

Occam's Sword: A different way of reading the *Maggid*

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Abstract: The central part of the *Maggid* in the *Haggadah* consists of a series of midrashic expositions on *parshat habikkurim* (*Devarim* 26:5-9). The purpose of this section is generally understood to be the recitation of the exodus narrative. However, when read as it appears in the *Haggadah*, this recitation appears to be extremely opaque, open to numerous problems of interpretation, and sometimes inexplicable. This apparent problem can be resolved by revisiting the assumptions one makes before approaching the text. The problems of interpretation are based on assuming that the *Maggid's* comments are there to, in some sense, explain *Devarim* 26:5-9 and that they, when read together, constitute a retelling of the exodus story. In fact, they are nothing more than a way of mapping *Devarim* 26:5-9 on to the primary account of the exodus story in *Shemot* and constitute a guide or framework for an oral retelling of the story as recorded there. Once viewed in this way, the *Maggid* emerges as a sophisticated, yet simple aid to fulfilling the purpose of the *Seder* and many of the problems that have been raised by commentators can be easily explained.

ויוציאנו יי ממצרים ביד חזקה ובזרע נטויה ובמרא גדל ובאתות ובמפתים

And HASHEM brought us out of Egypt, with a strong hand, and with an outstretched arm, and with great terror, and with signs, and with wonders. (Devarim 26:8)

And HASHEM brought us out of Egypt Not by an angel and not by a seraph and not by the emissary, but the Holy One Blessed be He, in His glory and by Himself. (since it says, 'And I will pass through the land of Egypt on that night, and I will strike every firstborn in Egypt, from man unto beast, and on all the G-ds of Egypt I will do judgements, I (am) *HASHEM*'.) ['And I will pass through the land of Egypt on that night' – I and not an angel. 'And I will strike every firstborn in the land of Egypt' – I and not a seraph. 'And on all the G-ds of Egypt I will do judgement' – I and not an emissary. 'I (am) *HASHEM*' – I am He and no other.]¹

With a strong hand This is the plague, since it says, 'Behold the hand of *HASHEM* is on your livestock which are in the field, on the horses, on the donkeys, on the camels, on the cattle and on the flock, a very heavy plague.

ויוציאנו יי ממצרים לא על ידי מלאך ולא על ידי שרף ולא על ידי השליח אלא הקב"ה הוא בכבודו ובעצמו (שנאמר: ועברתי בארץ מצרים בלילה הזה והכיתי כל בכור בארץ מצרים מאדם ועד בהמה ובכל אלהי מצרים אעשה שפטים אני יי.) ["ועברתי בארץ מצרים בלילה הזה" – אני ולא מלאך. "והכיתי כל בכור בארץ מצרים" – אני ולא שרף. "ובכל א-להי מצרים אעשה שפטים" – אני ולא שליח. "אני יי" – אני הוא ולא אחר.]

ביד חזקה זו הדבר. שנאמר: הנה יד יי הויה במקנך אשר בשדה בסוסים בחמרים בגמלים בבקר ובצאן דבר כבד מאד.

¹ In the version of Rav Sa'adya Gaon the comment stops before the round brackets. The version of the *Rambam* and the one attributed to Natronai Gaon include the verse in the round brackets, while the version of Rav Amram Gaon includes the further elaboration in the square brackets. See S. Safrai & Z. Safrai, *Haggadat Hazal* (Jerusalem, 1998), p. 273. In quoting from the *Haggadah*, I have followed the version in Rav Amram Gaon's *Seder* published by Goldschmidt, since it is the oldest among the versions of whose authorship we can be confident. I have filled in the verses and words he abbreviated and indicated variant readings where I thought necessary. Where Rav Amram's *Maggid* quotes a biblical verse differently to how it appears in our Masoretic version, I elected to follow the latter.

And with an outstretched arm This is the sword, like that which says, 'And his sword drawn in his hand outstretched over Jerusalem.'

And with great terror This is the revelation of the divine presence, like that which says, 'Or has G-d assayed to come to take for Himself a nation from the midst of a nation with trials, with signs, and with wonders, and with war, and with a strong hand, and with an outstretched arm and with great terrors, according to all which *HASHEM* your G-d has done for you in Egypt before your eyes.'

And with signs This is the staff, like that which says, 'And this staff take in your hand, with which you shall do the wonders.'

And with wonders This is the blood, like that which says, 'And I shall place wonders in the heavens and the earth: blood, and fire, and pillars of smoke'.

Another explanation: 'With a strong hand' – two. 'And with an outstretched arm' – two. 'And with great terror' – two. 'And with signs' – two. 'And with wonders' – two. These are the ten plagues with the Holy One Blessed be He brought up on the Egyptians in Egypt. And they are...

ובזרע נטויה זו החרב. כמו שנאמר: וחרבו שלופה בידו נטויה על ירושלים.

ובמרא גדל זה גלוי שכינה. כמו שנאמר: או הנסה א-להים לבוא לקחת לו גוי מקרב גוי במסת באתת ובמופתים ובמלחמה וביד חזקה ובזרוע נטויה ובמוראים גדלים ככל אשר עשה לכם יי א-להיכם במצרים לעיניך.

ובאתות זה המטה. כמו שנאמר: ואת המטה הזה תקח בידך אשר תעשה בו את האתת.

ובמפתים זה הדם כמו שנאמר: ונתתי מופתים בשמים ובארץ דם ואש ותימרות עשן.

