Chronos, Kairos and Chaos:
The Collapse of Time on Seder Night

Shabbat Hagadol 2011

...For in every generation our enemies seek to destroy us...

Rabbi Yosie Levine
The Jewish Center
I. Two Queries: Chaos and Yachatz

In 1937, the Peel Commission was presiding over the British mandate of Palestine, trying to decide what to do about the Arab-Jewish conflict. At the time, David Ben Gurion was the head of the Jewish Agency, and was the last witness to appear before the Peel Committee to appeal in favor of a Jewish state. In the course of his three hours of testimony, Ben Gurion related the following analogy:

1. David Ben Gurion’s Testimony Before Lord Peel, 1937

Three hundred years ago, a ship called the Mayflower set sail to the New World. In it were Englishmen unhappy with English society and government, who sought an uninhabited coast to settle and establish a new world. They landed in America, and were among the first pioneers and builders of that land.

This was a great event in the history of England and America. But I would like to know: Is there a single Englishman who knows the exact date and hour of the Mayflower's launch? How much do American children - or adults - know about this historic trip? Do they know how many people were on the boat? Their names? What they wore? What they ate? Their path of travel? What happened to them on the way? Where they landed?

More than 3,300 years before the Mayflower set sail, the Jews left Egypt. Any Jewish child, whether in America or Russia, Yemen or Germany, knows that his forefathers left Egypt at dawn on the 15th of Nisan. What did they wear? Their belts were tied, and their staffs were in their hands. They ate matzot, and arrived at the Red Sea after seven days.

He knows the path of their journey through the desert and the events of those forty years in the desert. They ate manna and drank from Miriam's well. They arrived in Jordan facing Jericho. The child can even quote the family names from the Torah.

Jews worldwide still eat matzah for seven days from the 15th of Nisan. They retell the story of the Exodus, and recount our fervent wish, “This year we are here; next year in the land of Israel. Now we may be enslaved, but next year, we’ll be a free people.”

Every secular Jew knows that on Seder night we retell the story of יִצְאָה מֵאֶgypt – the narrative of our journey from servitude to redemption. That’s the mitzvah. That’s the goal.

But anyone who’s ever attended a Seder knows equally well that the Haggadah is just about the furthest thing from a cohesive narrative. There’s no plotline. It’s a question, a pasuk, a mishna, a son, a story, a debate, a medrash. We’re all over the place. If the Seder is supposed to capture the saga that takes us from bondage to freedom, why is it almost impossible to locate the story in the Haggadah? This is my first question this morning: Why is there so much chaos in the Haggadah? Or to put it differently, why isn’t there more order, why isn’t there more seder to the Seder?

My second question is much more specific. There’s a short and oft-overlooked section of the Haggadah that we call יִצְאָה מֵאֶgypt. Right near the beginning of the Seder, we break the middle matzah. The larger portion we store away for the Afikoman. And the smaller portion we reserve for יִצְאָה מֵאֶgypt. And it’s actually a very important piece of matzah. This is the matzah through which we are going to fulfill our mitzvah of eating matzah on seder night. And of course we do this because the gemara (Pesachim 115b) tells us עַד דְּרֵי בֵּרֵהַ - such is
These are the two questions I’d like to explore with you this morning:

1. Marvin Silbermintz, Fantasy Gifts for Channukah, The Jewish Week Nov. 23, 2010

   Unbreakable Matzah

   What is more disconcerting than opening a brand-new box of matzah, and finding the contents have shattered in transit - resulting in matzah meal?
   And have you been frustrated when you try spreading cream cheese on matzah, only to have it crumble in your hands?
   "Unbreakable Matzah" is made from flour, water and Tyvek (the stuff FedEx uses for its envelopes). It won’t break, splinter or crack."
   "If colon blockage occurs, discontinue use.

These are the two questions I’d like to explore with you this morning:

- Why so much chaos and so little order?
- Why do we do this before Maggid instead of doing it where it belongs – before המפרסא היה? 

II. The path to the answers:

In order to find the answers to these questions, I want to revisit one of the governing principles of the Seder itself.

