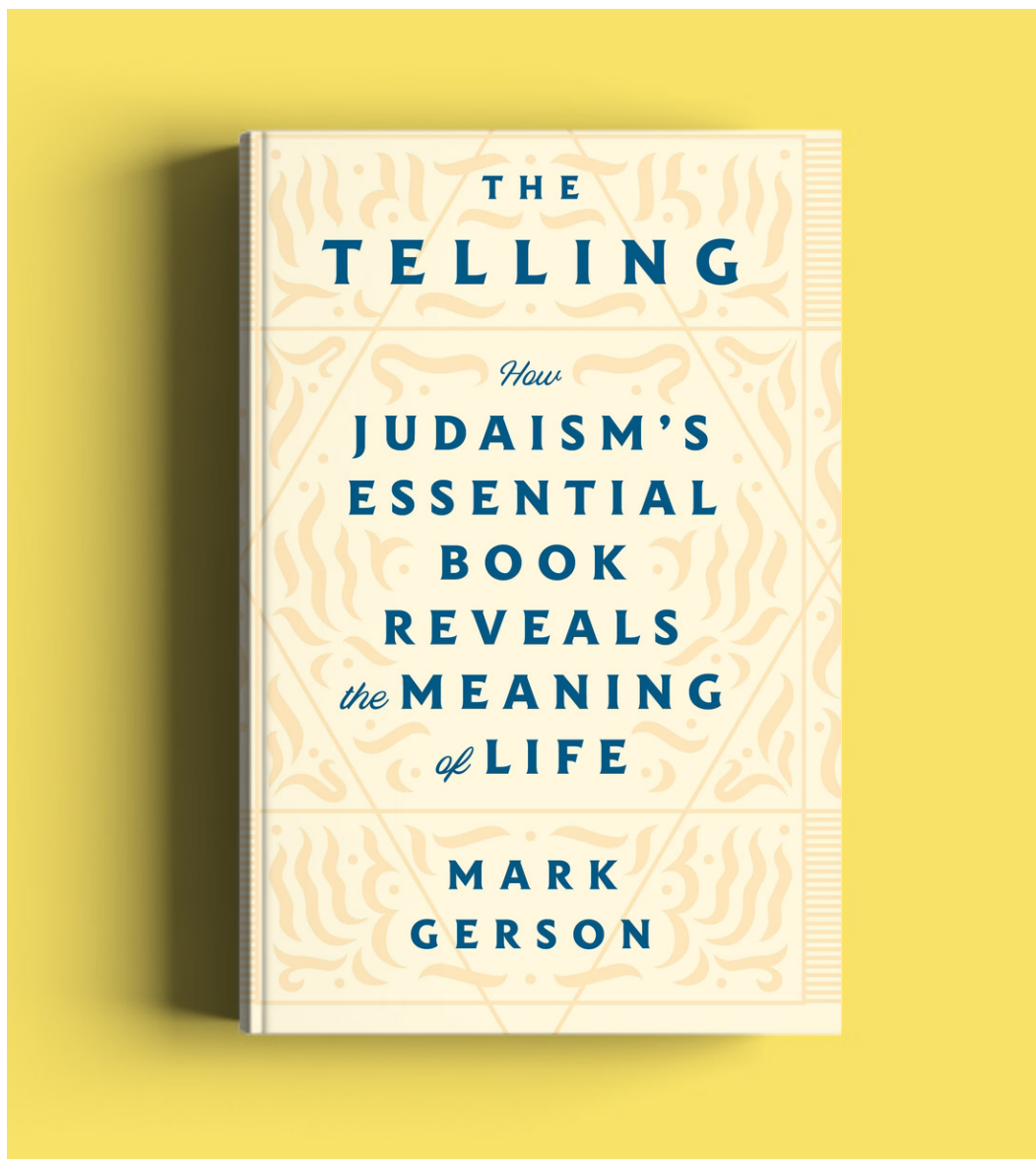


JBC Book Clubs Discussion Guide

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What Makes a Seder Great?.....	3
Discussion Questions.....	4
Make Your Best Seder.....	6
Live <i>The Telling</i> Throughout the Year.....	7
About Jewish Book Council.....	9

What Makes a Seder Great?