דבר אחר: "ביד חזקה" – שתיים. "ובזרע נטויה" – שתיים. "ובמרא גדל" – שתיים. "ובאתות" – שתיים. "ובמפתים" – שתיים. אלו עשר מכות שהביא הקב"ה על המצרים במצרים. ואלו הן....

The final verse expounded in the *Maggid* is *Devarim* 26:8.² Unlike the previous verses, it receives a double exposition. The second links the verse to the ten plagues through some simple arithmetic. The first follows the pattern established in the exposition of previous verses, by taking the individual, and ostensibly tautological, elements in the verse and linking each one to a concept by means of other scriptural texts. The *strong hand* is linked to plague (דבר); the *outstretched arm* is linked to the sword (חרב); *great terror* is linked to the revelation of the divine presence; *signs* are linked to Moshe's staff; *wonders* are linked to blood, presumably that of the first plague.

Looked at from a purely technical or formal perspective, these explanations are, on the whole, readily explicable. The imagery of an extended arm is, on a little reflection, that of one wielding a sword. The particular link between G-d's hand (albeit without the adjective *strong*) and *plague* is established by scripture, perhaps not only in the verse cited.³ The link between the staff and the *signs* activated by wielding it is equally clear. The connection between *wonders* and blood is somewhat more tenuous. Based on the verse cited, one could as well claim that *wonders* refers to fire or smoke.⁴ Nevertheless, some connection between blood and *wonders* is

² I have used the term 'the *Maggid*' throughout to refer to the section of the *Haggadah* which deals with *Devarim* 26:5-8, according to the tradition first recorded by the Babylonian Geonim. This is not perfect, but alternatives (such as 'Midrash Arami Oved Avi' or 'Miqrā Bikkurim Midrash') are clumsier and, in the light of what I will explain, actually misleading.

³ See *Peirush Qadmon* in *Haggadah Shel Pesah 'im Peirushei haRishonim: Torat Hayyim* (ed. Ketznelbogen, Jerusalem, 1998) p. 110.

⁴ The apparent absence of fire or smoke in the exodus story is no objection, as we shall shortly see.

established. The least intuitive part is the identification of *great terror* and the revelation of the divine presence. This is apparently based on a reading of מורא גדול (great terror) as a variant of מראה גדול (a great vision), which is the understanding of *Onkelos*.⁵

With the aid of a basic commentary we can, then, appreciate these readings on a technical level. However, when we turn our minds to the purpose of reading the *Maggid*, things become much less clear. As made plain in the Mishnah (*Pesachim* 10:4),⁶ each Jew fulfils his duty to tell the exodus story to his son and others by using *parshat habikkurim* (the declaration on the first fruits, *Devarim* 26:5-9), 'the briefest and yet still comprehensive passage in the Torah which tells the story of the descent into Egypt and the redemption',⁷ as a convenient springboard. This retelling of the story must be done 'according to the understanding of the son', which might take a few minutes or many hours. The *Maggid* text as we have it apparently functions as a standardization of this practice, perhaps to help those who cannot confidently expound scripture on their own.

If we take *Devarim* 26:6 as a paradigm, we can see how the *Maggid* fulfils its role. Each element in the verse is clearly linked by idea or word to a verse from the opening of *Shemot*, enabling us to tell the early part of the exodus story concisely and clearly. When we reach the end of the story however, this clarity is replaced by obscurity. Why are two plagues out of the ten, the first and the fourth, picked out for special mention? Why are they in the wrong order? Which revelation of the divine presence is being referred to?⁸ What is the significance of mentioning the staff? When did *the sword*, or any sword for that matter, make an appearance during the exodus?

We shall start by attempting to answer the last question, which I believe holds the key to the others and to the proper understanding of the *Maggid* as a whole.⁹

⁵ See *Rashbatz*, *Avudraham*, *Orhot Hayyim*, and the two interpretations attributed to *Rashi*, in *Haggadah Torat Hayyim*, pp. 113-4.

⁶ The exact status of this obligation is less clear. The opinion that there is a *mitzvah d'oraitah* to recount the exodus the night of the fifteenth of *Nissan* became unanimous from *Rambam* onwards. However, no such *mitzvah* is mentioned either by the *Behag* or Rav Sa'adya Gaon in their lists of the 613 *mitzvot*, or Ibn Gabirol's poem. There is also no clear proof of the existence of such a *mitzvah* in the Torah or *Hazalic* literature.

⁷ J. Kulp, *The Schechter Haggadah: Art, History and Commentary* (Jerusalem, 2009), p. 215. See pp. 213-5 for alternative theories. See also D. Silber & R. Furst, *Go Forth and Learn* (Philadelphia, 2011), pp. 1-15 for a series of homiletical neo-midrashic explanations.

Some have questioned why *Bemidbar* 20:15-16 or *Devarim* 6:21-24 were not chosen instead. The force of this question is doubtful. *One* of the passages had to be chosen. In any case, we can simply answer that the first does not provide an opportunity to discuss the plagues, while the second does not provide an opportunity to discuss going down to Egypt.

⁸ Three options are suggested in the classic commentaries, which in itself demonstrates that the reference is unclear, see *Haggadah Torat Hayyim*, pp. 113-5

⁹ This essay was prompted by an incident on *Seder* night 5777 where I asked to what *the sword* referred. The cumulative total of *sedarim* at which those assembled had been present was well in excess of five hundred. Nevertheless, no-one had the first idea. Moreover, it was clear that no-one had ever thought to ask the question.

