

THE SYMBOLIC OF THE FIFTH SON IN JUDAISM

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Abstract: *Many of the Jewish customs at the Seder table were intended specifically to capture the attention of the child. The Seder service, and the reciting of the Haggadah, have always been considered to be directed particularly towards the children: "And you shall relate to your son on that day" (Exodus 13:8). And the different kinds of education which are needed could be illustrated in the passage in the Haggadah which tells of the four kinds of son: one who is wise and one who is contrary, one who is simple and the one who does not know how to ask. But there is a fifth, and far more problematic, son. There is a good reason why he is not mentioned explicitly in the Haggadah. Because he is the absent son. He is the son who suffered, who felt the pain, he is the Holocaust Survivor.*

Keywords: *Judaism, Holocaust, survivors, Pesach, son, Haggadah.*

The symbolism key of the fifth son comes from the very ritual of Pesach (Heb. פסח) which represents one of the three pilgrim festivals (together with Shavuot and Succot), when the pilgrimages to the Temple in Ierusalim were a commandment for Jews: "three times a year to keep a feast unto me"¹ (Exodus 23:14). According to the Jewish calendar, the feast of Passover is celebrated for seven days in Israel and eight days in the Diaspora, starting with 14 Nissan.

The Feast of Pesah, like all Jewish celebrations, has a double meaning: historical and agrarian. The historical significance is that Pesah recalls the Jewish Exodus and the end of slavery in Egypt. "Its agrarian meaning is that of celebrating the spring at the beginning of the harvest of barley".²

Pesah has also other names meant to show the plurality of this feast. One of these names is *the hag ha-maṭot*³ (Exod 12:15), the name comes from the fact that on this day should be consumed bread without yeast (Heb. מצות - *matzot*) and there is the interdiction to consume *hameṭ* (Heb. חמץ – lit. leavened dough; everything what is baked from wheat, oats or rye; food in which composition can be found a ferment, usually yeast) or any types of dough-based food. This prescription comes from the idea that at the Jewish departure from Egypt, they did not have time to let the dough to leaven, having to bake it as it was, the result being those pieces of maṭot. Another name is that of *zman herutenu*⁴ (time of our freedom), when it is evoked the liberation of the Jews being under Egyptian bondage and set up as free people.

¹ *Encyclopedic Dictionary of Judaism* (Bucharest, Hasefer, 2001), 604.

² *Ibid.*, 604.

³ *Ibid.*, 604.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 605.

Pesah, which is a spring holiday (*hag ha-aviv*), requires some preparation for this season. First of all every home has to be cleaned, also it is prohibited to have in the house, during the feast, any type of dough-based food. Cleaning the vessels commonly used in cooking to remove any traces of food debris is another preparation made before the start of the feast. Also, all the food and fermented drinks (*mehirat hamef*⁵; ebr. מכירת חמץ – Jewish commandments which requires the removal from Jewish home of everything is leavened during Pesah feast) that could not be eaten before Pesah must be sold symbolically, even if they remain in the house. "The sale is purely formal, the rabbi is usually empowered to legalize this arrangement for the whole community. As for fermented products remained in the house without being included in this sale, their consumption remains prohibited even after Pesah."⁶

As in the case of other pilgrimage celebrations one of the Five Scrolls is read; for Pesah this is the Song of Songs, especially because in this book there is a description of the spring, season intimately related to Pesah.

In the ceremony of this festival can be found many symbolic elements with a resonance well known in Jewish families. One of these elements is *Seder* (Heb. סדר) whose grammatically root comes from the verb *lesader* (Heb. לסדר) which means to make order, to arrange and represents actually the domestic ceremony order which takes place on the first evening of Passover. *Seder* is one of the most respected rituals by Jewish people and one of the most important symbols. It solemnly evokes the slavery and the Exodus of the Jews from Egypt through a set of symbols, lectures and special hymns⁷. In order to establish the *Seder*, the wise men used the biblical text, which indicates the special meal which must be taken in the family with the occasion of the celebration of Pesah (Ex.12: 8).

Seder is a set of family rituals that recalls and confirms each year the miraculous liberation of the Jews from slavery: "When you will eat it (the sacrificed lamb-note), you must have a belt around your waist, your shoes on your feet and your stick in your hand; and eat it in haste; because it is the Lord's Passover" (Exod 12:10-15). This includes in a precise and symbolic order, several recitations and ritual food tasting, which express praise, gratitude and joy. *Seder* is more than just another way of retelling the history of the Jews. It is a vibrant learning experience in which all senses are implicated. This allows literally the "digesting" of the message sent by Judaism.