It all makes perfect sense. My question is: Why do we do this before Maggid instead of doing it where it belongs – before המפרסא היה? 

I’m not the first person to think of this question. It’s actually the Ritva’s question:

I am not the first person to think of this question. It’s actually the Ritva’s question:

II. The path to the answers:

In order to find the answers to these questions, I want to revisit one of the governing principles of the Seder itself.

• Why so much chaos and so little order?
• Why do we do this before Maggid instead of doing it where it belongs – before המפרסא היה?

II. The path to the answers:

In order to find the answers to these questions, I want to revisit one of the governing principles of the Seder itself.

These are the two questions I’d like to explore with you this morning:

- Why so much chaos and so little order?
- Why do we do this before Maggid instead of doing it where it belongs – before המפרסא היה?

II. The path to the answers:

In order to find the answers to these questions, I want to revisit one of the governing principles of the Seder itself.
It seems deceptively simple. But allow me to share with you a short comment by the Rif:

"The word 'besham' in the phrase 'besham halilah' means 'at the night of the holiday' or 'at the holiday of the night.' Does this mean that the entire holiday is to be observed? According to Shmuel, it means starting with our slavery in Egypt.

We can translate the words, but what’s the practical application in the Haggadah? How do we accomplish this on Seder night?

If you asked me, I would say we should retell the story of the Exodus roughly according to its chronology so that we fulfill this ethic of starting the narrative from our time in the doldrums and ending it with the great celebration of our liberation. But this isn’t what happens in the Haggadah at all.

What’s more, if we’re always so intent on keeping the kids involved, let’s tell the story. Everyone loves a story. We don’t have to sit around and read the book of Exodus – but that at least would be intuitive.

We have this great plot with all the components of a compelling drama. There’s magic, there’s suspense, great battle scenes, a beleaguered underdog, an arch villain, redemption, hope, freedom. It’s the best-selling book of all time.

The Gemara gives us such an elegant and compelling format: Start with our moments of degradation and work your way toward the praise we owe our Redeemer. So why don’t we do it?

Let’s turn for a moment to the Gemara. There’s a debate about how to go about accomplishing this format of besham halilah.

According to Rav, starting with our slavery means starting with the story of our ancestors who worshipped idols. According to Shmuel, it means starting with our slavery in Egypt.

It seems deceptively simple. But allow me to share with you a short comment by the Rif:

Two opinions in the Gemara. There’s no decisive conclusion in the Gemara as to who wins the debate, so nowadays we do both. But what does this mean? How is it possible to do both? Rav and Shmuel are arguing about where to start the story. You only get one chance to start! You can’t start twice! You have to pick one! How do you do both?

What I’d like to suggest is something a little revolutionary – something that I hope will cast an entirely new light on how we view the experience of our Seder.
We misunderstand the notion of מַתָּחֵיל בֶּנֶנֶת וְמִסְרֵים בַּשָּׁבָת. The Mishna and Rav and Shmuel aren’t telling you about the narrative arc of the Seder writ large. They’re telling you about the internal ethic of every dimension of Seder night: Every paragraph – every part of the story – should follow the blueprint of מַתָּחֵיל בֶּנֶנֶת וְמִסְרֵים בַּשָּׁבָת. Always do both. Whatever you’re talking about on Seder night, be sure to make this jump.

Look at the Rambam who makes this point almost explicitly:

That’s what the Rambam is saying. We keep doing it over and over. Every time you start – every time you say anything at the Seder – it should follow the format of מַתָּחֵיל בֶּנֶנֶת וְמִסְרֵים בַּשָּׁבָת.

Think about the paragraphs we’re referencing here:

- We start by saying, עבדים יינו, we were slaves in Egypt. And then in the very next line we say, והgiatan חשא אַךְ אַלּוֹקֶנֶה,moshe and the 10 plagues.
- We start by saying, מַתָּחֵיל בֶּנֶנֶת, and then the very next words are, והgiatan חשא אַךְ אַלּוֹקֶנֶה,moshe and the 10 plagues. The opening line of the narrative is followed immediately by a rush to the ending! The beginning bleeds right into the end.
- Even is the abridged version of Jewish history that takes us straight to, והgiatan חשא אַךְ אַלּוֹקֶנֶה.