Identifying the sword: three approaches

Amongst the *Rishonim* we find three suggestions explanations of what is meant by the *Maggid's* invocation of *the sword*. *Ritva*, citing other biblical verses as proof, interprets *sword* as a metonymical term referring to violence or vengeance in general. *Ra'avan* suggests that it refers more specifically to the striking of the firstborn, which was, after all, a mass killing. Additionally, the word 'sword' is often paired in scripture with the verb 'to strike' (להכות), which is also frequently used in relation to the killing of the first born (מכת בכורות). This approach provides an intelligible and plausible reason for the mention of *the sword*. However, from the perspective of retelling the exodus story it is much less convincing. Why does the *Maggid* not make things clearer by simply telling us that the *outstretched arm* refers to vengeance or the tenth plague? It can scarcely be argued that it would be exegetically impossible to create such a connection. If the *Maggid* is explaining the meaning of the phrase *outstretched arm*, the introduction of a sword seems like an unnecessary, and therefore confusing, intermediary between text and explanation. Further, such an interpretation of the *Haggadah* renders its telling of the exodus story even more incoherent, since the tenth *macah* is made to appear immediately after the fourth (plague) and before the first (blood).

Shibolei haLeqet, *Orhot Hayyim* and *Avudraham*¹⁰ seek to identify an actual sword involved in the exodus by turning to a midrashic source in *Pesiqta d'Rav Kehana* which derives an additional element in the exodus story from a hyper-literal reading of the verse in *Tehillim* למכה מצרים בכוריהם (read as '[praise to] the striker of Egypt by means of their firstborn').¹¹ According to this midrash, the Egyptian firstborn slew many of their own countrymen in a desperate attempt secure the freedom of the Hebrews and thus avert their own doom. Their sword, or rather swords, therefore played a role in the redemption from Egypt. This explanation faces similarly telling objections to the first. The function of the *Maggid* is to explain the verses from *parshat habikkurim* in order to tell the story of the exodus. An oblique reference to an aggadic tale found neither in the Talmud nor *Midrash Rabbah* would seem an odd way to go about this. At the very least, one would expect a cursory description of the episode.¹²

The last approach, that of *Rashbatz*, combines some of the virtues of both these approaches. For the *Maggid* to be explicable, he requires *the sword* to reference an actual sword that appears in the exodus story itself. This leaves him with only one option: *Shemot* 5:3. In this verse, Moshe informs Pharaoh that the people must be allowed to go three days into the wilderness to sacrifice to the G-d of the Hebrews,

¹⁰ This view is also found in a commentary ascribed to *Rashbam*. See *Haggadah Torat Hayyim*, pp. 114-115.

¹¹ This story also appears in subsequent midrashic sources.

¹² We shall leave aside the question of whether it would be more appropriate for the *Maggid* to limit its discussion of the exodus to things that incontrovertibly happened.

'lest he strike us with **the plague** or with **the sword**'. As *Rashbatz* points out, this has traditionally been understood not as a plea, but as a threat.¹³ This threat of *the sword* is what the *Maggid* intends to draw our attention to.

Though it satisfies the demand for a sword in the exodus story itself, this interpretation seems the least exegetically plausible of all. Why should G-d's *outstretched arm* refer to a threat (not even explicitly attributed to G-d) that was never fulfilled? We hardly lack examples of G-d actually executing his power in the narrative. There is, though, an extremely powerful reason to suppose that the *Maggid* is indeed directing us to *Shemot* 5:3. As we have already observed, the statement *this is the sword* is far from the only puzzling thing about this section of the *Maggid*. Nearly as difficult is its prior identification of the *strong hand* as *the plague*. Look again, though, at *Shemot* 5:3: 'lest he strike us with **the plague** or **the sword**'. The words *plague* (דבר) and *sword* (חרב) are placed together frequently only in the books of Ezekiel and Jeremiah, where they always form part of a trio along with *famine*. Elsewhere, the words are found in the same verse only five times.¹⁴ *Shemot* 5:3 is one of only two occasions (along with Amos 4:10) where *plague* and *sword* are directly juxtaposed with *plague* first and *sword* second. Since the word *sword* even by itself appears only twice in the exodus narrative, the allusion on *Seder* night, for someone well versed in scripture and with his mind on the exodus, is obvious.¹⁵

However, we have only succeeded in rendering the exegetical problem more serious. On such an understanding, both the *strong hand* and *the outstretched arm* are intended to be a single reference to a mere threat. In order to understand how this can be the case, we need to revise our understanding of how the *Maggid* operates.

A comment, but not an explanation

As we have already discussed, the purpose of the *Maggid* is the fulfilment of the obligation to recount the exodus on the night of the 15th of Nissan: והגדת לבנך.¹⁶ The Mishnah specifies that this should be done by expounding the declaration said over the first fruits 'from *A wandering Aramean* until he finishes the entire section'.¹⁷ This should be done 'according to the understanding of the son'. Explanations of the

¹³ *Rashi*, drawing on *Mekhilta D'Rabi Yishmael*, states that Moshe really intended the meaning *lest he strike you*, but modified his language out of respect for the royal office. *Ibn Ezra*, followed by *Sforno*, argues that the simple meaning of *us* includes both the Egyptians and the Hebrews, and therefore constitutes a threat with no modification of language. *Bekhor Shor* offers a third interpretation, cited by the *Hizkuni* and *Ralbag*, according to which Moshe threatened Pharaoh with the loss of his entire slave population at the hands of G-d unless he allowed them to sacrifice in the wilderness.

