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## Review of *Night of Beginnings: A Passover Haggadah*

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Marcia Falk, *Night of Beginnings: A Passover Haggadah* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society and the University of Nebraska Press, 2022). Paperback, 232 pages, \$19.95. (978-0-8276-1551-9) DOI: <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv296mt8m>.

Few volumes on the Jewish bookshelf can compete with the timeless popularity of the Haggadah. This classic rabbinic text, which serves as the ritual script for the Passover Seder, has been recopied, revised, and reconceived countless times over the centuries. Like the main theme of a jazz performance, the words of the Haggadah have inspired endless variations. These iterative changes to the text or its presentation, sometimes subtle but often striking, are meant to spur interest and enable readers to find new meaning in ancient formulations through illustration, commentary, and emendation. Now Marcia Falk, a peerless writer and visual artist, has given us her own reworking of the Haggadah as a prompt for contemplative practice. Falk brought to this project a wealth of experience, honed over decades and expressed in a list of works that include soul-stirring poetry, magnificent paintings, skillful translations, and original liturgy. Her Haggadah is bold and beguiling, invitational and repercussive in equal measures.

Mystical sensibility and a profound sense of the oneness of being undergird Falk's writing, but hers is not the specific and sometimes technical language of classical Kabbalah. Rather, Falk is interested in something more universal, seeking beauty and evocation by using the Haggadah as a textual taproot to summon up inspiration. She twins contemplative sensitivity with theological creativity and personal expression, yearning to discover new inspiration in ancient words while acknowledging that classical formulations have their limits. Falk rewrites certain elements of the Haggadah, reworking the text while offering creative English reflections and translations. In past works, she refers to Hebrew not as her mother tongue (*sefat em*), but as the language of her blood (*sefat dam*)—the framework of expression for devotion, love, and yearning—and Falk's original Hebrew compositions shine with luster. Her work models the dream of Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook, the first Ashkenazi chief rabbi of mandate Palestine, who hopefully remarked that “the old can become new, and the new can become sanctified” (*ha-yashan yithadesh ve-he-hadash yitkadesh*). Falk looks beyond the ritual minutiae that define Passover for some communities, and the vague cultural wavings of ideals like freedom, liberty, and justice for others. She offers a ritual framework for a Seder that is filled with possibility, beauty, grace, and awakening.

*Night of Beginnings* is not a book to be read passively and put back on the shelf. It is, in many respects, a ritual object—a sustained contemplative prompt and a companion piece to the eating,



drinking, and storytelling that define the Seder itself. Like many liturgies and prayer books, this volume offers directions, explaining the grammar and choreography of the Seder to novices and old hands alike. *Night of Beginnings* offers color coding (in delightful hues of sage, apricot, blueberry, raspberry, and peach) to orient readers and help them understand the different elements. Falk's commentary expands the possibilities of the text, showing them why things might be done. Her work is adorned with biblical verses that are not invoked in the traditional Haggadah, from the Prophets to the Song of Songs, the latter of particular importance because it anchors the ritual in a love song set against the backdrop images from the ancient landscape and natural world. This choice highlights the eros of dwelling close to God on this night, reminding us also that this is a holiday celebrating springtime, rebirth, and the promise of fecundity both physical and spiritual.

The text of the Haggadah has been a wondrous armature for Jewish creativity over the centuries, but Falk acknowledges that in some cases modern-day readers must find new theological language. In fact, she delights in this quest. Falk's new formulations spotlight images of God, not as King and Master, but as Source and Life. Her strikingly beautiful theology is nonhierarchical, moving beyond gender and drawing near to the kind of pantheistic vision described in Hasidic mysticism. The classical Hebrew language is, of course, gendered, but Falk improves the situation by editing out masculine pronouns, inserting feminine ones, and otherwise adding fullness and complexity. In English, the task is simpler, and sometimes she simply elects to employ a nongendered first-person translation. Falk's work expands the number of seats at the table, so to speak, addressing each reader directly.