You do it all in one breath. According to either opinion in the Gemara, the opening line of the narrative is followed immediately by a rush to the ending! The beginning bleeds right into the end.

The artist who crafted the image from the Barcelona Haggadah totally understood this. In the very same illustration, the artist depicts both slavery and redemption: both עבדים יינו and והgiatan חשא אַךְ אַלּוֹקֶנֶה.

9. Barcelona Haggadah, Excerpted from The Family Haggadah, Elie Gindi
IV. The Collapse of Time

Every section of the Haggadah – not just the Haggadah as a whole – is really set up this way. Each and every section follows the pattern of jumping immediately from the trauma or distress to redemption.

To put it a little differently, what I’d like to argue is that on Seder night time itself collapses. There’s no distant past with the build-up of an expanded development leading to a redemptive conclusion. There’s no linear progression that follows a journey through the stages of a beginning, middle and end. Instead, the constant refrain on Seder night is the absence of the middle – a direct leap from the literal or metaphorical שבעה נמח to the that ends the narrative. Eons, epochs or eras may chronologically stand between beginning and end. How many years actually passed between Terach and revelation? But at the Seder, those two bookends meet.

The collapse of time on Seder night is everywhere. It’s not just the paragraphs of הבורא and הנר and אבות and אבות היריא. It’s an ongoing refrain. Think of the sages of Bnei Brak. We call them sages, but they weren’t actually all men with long white beards. R. Akiva was much younger than R. Tarfon and R. Elazar Ben Azaryah was younger than Rabbi Akiva. But it’s no surprise that they were all together. For throughout the Haggadah, we find past and future uniting; the worlds of old and young coalescing around a common
narrative, yesterday and tomorrow meeting at one another’s door. The Seder itself is always a veritable family tree – with multiple generations represented.

From his Miami condominium, Morris calls his son on the East Side and says, "Donny, I have something to tell you. But I really I don't want to discuss it. I'm just telling you because you're my oldest child, and I thought you ought to know. I've made up my mind, I'm divorcing Mama." The son is shocked, and asks his father to tell him what happened. "I don't want to get into it. My mind is made up."

"But Dad, you just can't decide to divorce Mama just like that after 54 years together. What happened?"

"It's too painful to talk about it. I only called because you're my son, and I thought you should know. As I said, I really don't want to get into it. You can call your sister and tell her. It will spare me the pain."

"But where's Mama? Can I talk to her?"

"No, I don't want you to say anything to her about it. I haven't told her yet. Believe me it hasn't been easy. I've agonized over it for weeks, and I've finally come to a decision. I have an appointment with the lawyer the day after tomorrow."

"Dad, don't do anything rash. I'm going to take the first flight down. Promise me that you won't do anything until I get there."

"Well, all right, I promise. Next week is Pesach. I'll hold off seeing the lawyer until after the Seder. Call your sister in NJ and break the news to her. I just can't bear to talk about it anymore."

A half hour later, Morris gets a call from his daughter who tells him that she and her brother were able to get tickets and that they and the children will be arriving in Florida the day after tomorrow. "Donny told me that you don't want to talk about it on the telephone, but promise me that you won't do anything until we both get there."

Morris promises and puts down the phone. Morris turns to his wife and says, "Well, it worked this time, but what are we going to do to get them to come down for Pesach next year?"

It’s not always easy to get the different generations around the table, but that is part of the goal.

There are so many examples of collapsing time at the Seder. Consider just a few of them:

- He’s 18 but has the appearance of a 70 year old. Where else do we ever find something like this? It’s so bizarre. And if I can be a bit irreverent for a moment – it’s so irrelevant. I’m interested in the substance of his message, not the color of his hair. It’s relevant because the Haggadah is hinting to us that on Seder night this is not out of the ordinary. Tonight the 18 year old and the 70 year old are as one.
- The graphic that I have for you on the front cover of your source sheet is excerpted from A Night to Remember, a beautiful Haggadah by Mishael and Noam Zion. Where does it appear in the Haggadah? In the paragraph of – the section that contains the words.
There’s no distinction between past, present and future. I actually find it a very powerful image. The uniforms may change. The strategies may shift. The instruments of violence may vary. But there is also a constant: A timeless and ageless enemy of the Jewish people bent on our destruction. On Seder night, the sweep of Jewish history collapses into a single moment – as if we could really envision a Crusader and an Inquisitor arm in arm with a Cossack and a Nazi.