¹⁴ *Vayiqra* 26:25, Amos 4:10, 1 Chronicles 21:12, 2 Chronicles 20:9 and this verse.

¹⁵ For the contemporary observant Jew, the words דבר and חרב together are mostly likely to conjure up the fourth blessing on the שמע in the evening. Such an identification was certainly not universal in earlier times. The *siddurim* of *Ba'al haRoqeah* and Rav Amram Gaon include these words, those of *Rambam* and Rav Sa'adya Gaon do not.

¹⁶ See footnote 7.

¹⁷ M. *Pesachim* 10:4

Haggadah generally assume that the *Maggid* exists to specify the words in which this exposition should be performed.¹⁸

This is actually a very strange assumption. If the story of the exodus is supposed to be explained 'according to the understanding of the son', then specifying the words in which to do this makes no sense. Even the most perfectly lucid explanation could not fulfil this criterion. The elephant in the room, though, is that the *Maggid* is not lucid at all. It contains numerous opaque references, including apparently borderline-random wordplay, which don't seem to explain anything. When faced with such ostensible opacity, we should question our primary assumptions.

The exodus is referenced in dozens of places throughout the *Tanakh*, but the bulk of our information about it is found in *Shemot* 1:1 – 15:27. The most perfect way to recount the exodus would be to simply read and explain this account, perhaps drawing on outside sources where appropriate. Time constraints obviously make it impossible to follow such a method on *Seder* night. However, a well-constructed *Seder* liturgy could try to preserve as many features of this approach as possible. I propose that the purpose of the *Maggid's* commentary is not to explain each phrase in *parshat habikkurim*, but to map them to the primary account in *Shemot*. This allows each father at the *Seder* to tell the entire exodus story as it appears in *Shemot* whilst retaining the flexibility required for the evening. To put it another way, the *Maggid* is not, as generally assumed, a rendition of the exodus story, but a set of notes indicating how it should be told. We shall see that looking at the *Maggid* through this prism explains almost every incongruous 'explanation' it contains, and answers a number of other questions as well.

We shall start by looking again at the *Maggid's* treatment of *Devarim* 26:6, where the format is almost trivially obvious. We will then demonstrate the power of this approach by applying it to the *Maggid's* commentary on 26:8, ostensibly the most obscure part of the *Haggadah*. Finally, we will look at 26:7 and 26:5. The former fits the theory very well, while necessitating a minor modification. The latter presents some difficulties, though trivial ones compared to the usual way of reading the *Maggid*.

¹⁸ Amongst halakhic authorities, this seems to be simply assumed. There is a surprising paucity of discussion on how the *mitzvah* of *והגדת לבנך*, as opposed to the trappings that surround it, is supposed to be performed. Typically, the *halakhic* authority will simply state "וקוראין הגדה" (*Sefer Hinuch Parshat Bo* 21) or "וקורא כל ההגדה". (*Tur and Shulkhan Arukh* 473[:7]). *Sefer Mitzvot haGadol* (*Mitzvot Asei* 41), *Rif* and *Rosh* only detail beginning with 'shame' and ending with 'praise' according to both opinions in the *Gemara* and don't discuss the *Maggid* proper. The *Behag* (who doesn't include *והגדת לבנך* in his list of the 613 *mitzvot*) and *Mordechai* say nothing at all. Commentators, having nothing to comment on, ignore the issue. *Rambam*, in his commentary on the Mishnah, states, 'and the *d'rash* of that *parsha* is known and famous', which is possibly meant to be an explicit confirmation of the assumption that the words of the *Maggid* constitute the exposition of *parshat habikkurim* through which we perform the *mitzvah*. Such an assumption is apparently contradicted by what he writes in the *Mishneh Torah*, *Hilbot Hametz u'Matzah* 7:1-2, but then subsequently corroborated in 8:3.

וירעו אתנו המצרים ויענונו ויתנו עלינו עבודה קשה

And the Egyptians did bad to us, and afflicted us, and placed upon us hard work. (Devarim 26:6)

And the Egyptians did bad to us Like that which says, 'Come let us outsmart him, lest he multiply and when war shall happen he too will be added to our enemies and he will fight against us and go up from the land.' (*Shemot* 1:10)

וירעו אתנו המצרים כמו שנאמר: הבה נתחכמה לו, פן ירבה והיה כי תקראנה מלחמה ונוסף גם הוא על שנאינו ונלחם בנו ועלה מן הארץ.

And afflicted us Like that which says, 'And they placed upon it [the people] taskmasters in order to afflict it, and it built storage cities for Pharaoh: Pitom and Rameses.' (*Shemot* 1:11)

ויענונו כמו שנאמר: וישמו עליו שרי מסים למען ענתו בסבלתם ויבן ערי מסכנות לפרעה את פתם ואת רעמסס.

And placed upon us hard work Like that which says, 'And the Egyptians worked the children of Israel with harshness.' (*Shemot* 1:13)

ויתנו עלינו עבודה קשה כמו שנאמר: ויעבדו מצרים את בני ישראל בפרך.