So, too, her cast of characters. Falk strives for gender complementarity and parity by introducing female ancestors, protagonists, and matriarchs. Elsewhere she aims for a greater depth of personality. Her rearranged *maggid*, the section of the Haggadah that includes the lion's share of the narrative, shifts Moses from the periphery—indeed, he is invisible in the traditional text—and highlights his own transformation, growth, and journey. Moses emerges as the most interesting and complicated character; he changes, matures, and evolves in ways that the static Pharaoh or God do not. This could not have happened without the support of his family and strong female heroes: Miriam, Yocheved, Pharaoh's daughter, and the Hebrew midwives, Shifrah and Pu'ah. Her attention to gradual psychological awakening and the interior dramas of the Haggadah recalls the work of Aviva Zornberg, and Falk chooses to describe these journeys in liturgical and artistic form.

This drama often includes the reader, as we are invited to become participants in the journeys from hiddenness to revelation. Falk's reworking of the classical four sons, for example, includes the traditional text and framing but then gives a melodious reinvention of the children as different competing impulses within each person. The child usually called "wicked" is recast as one "who feels apart and alone," engaging in what some child psychologists refer to not as "attention-seeking behavior" but "connection-seeking behavior." Falk's Haggadah is a tale of complex personal journeys and indeed the birth of a nation, not through hate, exclusion, and will to power, but through compassion, humility, and love and the miraculous quality of connection to overcome oppression and injustice.

This retelling of the *maggid* is compelling indeed, but Falk's textual arrangement is only part of the gift of this volume. To my mind, the highlight is the array of creative *berakhot* ("blessings") and *kavvanot* ("intentions"). She has been composing such texts for many decades, working with

ancient tropes and bringing God back to life in highly original ways. The mark of good liturgy is being both backward-compatible and forward-looking; it links us to the past while enabling readers—or worshippers—to gaze beyond the confines of the present. Here, for example, is Falk’s version of the blessing recited over the wine as a sanctification of the day:

On this festival of freedom, we cross  
From wilderness to promise,  
From exile to home,  
From enslavement to fully lived lives.

We hallow this day and bless  
the ever-flowing wellspring,

which sustains us on the way,  
nourishing the fruit of the vines. (22)

Falk’s words are the stuff of every Jewish blessing—God, time, place, history, experience—but she has drawn them together with radiance and electricity. Her liturgy points toward a tale of transformation and movement, specific in referring to the onetime myth of exodus, a historical trek from exile to redemption, but her words surface the personal quest from bondage to flourishing, actualization, fulfillment. Such *berakhot* could, for some, accompany and give additional texture to the traditional kiddush, but others may wish to replace the old formulation with a more contemporary idiom. Follow your heart, and choose your own adventure.

These *berakhot* are meant to be recited or sung aloud, an important part of the many embodied practices that define the Seder. This is not necessarily true of Falk’s stirring *kavvanot*, reflective interludes that direct our way of thinking about an experience while sparking a shift in consciousness. In readying ourselves for the Seder, we read:

Here we are, once again, about to recount the transformative story of our peoplehood—just as we did last year, and the year before. Every year we tell the same story, but each year we are enjoined to make it new, to bring our own lives into it, to view it as if it had happened to each of us individually. Repetition and newness: together they are the flow.

The fountain, the flow of life. All life, forever in motion, ever renewing and being renewed. History is movement, and movement is change. . . .

As we renew the festival, we renew our selves, immersing ourselves in the flow of time—the flow of life. (11)

Rituals are, among other things, techniques for guiding the flow of attention and concentration; they also generate new types of somatic knowledge and spiritual awakening. The intention does not supersede the actual practice, nor does this anchoring guide really make sense without the ritual. Instead, Falk’s works anchor us in past and present, highlighting the relationship to God,

self, and people that is founded in a sentiment of yearning for constant renewal. Through attention to the ever-changing and pulsing world, that which is mundane becomes hallowed.

This appreciation for worldliness, corporeality, and nature, for lifting up the quotidian and routine, has long been of interest to Falk. “Indeed, the ordinary, the commonplace, the *everyday* is an ongoing source of blessing in our lives,” she wrote around three decades ago. “In a life lived attentively, we experience the world’s great fullness, for which we are filled with gratefulness.”<sup>1</sup> This is also the case with the Seder, a ritual activity that leads to transformation by opening our eyes and attuning us to the sanctity of the rebirthing world around us. In undertaking this journey out of Egypt, Falk demands that we are drawn not toward abstraction and philosophical musings, but to what improvisational theater actress and educator Viola Spolin called the realms of “direct experience” and “accessible intuition.” Falk, for her part, pairs the famous yet cryptic “Dayenu”—a tale of national journeys—to a moment of arriving just a little too late to see a butterfly emerge from its chrysalis. While the moment of rapture seems to have been missed, seeing many of them together, seeing life alight on the leaves, that is sufficient. The tiny but miraculous quality of the physical world calls us to attention and jolts us to think anew. This reminds us that the celebration is spring, a time of rebirth and beginning.