- Or think of the second cup of wine. This might even be the most stunning formulation of the whole Haggadah:

Blessed are you, God our Lord, king of the universe, who freed us and our fathers from Egypt, and brought us here this night to eat Matzah and Marror. So Lord our God and God of our fathers, may you bring us to [celebrate] other holidays and festivals in peace, rejoicing in the building of your city, and happy in serving you. There may we be able to eat the offerings and Paschal lambs...

It’s staggering! We came directly out of Egypt to the Upper West Side in 2011! Do you think we could just mention the 3500 years of intervening Jewish history? And then where do we go from our Seder? Directly to the Third Temple and our messianic aspirations of spending Pesach in Yerushalayim eating the Korban Pesach in the precincts of the Beis Hamikdash.

There it is: The whole of the Jewish past, present and future – neatly condensed into one sentence! Where else in Jewish observance do we so effortlessly bounce between these systems of time as if they were one?

In fact, on Seder night, time collapses to an even further extent. The most important symbol on our Seder table – the מצות של סדר – itself encapsulates this duality.

V. Matzah: A Philosophical problem.
Why do we eat matzah on pesach?
Ask any school child and she’ll tell you.

And they baked unleavened cakes of the dough that they had taken out of Egypt, for it was not leavened since they had been driven out of Egypt and could not delay; nor had they prepared any provisions for themselves.

12. Joyous Haggadah, Richard Codor pg. 33
When our ancestors fled Egypt, they couldn’t wait for their bread to rise and then bake it in ovens. They threw flat, unleavened dough on a pan over an open fire and made the original fast food that we call matzah. Break the other half of the Afikoman matzah into pieces and pass them around to everyone. Unlike all other nights, we make two blessings before eating the matzah.

But there’s a problem. Hashem commanded Jews to eat Matzah before the exodus happened!

Seven days you shall eat Matzah; on the very first day you shall remove leaven from your houses; for whoever eats leavened bread from the first day to the seventh day, that person shall be cut off from Israel.

How do reconcile these two realities?

Have a look at beautiful comment by the Sforno:

Bread of affliction: That is, bread that they ate during the time of their affliction; for they had no time to tarry and allow their dough to rise because they were perpetually oppressed… The reason the verse mentions our haste is to demonstrate that Hashem transformed the haste of oppression into the haste of redemption, as the verse states: He transformed my mourning into rejoicing.

We ate Matzah in Egypt long before the Exodus. It was the bread of our slavery! Yet God commanded us to eat it on the doorstep of our liberation to poetically demonstrate that the very symbol of our oppression could turn in an instant into the symbol of our redemption.
What’s more, we eat Matzah while reclining. We eat the bread of affliction as though we are free! We hold the whole duality and tension at once.

VI. Questions Revisited
So let’s take a step back. We’re now in a position to answer the second question we asked this morning: Why do we perform Yachatz so early on in the Seder.

Shmuel said: It is written Lechem Oni because it is bread upon which we declare words.
It was also taught in a Beraita: bread upon which we declare many things. Another interpretation: It is written Lechem Oni: just as it is the manner of the pauper to partake of a broken loaf, so too here we partake of a broken loaf.

Just as in the debate we saw earlier, here too, we seemingly accept both answers. Matzah is both the bread of redemption – the bread upon which we tell the story of the Exodus. And it’s also the poor man’s bread. As we saw, it’s the bread we ate in Egypt during our time of slavery.