The *Maggid* divides this verse into three sections. The first, *And the Egyptians did bad to us*, is linked (as usual, by the term 'like that which says')¹⁹ to *Shemot* 1:10, in which Pharaoh declares to the Egyptians his intention to enslave the children of the Israel. The *Maggid* is perhaps reading וירעו not as *did bad to us*, but *thought badly of us*,²⁰ since Pharaoh cites as his motivation the fear that the Hebrews would side with Egypt's enemies in future conflicts. We are thus being instructed to recount Pharaoh's initial plan to enslave the Hebrews after the ascension of a new king to the throne. This is found over three verses: *Shemot* 8-10.

The *Maggid* then directs us to the next phase of the story: the actual enslavement. The word *they afflicted us* is linked to *Shemot* 1:11, by the presence of the phrase *in order to afflict it*, from the same root: ע נ ה. Verses 11 and 12 describe how the Egyptians enslaved and afflicted the children of Israel, but found that their new subjects responded by reproducing faster than ever. Finally, the *Maggid* comments on *and they placed upon us hard work* by pointing us to *Shemot* 1:13. In this and the following verse, the Egyptians react by placing even harder work upon the children of Israel. The structure of this section of the *Maggid* can be represented as follows:

Phrase in <i>Haggadah</i>	Verses in Torah	Section of story
וירעו אתנו המצרים	<i>Shemot</i> 1:8-10	Pharaoh plans to enslave the children of Israel.
ויענונו	1:11-12	The children of Israel are enslaved and afflicted.
ויתנו עלינו עבודה קשה	1:13-14	The Egyptians place hard work on the Hebrews.

¹⁹ *כמו* appears in the earliest geonic versions and was later replaced with *כמה*, though it is not impossible that this is the original version.

²⁰ Or, literally, 'rendered us bad (in their imagination)'

There are three simple principles involved here. First, each phrase is mapped to a section of the exodus story in *Shemot*. Secondly, the story is told in *chronological order*. Thirdly, each particle of the verse from *parshat habikkurim* has to be linked, either semantically or linguistically, to the section of the *Shemot* story to which it is mapped. I do *not* mean to say that the father should simply read all the passages in *Shemot* being alluded to. Rather, being aware of which section of the story he is being prompted to recount, the father should tell it in his own words, using explanations, commentaries and *aggadot*, 'according to the understanding of the son' (and, of course, his own).

One may ask, at this stage, how different this interpretation of the *Maggid* is from the traditional understanding, in which the purpose of the cited verses is to *explain* the elements they are attached to. We shall now apply the same analysis to *Devarim* 26:8 to see the true power of this method.

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ויוצאנו יי ממצרים ביד חזקה ובזרע נטויה ובמרא גדל ובאתות ובמפתים

And HASHEM brought us out of Egypt, with a strong hand, and with an outstretched arm, and with great terror, and with signs, and with wonders. (Devarim 26:8)

The *Maggid* explains the first element of the verse, *And HASHEM brought us out of Egypt*, with a grandiose declaration that He and not any sub-deity was responsible for the exodus, citing a midrashic explanation of *Shemot* 12:12.²¹ Since that verse contains G-d's declaration that he is about to strike the firstborn, the *Maggid*, as usually explained, is jumping the gun and directing us to the last plague. However, by following our three interpretative principles, we will see something quite different.

In its comment on the last phrase in the previous verse (*Devarim* 26:7), the *Maggid* directed us to *Shemot* 3:9. In *Shemot* 3:1-10, G-d reveals himself to Moshe and declares that Moshe shall be His emissary in the liberation of His people. According to our method, if we read on, we should find a passage that is linked to *And HASHEM brought us out of Egypt* through the *Maggid's* emphatic declaration that He alone was responsible. In fact, we find exactly that. Moshe makes the following enquiry of G-d:

...הנה אנכי בא אל בני ישראל ואמרת להם אל-הי אבותיכם שלחני אליכם ואמר
לי מה שמו מה אמר אליהם:

... behold, I (will) come to the children of Israel and say the G-d of your fathers sent me to you, and they will say, "What is his name?" What shall I say to them?²²

²¹ *Shemot* 12:12 is absent from version of Rav Sa'adya Gaon as well as most earlier *haggadot* from Bavel and the land of Israel. See footnote 2 and Kulp, *Schechter Haggadah*, pp. 218-220.

²² *Shemot* 3:13

G-d answers the question, apparently, twice. At first, He declares that 'I will be what I will be' and instructs Moshe to tell the children of Israel that *I will be* sent him. However, He immediately follows with a more specific answer:

ויאמר עוד א-להים אל משה כה תאמר אל בני ישראל יי א-להי אבותיכם א-להי אברהם א-להי יצחק וא-להי יעקב שלחני אליכם זה שמי לעלם וזה זכרי לדר דר:
 And G-d said further to Moshe, 'thus shall you say to the children of Israel, "HASHEM the G-d of your fathers, the G-d of Avraham, the G-d of Yitzhak, the G-d of Ya'aqov, sent me to you, *this is My name forever, and this is My memorial from generation to generation.*"²³

After extensive discussion, Moshe returns to Egypt. Aharon relays the message, Moshe performs his signs, and the Torah informs us that they were successful:

ויאמן העם וישמעו כי פקד יי את בני ישראל...
 And the people believed and they understood *that HASHEM had* remembered the children of Israel...²⁴

Pharaoh, however, takes a different view:

ויאמר פרעה מי יי אשר אשמע בקלו לשלח את ישראל לא ידעתי את יי ...
 And Pharaoh said, 'Who is *HASHEM* that I should listen to his voice to send away Israel? I don't know *HASHEM* ...'²⁵

It is no exaggeration to say that the *leitmotif* of this part of *Shemot* is the initial revelation of G-d specifically identified by under his unique name of *HASHEM* as the sole (or supreme) deity. What appears according to traditional understandings of the *Haggadah* to be an exclamation of faith awkwardly inserted into the middle of a story, emerges as a prompt to recount an important part of the exodus narrative and discuss arguably its most important theme.