Along with the beauty, Falk asks us to grapple with brokenness and fracture, not in isolation but as part of the complexity of life’s fabric. That means loss and suffering, broken bodies and spirits that are, like the middle *matzah*, split into pieces. The human condition, it seems, is brokenness—that fractured nature of the world described by kabbalists. Falk bristles with the unfulfilled promise of America as a place where people can seek refuge, a place of justice, and demonstrates how the ritual and liturgy of Passover can help us address inequality, homelessness, poverty, and socioeconomic enslavement in all of its modern forms. But the allure of hopelessness is perilous, and even brokenness is not all bad because something new can come forth: “There is also another kind of breaking, the breaking-pen of the heart that puts us in touch with our deeper selves, and that may even serve as a gateway for wholeness” (47). Like the decomposition and rebirth of the chrysalis. That looking or gazing upon that which is injured, not averting our eyes from the difficult task that Adrienne Rich called “diving into the wreck.” Falk argues, and rightly so, that freedom can only be achieved if we have the courageous honesty to hold complexity alongside a narrative of possibility, abundance, generativity,

*Bitter*, side by side with *sweet*—  
and the sweet becomes sweeter  
Everything and its opposite,  
Unfolding  
Life  
enfolding it all. (133)

These simultaneous truths are both held within the One, an expanse of divinity that Falk refers to as the “font” or “source” of all life and vitality. ‘Ayin can mean a wellspring, and it can also mean color. Jewish mystics often make use of the homonym ‘ayin (“eye” or “appearance”) and ayin, the infinite divine Naught or Fullness that is a pool of limitless potential beyond all shapes or manifestation. This connection, made possible with the playful exchange of two Hebrew letters

that are both silent in common pronunciation, invites us to consider the way that physical objects or experiences serve as gateways to that reservoir of possibility that holds us, welcomes us, beckons to us, lures us.

In Jewish history, illuminated manuscripts are as synonymous with the Haggadah as they are with the *ketubah* or “marriage contract.” Some of the oldest examples of these artworks, like the famous Sarajevo Haggadah or the Bird’s Head Haggadah, bring the Passover story to life for their readers in their own times. The magnificent *Moss Haggadah* accomplished a similar task some 30 years ago, and, more recently, the *Graphic Novel Haggadah* opened the text to a whole new generation of readers. Falk’s paintings and drawings in *Night of Beginnings* are nothing short of magnificent, fleshing out the book as a fully fledged ritual object. These renderings, a kind of visual midrash weaving the themes of Song of Songs, remind us that Passover is a spring holiday. And yet they are paired with plenty of blank space on the page, needed as room for reflection.

Contemplative practice and the work of religious renewal is a very narrow bridge, one that spans rote piety and ossified observance on one hand, or disconnected revolution and creativity on the other. To find newness in the past, be it texts or rituals, we have to slough off the skins of habituation that prevent us from creating. Falk’s work offers a way of doing this. The noted poet Charles Baudelaire once described himself as having been brushed “by the wind of the wing of madness.”<sup>2</sup> Immersing myself in Falk’s *Night of Beginnings*, I was graced by the beauty and the breath of spiritual renewal. Her work reminds us that the Seder can be so much more than a festive meal, a political discussion, or a lesson in history. This ritual becomes a personal and communal rite of passage, a journey through narrow straits and into new imaginative possibilities. Falk’s career dazzles with previous accomplishments, and if *Night of Beginnings* is any herald, the very best may be yet to come. May this be a beginning, indeed!

NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Marcia Falk, *The Book of Blessings: New Jewish Prayers for Daily Life, the Sabbath, and the New Moon Festival* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1996), 3.

<sup>2</sup> Charles Baudelaire, *Intimate Journals*, trans. Christopher Isherwood (Westport, CT: Hyperion Press, 1978), 99.