By performing Yachatz – by breaking the middle Matzah before Maggid, we actively combine the dual identities of Matzah. We could just uncover the Matzah and tell the story of the Exodus while it sits in front of us. But we actually go one step further:

We insist on integrating the two themes. We break the matzah before maggid so the self-same bread upon which we’ll recite maggid and expound upon the miracles of the night – will be the broken bread – the poor man’s food. Once again, the gap between slavery and freedom collapses and in the very same moment we hold both identities.

VII. Losing Ourselves
To review: What we’ve attempted to demonstrate this morning is that on Seder night, we don’t just bridge the gap between past and present – we don’t just accelerate the transition from bondage to liberation – we go so far as to hold them both simultaneously. Everywhere we turn on Seder night, time is collapsing around us.

The question is why?
If we’re not making a neat linear progression from slavery to freedom – if instead we’re constantly toggling back and forth between the bookends with no emphasis whatsoever on the journey – if we’re perpetually endeavoring to contain both past and future...
concurrently – then we have to wonder why. What is it that we are we trying to accomplish?

What I’d like to suggest is that this collapse of time contains within it two powerful messages on Seder night. What happens when time collapses? Let’s use for a moment our classic conception of linear time. Imagine a time line. We’re in the middle. An enormous space separates us from our distant past and our distant future. Our great great grandparents and our great great grandchildren may even be farther away than we can imagine. When that line collapses into a point, when past, present and future converge, everyone on the line comes together.

On the most basic level, part of our mission on Seder night is to create a space in which we can imagine that we ourselves have been redeemed. What better way to accomplish this than to collapse time and insert ourselves directly into the narrative of the Jewish people?

But I’d like to take it one step further.

Because beyond our national agenda on Seder night, is a very personal one as well. The Haggadah tells us. It’s not enough to see ourselves in the context of our national story. We are obligated to look at ourselves within the context of our own individual redemption. I’d like to suggest that we’re so intent on constantly re-focusing our attention on beginnings and endings because it’s those sign posts that remind us of two central messages: First, by helping us remember what our priorities should be, they allow us to live fully in the present. And second, they remind us that we are not alone.

Let’s consider this first message for just a moment: Seder night is not the only occasion on which time collapses. Think of a birth or a wedding. All the hopes and dreams that we imagine in the future collapse into one moment. We hold them with us in the delivery room or under the Chuppah. Or think more soberly of a funeral. We gaze backward on the vast expanse of an entire lifetime and attempt to capture it in the words of a eulogy. It’s at these special times that we see our world with a clarity of vision and purpose. What makes the Seder experience so unique is that we look not in a single direction – but both backward and forward at once.

Let’s return for a moment to the sages in Bnei Brak:

18. The Fank Lovell Haggadah Collection at the Schechter Institute
The Five Sages: An illustration in several Haggadot published between 1927 and 1930 depicts, seated from right, Maimonides, Rashi, R. Ya'akov ben Asher, R. Yosef Karo and R. Yitzhak Alfasi (whose back faces the viewer) reclining in Bnai Brak.

We all know the story of the five sages gathered around engrossed in the saga of ספירה. They get so carried away that their conversation pushes on until morning. And finally their students arrive to alert them to the fact than they’re in jeopardy of missing minyan. It’s time to daven, but their oblivious to the dawning of the new day.

It’s so odd. If it’s a critique – if they should have been more careful about watching the clock – why include it in the Haggadah? And if it’s an endorsement, then we have bigger problems. How could these sages, who are the paradigmatic purveyors of the mesorah and the most meticulous men of their generation, justify their behavior? Halachically speaking, the Seder should have ended at ספירה. Anything they do now is embellishment at best and supererogatory at worst. How could they possibly prioritize merely lengthening the Seder at the expense of reciting קריאה שמה?
Part of our goal on Seder night is to become so engrossed, so enraptured in the narrative of what’s happening, that we actually transcend time. It’s not just about losing track of time; it’s about losing ourselves in the process.

This is what best selling author Nicholas Carr writes about deep reading. Source 20.

Almost ironically, it’s when we temporarily put aside our perpetual concern for yesterday and tomorrow – it’s when we’re fully able to live in the moment – that past and future begin to join us.