Faced with Pharaoh's refusal to comply, Moshe and Aharon try a different tack:

ויאמרו א-להי העברים נקרא עלינו נלכה נא דרך שלשת ימים במדבר ונזבחה ליי א-להינו פן יפגענו בדבר או בחרב:
 And they said, 'The G-d of the Hebrews has happened upon us. Let us go, please, three days travel in the wilderness, and let us slaughter to *HASHEM* our G-d, lest he strike us with the plague or with the sword.'²⁶

²³ *Shemot* 3:15

²⁴ *Shemot* 4:31

²⁵ *Shemot* 5:2

²⁶ *Shemot* 5:3

As we have seen, the *Maggid's* comments on *strong hand* and *outstretched arm* are unmistakable references to this verse. The *Maggid* is, then, directing us to relate the next part of the story in which Moshe and Aharon threaten Pharaoh, after which Pharaoh responds by intensifying the burdens of the children of Israel.

We find further corroboration for this if we look at the source of this section of the *Maggid*, *Sifrei* on *Bemidbar*.²⁷ The commentaries on *strong hand* and *outstretched arm* are both lifted entirely from the same passage in *Sifrei*, where they appear consecutively. It is therefore reasonable to assume that the *Maggid* intends the *plague* and *sword* to be read as a unit, directing us to a single passage. Modern commentators have puzzled over the fact that the source text, explaining a passage in Ezekiel, is talking about punishments directed not at Egypt, or any other foreign nation, but the Jewish people itself. This is odd if we, as is generally assumed, are supposed to be in the middle of discussing G-d's vengeance against Egypt.²⁸ However, according to our method of understanding the *Maggid*, this can be understood without exegetical gymnastics as simply strengthening the allusion to the section of *Shemot* that the *Maggid* is directing us to, since it primarily describes Jewish misery.

In its next comment, the *Maggid* tells us that *great terror* refers to 'the revelation of the Shechinah' (גלוי השכינה). This apparently opaque 'explanation' once again becomes clear if we turn to the next part of the story:

וידבר א-להים אל משה ויאמר אליו אני יי: וארא אל אברהם אל יצחק ואל יעקב בא-ל שד-י
ושמי יי לא נודעתי להם:

And G-d spoke to Moshe, and He said to him 'I am *HASHEM*. And I appeared to Avraham, to Yitzchak, and to Ya'aqov as *El Shaddai* and (by) My name *HASHEM*, I was not known to them'.²⁹

This is famously one of the hardest passages for traditional *p'shat* commentary to deal with. After all, as far as we know, G-d was known to all the forefathers as *HASHEM*. Whatever the correct interpretation of this passage, however, it clearly refers to some revelation of an aspect of G-d by which He had not previously been known or recognized. It is certainly no stretch to refer to this passage as 'the revelation of the Shechinah'. Once again, the *Maggid* is directing us to talk about an essential part of the exodus narrative, one that we may justly fear is habitually omitted at the *Seder* table.

²⁷ *Pisqa* 115.

²⁸ D. Arnow, 'The Sword Outstretched over Jerusalem: A Puzzling Allusion in the Passover Haggadah', in *CCAR Journal: The Reform Jewish Quarterly* (2015), pp. 99-100. Arnow also advances his own interpretation, which is an interesting example of esoteric exegesis in modern academic scholarship.

²⁹ *Shemot* 6:2-4

In its fourth comment on the verse, the *Maggid* tells us that *signs* refers to Moshe's staff. If we understand the *Maggid* as an explanation of *parshat habikkurim*, this is really quite senseless. The *signs*, or at any rate some of them, were performed using the staff, but the signs certainly are not the staff itself. However, there is no need to explain away what at first appears to be a simple category error. If we return to *Shemot*, and read past a genealogical interruption, we find G-d directing Moshe and Aharon to take the staff and turn it into a crocodile³⁰ at Pharaoh's court, which they promptly do.³¹ Finally, the *Maggid* explains that *wonders* refers to blood. Sure enough, the plague of blood follows immediately after.

After reaching the end of the verse, the *Maggid* then proceeds to expound it again. According to the traditional way of reading the *Maggid*, this is odd. No other verse is explained twice. Following our theory, the explanation is quite simple: the *Maggid* has reached the end of the expounded passage but it has not finished telling the story. It therefore goes back and remaps the verse to the next part of the story, namely the ten plagues.³²

We can also understand why in its first rendition of *Devarim* 26:8, the *Maggid* refers to verses from outside the primary account of the exodus far more than in its treatment of *Devarim* 26:5-7. *Parshat habikkurim* divides the exodus story into four parts: (i) the descent to Egypt, (ii) suffering at the hands of Egyptians, (iii) crying out to G-d and this being accepted and (iv) leaving Egypt by means of signs and wonders. However, in *Shemot* there is a long narrative in between parts (iii) and (iv) consisting mostly of dialogue between Moshe and the children of Israel, Pharaoh, or G-d (*Shemot* 3:1 – 6:30). The simple fact that *parshat habikkurim* completely omits this part of the story necessitates two things. First, the *Maggid* has to use *Devarim* 26:8 twice in order to accommodate the extra material. Secondly, since there are no 'natural' links between *parshat habikkurim* and this section of *Shemot*, the *Maggid* resorts to roundabout connections, drawing on verses from various parts of the *Tanakh*. If one reads this section of the *Maggid* without an awareness of its basic method, many of the '*d'rashot*' appear, to traditional and academic commentators alike, strange, irrelevant and even incomprehensible.