Seder ritual involves the use of ritual objects and books such as: - *Haggadah* (Heb. הגדה - the name of the book containing the liturgical order of the ceremony and related stories at the exit from Egypt), which is the book that represents the central element of this great feast. The service during *Seder* night and the recitation of the *Haggadah* were always considered to be directed especially to children: "And you will tell your son on that day ..." (Exodus 13:8), and therefore, many of the Jewish habits of the *Seder* meal were specifically

⁵ *Ibid.*, 605.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 605.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 607.

meant to capture the child's attention. And among different types of education, which are illustrated in this section of the *Haggadah*, it tells about his four sons, the wise, the wicked, the simple and the one who does not know how to ask or inquire. But nowadays there is a fifth son, more problematic. There is a reason he is not explicitly mentioned in the *Haggadah*. Because he is the absent son:

I remember another Passover. Once again we were two who were reciting from Haggadah book. Simha for the first time remained silent. Suddenly he interrupted us.

- Reuven, he said to my father, fulfill your duty as a father. Haggadah, continued Simha, tells us about the four sons and their attitude about the question that has to be asked. The first son knows the question and assumes it; The second son knows the question and rejects it; The third son treats the issue with indifference; The fourth one does not even know the question. Of course there is a fifth son, but he does not show up in the story because he is gone. Therefore, the duty of a Jewish father is to pass on to the living⁸

Number five which appears here as a symbol of the Jewish Survivor released from concentration and extermination camps during the Second World War, represents a human characteristic. Number five is found in the human body: the five fingers of the hand and feet, the five senses (touch, taste, smell, hearing and sight), the five limbs (two arms, two legs and the head, the bust being the center). Considered as a mediator between God and the Universe, five is regarded as a symbol of the Universe. This number also represents harmony and balance, the divine beauty, so that is why it plays an important role in Judaism.

Even if the reactions of the four sons about *Seder* are different, they still have something in common. They are all present. Even so, the "wicked" son is there, according to the low interest for what happens in the Jewish life around him. This justifies the hope that someday he will become "wise", and all Jewish children present at *Seder* will become dutiful and observants of the tradition.

Unfortunately, nowadays, there is a different kind of Jewish child. The child who amazes by his absence, which has no interests in *Torah* (The five books of Moses) and *Mitzvot* (Judaic Religious Commandments), which is not even aware of *Seder* and its miracles, he is the child who was deported from various parts of Europe in the Nazi extermination camps. His absence is somehow explained exactly by the segregation from the environment in which he was accustomed to live and his transfer to a world of pain and anguish. After the war, the Survivors of the inferno, represented by the the German machine of human destruction during the Holocaust, will return to life as a symbol of the fifth son, the son who will always be absent from the *Seder* table.

In this context, there are different sad life experiences of children who had to endure the horrors of the Holocaust, to be separated from parents and family, which have made the ultimate efforts to survive and to return to life in order to have another chance to meet and hug any relative who was still alive. This includes the tragic experience of Elly Berkovits

⁸Wiesel, E, *The Fifth Son* (New York, Schocken Book, 1985), 36-41.

Gross, who was born and raised until the age of 15 in a small town in northwest Transylvania called Șimleu Silvaniei. Many Jewish families were established in that area and at the end of the nineteenth century it became one of the most important centers of the Jewish Communities of Sălaj County. Elly has not given up the hope that one Day, she will meet again her mother and brother, and will spend another Pesach together. Elly was the one who was deported from Cehei ghetto with her family, along with thousands of Jews in the Nazi concentration and extermination camps:

In 1944, on the first day after the Jewish Passover they gathered us from the city and took us to Cehei ghetto. They told us that they would take us where the men were taken two years ago, to reunite the family. No one knew anything. I hoped that that time we would not be tricked. (...) I'll never forget as long as I live. When I walked into Cehei ghetto on the right side there were pillars where some older men were tied. Their bodies were filled with dried blood. They were not dead, they were faint. They were beaten if they had something to hide. 1,594 Jewish lived in town - I made a list. Later, I made another list with those who survived - 210 of the 1,594 people. I can say it was a miracle that I survived. Four women were elected to peel potatoes. I was 15 and I was one of them. I was allowed to eat boiled potatoes as much as I wanted and I had water to drink. The others stood in line two days to get a potato. I'll never forget that even the Crasna River was flowing near the ghetto, they were not giving us water. When I left work in the evening, I received one or two raw potatoes, which I gave to my brother and mother.

On Saturday, 27 May (nn 1944), it was a beautiful sunny day, but not for us. I was with my mother and brother, in the first shipment of 3,106 people. They told us to get in a canvas tent, we were stripped to the skin and they controlled us, not to have a thing. This happened from Saturday morning till evening. In the evening, they led us to the oxen carriages where 95-100 people entered into a waggon and I repeat, Crasna was flowing there and they gave us only a bucket of water to so many people, which meant a drop for each person and a bucket for physiological needs.

We left in the evening from Șimleu station, after we spent the whole day in the sun, in the carriage. The transport started during the night of 28 to 29th. (...) On the way a child was born. There were people who died and the dead were held in one side of the wagon.

