to the child. Because of this distinctiveness, parents cannot simply transfer their own worldview into their child's mind. Children have their own social networks and engage with the outside culture, whether through social media or the zeitgeist, in their own way. The larger culture has the potential to exert a massive and often contradictory influence on the child's moral development and identity formation.

At one level, parents must carefully, and sometimes delicately, navigate their child's exposure to other influences within the broader world that their children will eventually participate in. Proper education, however, requires not only protecting them from religious harm, but building and forming children with the right character, values, and worldview. Protection and building must occur in a way that works with the child's nature.

The Fragility of Inspiration

Relying solely on religious inspiration is a fragile strategy for continuity. The Torah itself demonstrates the vulnerability of inspiration. The revelation at Mount Sinai was the ultimate inspirational moment, accompanied by thunder, lightning, and the literal voice of the Divine. Yet this unparalleled inspiration barely lasted forty days before the Israelites succumbed to the temptation of the Golden Calf.

The prophet Elijah needed to relearn this lesson. Faced with the assimilationist Ahab and Jezebel, he proposed a sacrifice contest on Mount Carmel. The prophets of Baal were unable to coax a fire to come down from heaven, but Elijah did. Seeing this incredible miracle, "the people flung themselves on their faces and cried out: 'HaShem alone is God, HaShem alone is

God!” (I Kings 18:39). And within a few days, the Kingdom of Israel was back to its polytheistic and idolatrous ways.

Inspiration has little lasting power. By its very nature, inspiration stems from our emotional faculties. While it may spur immediate action, its longevity is inherently limited by the biological and psychological realities inherent within positive human emotion. Positive emotional states are temporary surges rather than permanent conditions of being, since “pleasure is always contingent upon change and disappears with continuous satisfaction.” This is in contrast to negative emotions as “pain may persist under persisting adverse conditions.”¹

Nico H. Frijda, *The Laws of Emotion*, American Psychologist, Vol. 43, No. 5 (1988), pp. 349-358 (p. 353).

The intense feelings of a positive emotion inevitably fade as the mind regulates itself and returns to a baseline state. Consequently, any personal or national commitment built exclusively on inspiration is highly vulnerable to the simple passage of time.

Creed’s Achilles Heel

Recognizing the inherent unreliability of emotional inspiration, many look to formal creeds and moral axioms to provide a more stable foundation for continuity. In a superficial sense, these declarative doctrines are indeed more enduring; one can recite and transmit the exact same phrases across generations without alteration. However, creeds are highly susceptible to the insidious threat of cultural erosion. As a society attempts to apply inherited values amid shifting technological, cultural, or philosophical realities, the original meaning of those foundational concepts can easily become warped. The philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre masterfully diagnosed this phenomenon, observing that while modern society continues to use the vocabulary of morality, it has lost the underlying conceptual framework required to achieve consensus on profound ethical dilemmas like abortion and the required conditions to engage in a morally justified war.²

Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, University of Notre Dame Press (1981), p. 6.

In contemporary discourse, the term “justice” is frequently invoked by competing factions with entirely contradictory definitions. For some, it signifies the impartial application of the rule of law, while for others, it represents a Marxist imperative for the equal distribution of status and material possessions. When the definitions of our most sacred principles are left entirely to the whims of the prevailing culture, the creed itself loses its power to anchor the next generation.

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Words never fully capture the ideas that they are meant to. They are part of a narrative framework where much of the meaning of the law is unwritten. As Robert Cover writes, “law and narrative are inseparably related.”³

Robert M. Cover, “The Supreme Court, 1982 Term — Foreword: Nomos and Narrative,” *Harvard Law Review*, Vol. 97, No. 4 (1983), pp. 4-68 (p. 5).

Therefore, “the creation of legal meaning – ‘jurisgenesis’ – takes place always through an essentially cultural medium.”⁴ This means that, “maintaining the world is no small matter and requires no less energy than creating it. Let loose, unfettered, the worlds created would be unstable”⁵ and “differences arise immediately about the meaning of creeds.”⁶ Maurice Halbwachs described this as a process in which “social forces, among others, prevail and displace the group’s center of gravity.”⁷ The encounter with a changing milieu warps the meaning of inherited norms, beliefs, and rules in a way that dislodges them from their original intended purpose. This leads to fundamental disagreements over how the nation’s values should be implemented. As we see in contemporary society, this breakdown can lead to conflicting understandings of the nation’s deepest defining values and even of the nation itself.