This new understanding of the *Maggid* also helps us explain two further puzzling features. First, the *Maggid* proceeds to inform us that Rabi Yehuda made a mnemonic for the ten plagues. Every commentator struggles with the passage. Rabi Yehuda was one of the greatest of the *Tannaim*; it does not seem likely that he

³⁰ '*Tanin*', often rendered as 'serpent'.

³¹ Note that, in this specific case, the staff and the signs are actually one and the same.

³² This also explains why this '*d'rasha*' on the verse comes second despite it indisputably being much older.

required a memory-aid to remember basic scriptural information. Leaving that aside, why do we need to be informed of it now, since anyone of a forgetful disposition can presumably just read a few lines up the page? If, however, we understand the *Maggid* as directing us to tell successive parts of the narrative in *Shemot* through prompts in *parshat habikkurim*, the answer becomes simple.

So far, the story has been divided into discrete coherent chunks, clearly identifiable to the reader of *Shemot*. While it is certainly possible to recount the plagues in pairs or in a simple list of ten, as we have just been directed by the *Maggid* to do, a fuller explanation requires a different structure. The Torah clearly demarcates the first nine plagues into three sets of three. In each set, the first plague is preceded by Moshe confronting Pharaoh in the morning 'at the waters'; the second ends with an observation about Pharaoh's hardened heart and the third is imposed without Pharaoh receiving a prior warning. Each set of three has a theme: the first is the power of G-d to work miracles beyond those of Pharaoh's necromancers; the second is His placing a distinction between Egypt and Goshen,³³ the habitation of the children of Israel; the third is His sending 'all my plagues ... so you may know that there is none like Me in the earth'.³⁴ As various commentators have pointed out, the noteworthy part of Rabi Yehuda's mnemonic is not the order of the letters, but the way of dividing them up: דצכ"ע דש"ב אה"ב rather than, say, באה"ב עד"ש באה"ב.³⁵ We can read the *Maggid* as providing us with two ways of recounting the plagues: either as a list with some basic explanation, or in a more developed way according to the narrative in *Shemot*, all 'according to the understanding of the son'.³⁶

Secondly, in the text of Rav Amram Gaon and most subsequent versions of the *Maggid*, the ten plagues are followed by an odd discussion about the number of plagues at the sea.³⁷ According to our theory, this fills an obvious lacuna in the *Maggid* up to this point. We have reached the end of the expounded verses, but we have not finished the story. As we have seen, a central feature of the exodus story, both as told in *Shemot* and understood in the *Haggadah*, is the revelation and recognition of G-d, identified specifically as *HASHEM*, as uniquely powerful. The culmination of this thread of the story happens not in Egypt at all, but at the splitting of the sea. Since the Mishnah (*Pesahim* 10:4) seems to indicate that the *Maggid* should not stop at *Devarim* 26:8, but continue until it 'completes the entire

³³ *Shemot* 8:18

³⁴ *Shemot* 9:15

³⁵ The commentary of *Ritva* includes an extensive discussion, though this is apparently an addition of Rav Haviv Toledano. See also the commentary attributed to *Rashbam* in *Haggadah Torat Hayyim*, 102.

³⁶ For a fuller discussion of the tripartite structure of the ten plagues and how it relates to the *Maggid* see N. Fredman 'The Ten Plagues', *Tradition* (20:4, 1982), pp. 332-337.

³⁷ The Siddur of Rav Sa'adya Gaon includes it as an optional appendix. See Kulp, *Schechter Haggadah*, p. 234.

passage', it would make perfect sense for the *Maggid* to include a prompt to recount the splitting of the sea. What appears to many to be just the last in a stream of bewildering material, can be understood as an attempt to restore the full exodus story, it having been cut off before the end by the understandable decision not to expound *Devarim* 26:9 during the years of exile.³⁸

The structure of this section of the *Maggid* can be expressed as follows:

Phrase in <i>Haggadah</i>	Verses in Torah	Section of story
ויוצאנו יי ממצרים	<i>Shemot</i> 3:13-5:2	Moshe learns the name of G-d and reveals it to the children of Israel
ביד חזקה ובזרע נטויה	5:3- 6:1	Pharaoh responds to Moshe's demands by worsening the burden on the children of Israel.
ובמרא גדל	6:2-6:12	G-d declares that He will hereafter be known as (or by) <i>HASHEM</i> .
ובאתות	7:8-7:13	Moshe turns his staff into a crocodile at Pharaoh's court.
ובמפתים	7:14-25	The plague of blood.
ויוצאנו יי ממצרים ביד חזקה... (2nd time)	7:14-12:36	The 10 plagues.
דצ"ך	7:14- 8:15	Plagues of blood, frogs and lice.
עד"ש	8:16-9:13	Plagues of stinging flies, disease and boils.
באח"ב	9:14-12:36	Plagues of hail, locusts, darkness and the killing of the firstborn.
רבי יוסי הגלילי...	13:1-15:21	The parting of the Reed Sea.