When we got off the waggon, the dead people, the mother with her new born child and those who could not walk were thrown into a carriage which was pulled by men in striped clothes. The area was surrounded with barbed wire, there were men shouting and dogs were barking. I saw smoke coming out of chimneys and from time to time red flames. The air was full of smoke. We couldn't see the sky, it was like a mist and it smelled like burnt rubber. From far away I heard symphonic music. We were separated into two groups: mothers with children and younger girls on one side, older men with younger boys on the other side. At the last moment, an officer dressed well, with white gloves, made a sign and then a soldier pushed

*me towards the group of men. I ran and I waved my hand to my mother for the last time. It was the last time I saw them alive. Later, after the war, I learned that they were gassed*⁹

In the same context the Nobel laureate Elie Wiesel, born in Sighetu Marmăției describes his experience in another ghetto where he had to spend the Passover with his family:

*....the last Passover spent in the ghetto Suddenly appears in my conscience, I wonder why. All those people from the table. Familiar and weird faces. Songs of joy mixed with pain*¹⁰

The duty of a Jew father is to forward the ritual, to hand down the tradition and the items used during the ages, to approach the people around him and reveal them the knowledge. This knowledge is focused on the use of a number of tools required by the religious ritual. On each celebrating, the ritual objects are an important part of the holiday and much more on Pesach when the traditions and customs are transmitted from generation to generation.

Therefore, at the traditional evening meal of Pesach, during Seder, there is a ritual object named Keara (Heb. קערה), which is a tray loaded with five symbolic elements: *zeroa* - a fried piece of bone as a symbol of Divine power, the arm of God which took out Jews from Egypt; *Beitza* - a boiled egg as a symbol of fertility; *Maror* - bitter herbs evoking the Jews suffering under the Egyptian bondage; *Haroset* - a mixture of apple, nuts, wine and caramel, in the memory of the mortar used by the Jews slaves to build the Pharaoh's cities and the three *matot* (Heb. מצות - unleavened bread, azyne).

The four cups of wine, are the centerpiece of the ceremony, symbolizing the four terms that express the Deliverance in the Bible, (Ex. 6:6-7)¹¹ and are related to the four sons. Therefore the fifth cup of wine is based on abiding faith in the rebirth of the Jewish people in general. Pesach is a holiday of rebirth and of constant renewal.

As the *Seder* term shows, the ceremony takes place in a certain order. It begins with the blessing of the wine (the first of four cups on Seder), which symbolizes the consecration of that particular day; it continues with the hands washing and it is followed by the consumption of a root vegetable, kept in salted water, which is shared to everyone at the table.¹² The bitter roots remember of little and poor food of the Jews during Exodus, and also about spring - the rebirth of nature. The one who soaks the vegetables in salted water also says a blessing, and then he takes a bite of it. The salt water symbolizes the tears of the Jews - both of pain, during slavery, and of joy, from the moment of release. In order to please the children who participate at the event, one of the parents breaks half of the *matza* slice (called

⁹ Berkovits Gross, E., *Interview with Holocaust Survivor*, in "Agerpres", May, 29th 2014, Social.

¹⁰Wiesel,E, *The Fifth Son*, 42.

¹¹Encyclopedic Dictionary of Judaism, 711.

¹²*Ibid.*, 712.

afikoman) and hides it, so that, after the meal, a reward can be given to the one who finds it. Then, the first part of the Book Haggadah is read, and every participant must read a paragraph of this book. In the same time the second cup of wine is consumed. All the food is consumed with bitter herbs during the Seder meal in order to remind the rough events, lived by the Jews along the time, from the Egypt exodus to the Holocaust.

At the end of the ceremony it takes place the *sulhan oreh* (Heb. אורחשולחן) which is the meal of *Seder* and reminds of the ancient Passover meal. After the meal special gratitude blessings are recited. The *nirṭah* (meaning that the Commemoration was accepted) is the closing moment of the ceremony, when the participants wish each other: "*Le Shan ha-baa bi-Iruṣalaim*" (Heb. בירושליםבאהלשנה)¹³ –next year see you in Jerusalem.

As a conclusion, the present research aims to contribute to the detailed knowledge of some aspects of the daily life of Jews, to identify connections between the past and the present by highlighting the traditions and customs aspects of life which are correlated with the experience of the Holocaust Survivors and last but not least to offer the possibility of a more extensive approach of the symbolism in the Jewish religion. The main contribution of the study is to develop a way to approach and to understand a subject less known about Judaism, and to translate it into a personal note by means of the connection created by the Holocaust Survivors.

After 70 years from the end of the Second World War, the trauma of the Holocaust Survivors remains an open subject. For years, researchers and psychologists have worked very hard to study this phenomenon, not realizing that during the Holocaust a severe gap has occurred to the Jewish families, to their sons and daughters and this trauma affects the process of passing on the Jewish traditions and customs from generation to generation.

The fifth son who is absent from the Seder table was deprived of his necessary religious education and had to cope on his own and to learn from the little that was left by his parents. Some Jews have even abandoned the Jewish tradition and do not involve themselves in the religious activities anymore.

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¹³*Ibid.* p. 712.

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