The purpose of *The Telling* is to make every Seder meaningful and memorable. How do we do this? At every Seder we re-tell the story of the Exodus from Egypt, and through this re-telling we re-live the experience, not simply of the Exodus, but of all the great Seders we've attended in the past.

Think back to the best Seder of your life. What made it so special? Who was there? What was discussed? When we think back on these memorable Seders, we realize that all great Seders include the following: Reconnection, Reflection, and Resolution.

Reconnection

The Seder grants us the opportunity to reconnect with the most important elements of our lives. It re-connects us horizontally: To friends, family and Jews around the world. It reconnects us vertically: Upwards to God, backwards towards our ancestors and forwards to our descendants.

Reflection

The story of our people, our family, begins in earnest with the Exodus from Egypt. We re-tell this story every year, but what changes is not that story but the people telling it. That we re-tell this story every year is an invitation to reflect on the person we have become in the past year. How is the person—and indeed, the people—telling the story different from the previous year?

Resolution

Finding ourselves re-telling the story again this year encourages us to think: who will we be next year? If we want to come to next year's Seder having grown in a certain way, today is the day we resolve to become that person. The discussion questions that follow in the next section are meant to help us engage in this resolution, and in the re-telling in general.



via Wikimedia Commons: Darmstädter Haggadah, artist Israel b. Meir of Heidelberg. An early 15th century manuscript copied around 1430 in square Ashkenazic script. The text on this page begins Psalm 79 verse 6. Original: Darmstadt, Hessische Landes-und Hochschulbibliothek

Discussion Questions

1. Mark claims that the Haggadah is our great Jewish guidebook, incorporating the Greatest Hits of Jewish Thought. What is some of the guidance from the Haggadah that you'd like to incorporate into your life in the coming year?
2. How does thinking about Pesach as the authentic Jewish New Year change the way you think about the holiday?
3. Mark shows how each of the foods on the Seder plate has several different meanings. Which interpretation of the hard boiled egg is most meaningful to you?
4. The book points out on p. 119 that the Haggadah does not tell the story through any of the many characters who populate the Book of Exodus—but through an imaginary man far in the future. Why is the imagination so important?
5. On p. 126, Mark shows that the Haggadah praises a great Rabbi for...bragging! When is it okay to forthrightly acknowledge our strengths and abilities, and why?
6. Mark makes the case that the Torah (and the Haggadah) teach that the single most important quality with which to approach the world is gratitude. Why is it important for us to think of the world in the language and with the feeling of gratitude?
7. The book argues that freedom, in the context of Pesach, is never the ability to do whatever one wants—but is always associated with a higher purpose. We are blessed to be free. To what purpose do you want to dedicate your freedom?
8. Mark makes the case that American history is one great Seder, as it is the story of each generation re-living and re-telling the story of the Exodus. How can our generation best help to continue this incredible tradition?
9. Our festival of freedom is called “Order.” What is the juxtaposition of order and freedom in your life?
10. On p. 193, Mark makes the case that each of us is the 70th person who went down to Egypt, and is an actual part of the continuous story. How will we think differently of ourselves as Jews, with that role in mind?
11. Mark shows how Dayenu teaches us to express gratitude in the specific. How can we better express our gratitude in our everyday—and less frequent—activities?
12. Would you want your child to marry the wise son or the simple son—and why?
13. On pp. 257-9, Mark illustrates how the ninth plague is against Egyptian relationships, with the consequence being immobilizing depression. How are we to think about that, especially after this year of quarantine?
14. The book contains a chapter called: “Haste: The Moral Imperative of Speed.” Why is Judaism so insistent that speed is so important to being a good person? If you accept the moral imperative of speed, what will you do faster in the coming year?
15. The chapter entitled “The Tenth Plague: What It Means That The Jews are the Chosen People” explains that the firstborn is not a chronological

Discussion Questions

concept—but a cultural one. Who in your family and community are the culture carriers, and what wisdom can you offer them in the coming year?

16. Mark makes the case that God is perfect because he learns and changes. What are those implications for each of us?

17. On pp. 94-7, Mark explores how the four questions never interested anybody, and that this is intentional—as they lead us to understand the importance of, per King Solomon, educating a child “according to his way.” How will you educate each of your children differently, realizing that Jewish education is based on this premise?