Memory and Identity

The solution to the erosion of identity lies at the depth of human psychology. To shape a child, we must shape their identity, and identity is fundamentally constructed from memory. A 2012 article in *The Atlantic*, titled “Amnesia and the Self That Remains When Memory Is Lost,” observes what happens when human memory vanishes.⁸

Levitin, D. (2012). “Amnesia and the Self That Remains When Memory Is Lost.” *The Atlantic*. <https://www.theatlantic.com/health/archive/2012/12/amnesia-and-the-self-that-remains-when-memory-is-lost/266662/>

When a person loses their memories, they are stripped of their constructed identity, leaving behind only their raw, unfiltered, natural tendencies. Without memories of love, loyalty, betrayal, hard work, or honesty to guide their choices, the person suffering from amnesia lacks a cohesive self.

The psychologist Erik Erikson defined this formed sense of self as the ego identity. Ego identity is, Erikson argued, “the ability to experience one’s self as something that has *continuity* and *sameness*, and to act accordingly (emphasis mine).”⁹

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4. Ibid., p. 11.

5. Ibid., p. 16.

6. Ibid., p. 15.

7. Maurice Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory*, University of Chicago Press, p. 86.

8.

Erik H. Erikson (1993). *Childhood and Society*, W. W. Norton & Company, p. 42.

Memories do not just catalog the past. They inform how an individual analyzes and responds to future situations. When a child is faced with the moral complexities and pressures of modern progressive culture, it is their ego identity, forged by deeply ingrained, formative memories, that provides the drive, determination, and fortitude to stand firm.

To survive the relentless cultural gravity of the surrounding world, the personal ego identity of a Jew cannot stand in isolation. It must be actively fused with Jewish national memory. It is precisely this deeply rooted sense of national attachment that overrides default individualism and endows a person with the profound strength to sacrifice for the continuity of his people. This strength is an absolute necessity because being a minority in a dominant majority culture requires more than a mere intellectual belief in one's way of life. It requires instinctual courage to remain steadfast even when that way of life is marginalized or mocked by the broader society. Historically, even in periods when Jews were not actively oppressed, they often faced restricted social mobility and received less honor than their peers in the majority. To choose the Jewish path under such conditions, the individual must be willing to forego personal advancement and social prestige for the sake of covenantal obligations. Being counter-cultural cannot be sustained by logic or abstract belief alone; the requisite sacrifice can only arise from a visceral connection to a national identity that is perceived as something significantly larger, and more eternal, than the self.

Reliving the national story connects each person to the nation, enabling individuals to tie their identities to the living, the dead, and the yet-to-be-born. In this way, memory overcomes the natural barriers imposed by the passage of time, invoking what President Abraham Lincoln called the “mystic chords of memory.”

Having Jewish memory flow through a person then provides the narrative framework to understand the proper meaning of Jewish law and aspirations. Morality, justice, and peoplehood all have clearer meanings.

In Sefer Devarim, his farewell addresses to the nation, Moshe Rabbeinu cements this methodology. He knows that as time passes, outside cultural forces of new eras will cause children to question the utility and relevance of the Torah. When that inevitable friction occurs, Moshe provides the ultimate blueprint for Jewish continuity:

When, in time to come, your children will ask you, ‘What do these decrees, laws, and rules that HaShem our God has commanded upon you mean?’ you shall say to your children, ‘We were slaves to Pharaoh in Egypt and HaShem freed us from Egypt with a mighty hand.’

Deuteronomy 6:20-21

Moshe does not command us to answer the child with a philosophical defense of the commandments' usefulness. He does not point to the cultural norms of the surrounding nations. He singularly focuses on constructing national memory. He anchors the creed within the context of lived experience. By continually re-experiencing our formative memories, we preserve the context necessary to collectively decipher the normative values we have inherited.

Lord Rabbi Jonathan Sacks emphasized that Moshe recognized a fundamental truth of history: while armies can conquer territory, only the sustained commitment of parents and teachers can perpetuate a nation.¹⁰

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, "The Teacher as Hero," *Covenant & Conversation*. <https://rabbisacks.org/covenant-conversation/devarim/the-teacher-as-hero/>

National Memory and Time

The most immediate critique of this approach is that this requires living in the past. This is of course impossible. The past might thoroughly tell Jews how to respond to polytheistic cultures where "gods have eyes who cannot see," (Psalms 115:5) but does it have the material to respond to the challenges posed by monotheistic Christianity or Islam, or universal human rights? Does the past have the answers to changing economies, especially as we move from industrial to computing to AI? Does it have the answers to the changing role of women in society? On a deeper religious level, does being a "light of nations" require influencing the world to turn back the technological clock?

Maurice Halbwachs, who was mentioned earlier as recognizing the profound impact of cultural forces on religious communities, argued that societies perpetuate themselves through intentional continuous reconstruction of the past. For Halbwachs,

*"in order for this center to remain in equilibrium, readaptation is required... The society wishes to adopt these larger and deeper beliefs without entirely rupturing the framework of notions in which it has matured up until this point... Society must persuade its members that they already carry these beliefs within themselves at least partially..."*¹¹

Halbwachs, p. 86.