On seeing the title of this drasha, someone recently told me he thought the first word was pronounced Khronos and that it was the Yiddish plural of Chrein. In point of fact, Chronos and Kairos are the Greek words for time. Chronos refers to sequential time, quantitative time – like the word chronology. Kairos, on the other hand (no pun intended), signifies a special time, a moment the length of which is irrelevant. The sages of Bnei Brak are so absorbed in the present, that they transform Chronos into Kairos – quantitative time into qualitative time.

In the end, the disorder of the Seder – our propensity to focus so much on openings and finales – actually paves the path for more order in our lives. For it’s in these rare moments, occasions in which we are actually able to lose ourselves, that we are no longer beholden to the dates and mandates which conspire eternally to distract us from what matters most. It’s what TS Elliot called placing ourselves in the still point of the turning world.
As the sages of Bnei Brak remind us, it really is possible to set aside disruption and obligation, submerge ourselves fully in a moment or in a mitzvah and transcend time.

Turn back for a moment to source 18. It’s brilliant. Notice what the artist has done? He’s substituted sages spanning five hundred years for the sages mentioned in the Haggadah. One could think of it as the inverse of the illustration on the front cover of your source sheets. Collapsing time can also spell the union of our people’s most venerable minds. For when we mimic those ה拉ומס in Bnei Brak, the passage of time becomes immaterial. If we so choose, we are freely able to bring with us the most cherished moments from our past and the most hopeful aspirations of our future.

**VIII. We are Not Alone**

There is a second reason times collapses on Seder night, and with this I’d like to conclude: By highlighting the beginning and end and de-emphasizing the middle, we’re reminded that, as lonely as our mission may feel at times, we are in fact never alone.

21. Halachic Man pg. 120
This is the second explanation behind the appearance of so much chaos on Seder night. Past and future are fused together so that the heroes of both our history and destiny can stand by us.

Judaism is not silent on the confounding philosophical questions that conspire to bewilder us. Seder night – the great monument we build to the narrative of Jewish nationhood – is a celebration of our unique capacity to say נאסר erbah in one breath; to live as slaves and freemen at once; to eat the food of bondage and liberation in a single piece of Matzah. To put it differently, it’s a celebration of our ability to bear witness to the collapse of time. Distinctions between past and future become irrelevant. Because we ourselves are so integrated into the story, our Jewish present is directly connected to both our past and future. On Monday night, R. Akiva will be sitting at our table right along side Eliyahu Hanavi.

By holding onto to their memories, their values and their hopes we breathe life into their souls and make them present at our Seder tables. As Jews we are never alone. We walk the earth with Rashi sitting on one shoulder and רב坐着 sitting on the other. Our heroes
aren’t relegated to the annals of history, nor our saviors to naïve mythology. Both belong firmly to the unfolding present of our contemporary lives.

When you sing your Zeidy’s tune at the Seder, he’ll be singing with you – along with his Zeidy. When you read from your Bubby’s Haggadah, she’ll be reading with you – along with her Bubby. And when the face of a little boy or a little girl lights up as they sing the נשמת, the faces of Jewish children still waiting to be born, will light up with them. Our memories and our dreams don’t belong to the distant past or the distant future, they belong to us today; they are with us now.

IX. Concluding Thoughts
David Ben Gurion may not have been the most meticulous observer of Pesach, but he most certainly understood these two core principles. First, grasp tightly the memories of our beginning and hold firm to the dreams of our future. While others may attempt to derail us, these guiding lights will keep us on our path. And second, in the great expanse of Jewish destiny, we are never alone.

This Seder night, lose yourself in the moment. Bear witness to the collapse of time in the script of the Haggadah, and then allow it to happen organically at your table, too. On this night of the year, time need not be governed by Chronos; time need not be governed at all. If we put the distractions of yesterday and tomorrow out of our minds, experiencing Kronos – qualitative time – really is possible. And on this great holiday of hope, let us ponder the dream of a time very much within our reach: לְשׁנָה מַחְשֹׁבָה בָּיְרוֹשֵׁלִים

I wish each and every one of you a הָגָה כָּל הָשָׁנָה – a Pesach filled with vivid memory, sublime hope and the eternal prospect of redemption.