18. The book closes with an explanation of how the Pesach holiday, through Pesach Sheni, gives us the gift of second chances. What do you want a second chance at in the coming year?



Via [Wikimedia Commons](#): Birds' Head Haggadah
Southern Germany, c. 1300 Scribe: Menahem
Parchment, pen and ink, tempera; handwritten 47
leaves, 27 x 19 cm.

Make Your Best Seder

Each year, as the night of the first Seder approaches, Seder hosts wonder how to make this year's Seder more interesting and meaningful than last year's. Here are some principles to follow.

Reconnect:

The people with whom we choose to celebrate Seder night is one of the first and one of the most important decisions we make with regard to the holiday. This decision sets the tone not only for Seder night but for the year that follows. With whom will you be celebrating this year, and why?

Reflection:

The Seder night should facilitate our reflection. Choose three to four ideas from this book that will be especially interesting and meaningful to the specific people at the Seder.

Reflection (Parents):

Think about each child who will be at the Seder. What energizes and excites each of them specifically? How will you orient the Seder accordingly?

Resolution:

Make a list of the chametz not in your house but in your life — that you want to get rid of spiritually as you get rid of the bread products literally.

Live *The Telling* All Year Round

As *The Telling* shows, the Haggadah is a guide for more than just the Seder night. How do you bring the wisdom and lessons of the Haggadah into your every day life?

Educate

The Pesach Seder, from the Four Questions to the Four Sons and in many other places as well, emphasizes that effective education is done with regards to the specific strengths, interests and aptitudes of each child (and indeed, each person). Attuned to the importance of individual education, how will you be a better teacher to your children and to those around you in the year to come?

Time

The Telling emphasizes that the fundamental mark of a free person is how he/she handles time. To be a truly free person, we learn from Exodus 12:2, is to spend time wisely and thoughtfully. How will you be a better allocator of time in the coming year?

Words

While God could have created the world with a proverbial nod of the head or wink of the eye, God did so by speaking—with several “God said.” Just as God created the world with words, we too create our worlds with words. How will you use words better and more thoughtfully, to create the worlds I want to create?

Worthiness

Biblical passages, when transposed into the Haggadah, are truncated. This unfinished is clearly str-

tegic—as it teaches that the best endeavors and the most worthy goals are those that cannot be successfully completed in our lifetime. What goals do you want to set that you will die having not fulfilled—and, by the unfinished, prove themselves worthy of the devotion that you are going to give to them?

Miracles

The Telling (on p. 286) describes the great miracle-counting contest towards the end of the Maggid section of the Haggadah. The winner, Rabbi Akiva, counted 250 miracles in the Exodus. The book gives examples of actual miracles in our lives. How many can you count on an “ordinary” day? How might you feel differently, with respect to myself, others and/or God, at the end of such a day of counting?



Via Wikimedia Commons: The Four Questions. from the Sarajevo Haggadah, illuminated manuscript circa 1350 C.E. Svjetlost edition, Ljubljana

Live *The Telling* All Year Round

Mission

One of the early chapters shows that God's Business Card—declaring himself to be the Liberator from Exodus rather than the Creator of Genesis—teaches us many things, including that having a mission is crucial. If having a mission is so important to God, it must be even more so to those of us created in God's image. Moreover, Mark argues that God wants us to have a mission—and therefore could not have made it so hard to figure out. Providing a mission but making it inscrutable would be ridiculous—and God is not ridiculous! So: what is your mission in life?

Gratitude

The Telling shows how the expression of gratitude is important along with its cultivation. And the book further shows that gratitude is best expressed in the specific. How will you better express gratitude in the coming year?



Via Wikimedia Commons: This is the first illustration in the Golden Haggadah, fol.2r. Sourced from the British Library's Digitized Manuscript Collection. MS 27210. between circa 1320 and circa 1330

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Jewish Book Council, with roots dating back to 1925, is the only nonprofit dedicated to the promotion of Jewish-interest literature. For over 70 years, we have supported and celebrated Jewish authors and books, and used literature to bring people together for meaningful discussions around Jewish life, identity, and culture.

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