To be clear, this is not living in the past. Rather, "at the moment of reproducing the past our imagination remains under the influence of the present social milieu."¹²

Ibid., p. 49.

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One brings the past into the present.

Halbwachs has an important caveat, however. This process “is possible only if society does not confront all of the past, if it at least preserves the forms of the past.”¹³

Ibid., p. 86.

Here the various retellings of Israel’s history are instructive. Joshua (chapter 24:2-13), Samuel (I 12:6-13), and Nehemiah (9:6-35) each publicly retell Israel’s history. These public ceremonies of memory transmission stress different events in Israel’s history. They begin at different points in Israel’s past. They all incorporate new events, but the telling of the history is not set in stone. Samuel skips over some of the events that Joshua mentions, and similarly with Nehemiah. They all mention the Exodus from Egypt, God’s salvation, and the importance of the land of Israel, which act as an anchor holding a ship in shifting tides. With cultural changes and new events, the challenges change, and therefore, different parts of Jewish history need to be emphasized and deemphasized within the national memory.

The need to construct and re-construct national memory that Halbwachs describes is a framework, not a clear-cut map. It is not always evident which contemporary values can and will be integrated with the national character. The nation will evolve due to some new ideals, but it also must be prepared to categorically reject others. Jews can adapt in some areas and retaliate in others. Most importantly, the claim to adapt must be made by appealing to the nation’s past, to tradition, and not by a call to reject or forget the past. This is an evolutionary process, not a revolutionary one.

The Biblical Pedagogy of Memory

This pedagogy of memory is not a late addition to Jewish thought. It is its very foundation. We are told that God’s choice of Abraham was not based on his individual piety alone, but on his capacity for transmission. We are not told which virtues of Abraham led God to choose him, but we are told that Abraham’s ability to properly teach the ways of God to his family is central: *For I have singled him out, that he may instruct his children and his posterity to keep the way of the HaShem* (Genesis 18:19).

Even more striking is the placement of this educational mandate within the Exodus narrative itself. As Rabbi Sacks points out, Judaism is fundamentally a religion of active memory.¹⁴

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, “We Are What We Remember,” *Covenant & Conversation*. <https://rabbisacks.org/covenant-conversation/ki-tavo/we-are-what-we-remember/>

Amidst the unfolding, cosmic drama of the Exodus, the Torah abruptly interrupts the historical action. Before the Israelites have even left Egypt, before the sea has split, God commands them

on how they must transmit this event to their children in the distant future. At three distinct points in this section, Moshe explicitly mandates this dialogue:

1. “And when your children ask you, ‘What do you mean by this rite?’” (Exodus 12:26)
2. “And you shall explain to your child on that day, ‘It is because of what God did for me when I went free from Egypt.’” (Exodus 13:8)
3. “And when, in time to come, a child of yours asks you, saying, ‘What does this mean?’ you shall reply, ‘It was with a mighty hand that God brought us out from Egypt, the house of bondage.’” (Exodus 13:14)

Only after Israel internalizes the importance of teaching their children about God’s redemption can the actual, physical freedom take place. The capacity to carry the story forward is treated as the very prerequisite for their freedom.

Conclusion

The Seder is uniquely designed to combat the amnesia threatened by the outside culture. It demands that parents become the central figures in reliving the Exodus story. The Talmud in Pesachim 116b, which is quoted in the Haggadah, insists that “in each and every generation a person must view himself as though he personally left Egypt.”

The section in the Haggadah of “Arami Oved Avi” highlights this process. The section begins with the person speaking about Jewish history in the third person as occurring in the past. However, when the person gets to the next verse and says “The Egyptians dealt harshly with *us*,” he now speaks in the first person about a present story.

If we are to view the Seder not as a relic but as a living mechanism, we must recognize that its success depends on our willingness to step into the narrative ourselves. The Seder fulfills that mandate through sensory, formative experiences. We taste the bitterness of the maror to remember the pain of subjugation; we eat the matzah to internalize the urgent Exodus from Egypt; we ask questions and debate, and most importantly, we tell the story.

This process is not foolproof. Children possess free will, and the modern progressive culture is a formidable, intoxicating force. Even the greatest parents and educators have faced the heartbreak of children who find the obligations too onerous or who desire more freedom than our binding tradition allows. Yet, providing these soul-nourishing experiences, reliving the Exodus at this very table, remains the absolute best, historically proven model we possess for shaping the Jewish identity.

By providing these soul-nourishing experiences, we are not merely observing a ritual; we are ensuring that the story continues. Ultimately, the Seder is not about how late into the night you

go. It is about how much you open yourself up to realize that you are part of a much larger story that began thousands of years before you were born and will continue for millennia after you die.

Open yourself up to be formed by the Jewish story. Let it overtake you and shape the thoughts of your mind. Be constructed by Jewish national memory.