³⁸ J. Kulp states that there is 'no evidence' that *Devarim* 26:9 was ever included in the *Maggid*: J. Kulp. *Schechter Haggadah*, p. 214, f. 83. The obvious piece of evidence is what the Mishnah says. It is true that 26:9 does not mark a *parsha* division according to the Masoretic system, nor is it even the conclusion of the declaration over the *Bikkurim*. However, it is the end of *something*, namely the narrative part of the declaration. 26:8 is not the end of anything. See M. First, 'Arami Oved Avi, Uncovering the Interpretation Hidden in the Mishnah', *Hakirah* (13, 2012), pp. 138-9. This question has become mixed up with the issue of the antiquity of the *Seder*. Older scholarship assumed that a service resembling that described in the Mishnah was performed in Jerusalem while the temple stood, and reasoned that it would have been appropriate to continue to 26:9. More recent scholarship has demonstrated that the Mishnah describes a ceremony that is of post-temple provenance. However, it does not follow that it would necessarily have been inappropriate to include 26:9. Whilst in its original context "אל המקום הזה" may refer specifically to the temple, it can be just as easily read as referring to the whole land of Israel. There is, though, some positive evidence against the assumption that the Mishnah intends us to include 26:9, namely the fact that it is absent from all extant copies of *haggadot* from the land of Israel. We may question whether the documentary record is complete enough to make firm conclusions. The earliest *haggadah* we have is from the 8th century, by which time the role and status of the Israeli community in world Jewry was entirely transformed. Saying 'and he brought us to this place' did not mean the same thing as in previous centuries. More generally, one cannot assume that later Israeli practice accurately reflects Mishnaic era prescriptions on liturgy, since, most obviously with regard to *piyyutim*, the opposite often appears to be the case. What we can say, however, with reasonable certainty is that the *Maggid* we use never included the *Devarim* 26:9.

Having established this theory as the first coherent way of explaining what is otherwise the most obscure part of the entire *Haggadah*,³⁹ we shall now discuss the other two verses expounded in the *Maggid*.

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ונצעק אל יי א-להי אבותינו וישמע יי את קלנו וירא את ענינו ואת עמלנו ואת לחצנו:

And we cried out to HASHEM the G-d of our fathers, and HASHEM heard our voice, and He saw our affliction, and our toil, and our oppression. (Devarim 26:7)

And we cried out to HASHEM the G-d of our fathers Like that which says, 'And it was after many days that the king of Egypt died, and the children of Israel groaned from the work, and they called out, and their cry went up to G-d from the work.' (*Shemot* 2:23)

ונצעק אל יי א-להי אבותינו כמו שנאמר: ויהי בימים הרבים ההם וימת מלך מצרים ויאנחו בני ישראל מן העבדה ויזעקו ותעל שועתם אל הא-להים מן העבדה.

And HASHEM heard our voice Like that which says, 'And G-d heard their cry, and G-d remembered his covenant, with Avraham, with Yitzhaq, and with Ya'aqov.' (*Shemot* 2:24)

וישמע יי את קלנו כמו שנאמר: וישמע א-להים את נאקתם ויזכר א-להים את בריתו את אברהם את יצחק ואת יעקב.

And He saw our affliction This is conjugal separation, like that which says 'And G-d saw the children of Israel, and G-d knew.' (*Shemot* 2:25)

וירא את ענינו זו פרישות דרך ארץ. כמו שנאמר: וירא א-להים את בני ישראל וידע א-להים.

And our toil These are the sons, like that which says, 'Every son which is born, cast into the river, and every daughter let live.' (*Shemot* 1:22)

ואת עמלנו אלו הבנים. כמו שנאמר: כל הבן הילוד היארה תשליכהו וכל הבת תחיון.

And our oppression This is the oppression, like that which says, '... and indeed I have seen the oppression with which Egypt oppresses them'. (*Shemot* 3:9)

ואת לחצנו זה הדחק. כמו שנאמר: ... וגם ראיתי את הלחץ אשר מצרים לחצים אתם.

The *Maggid* divides the verse into five sections. The first three and the last one fit neatly and readily into our theory. In its first comment, the *Maggid* refers us to the children of Israel crying out to G-d from the midst of their torments. The next

³⁹ In his essay "Davar Acher": On Dual Narrative in the Haggadah', Rabbi Shmuel Hain asks the same questions I do about this passage and arrives at similar answers to particular questions. His alternative explanation of the passage as a whole, however, is open to the same objection as all other analogous efforts. He believes the *Haggadah* is trying to communicate a *message* and that this message was quickly lost and remained that way for nearly a millennium (at least), despite the fact that generations of Jews were reading the *Haggadah* in fundamentally the right way. The only conclusion we can draw is that the *Haggadah* is exceptionally unclear. In Hain's words, 'the proof-text misdirects the reader' and 'the explication of the midrash is further obscured by the midrashic material preceding it'. According to Hain, the *Maggid* is 'the finest rabbinic example of an orchestrated, oscillating narrative', but it was, on his own telling, written in a way that not one in a million Jews appreciated it. I believe the *Haggadah* is not trying to communicate a message at all, that it is perfectly clear, and that it has simply been read in the wrong way. download.yutorah.org/2014/1053/Pesach_To_Go_-_5774_Rabbi_Hain.pdf (May 22, 2017), pp. 16-18, f. 15, p. 20 and *passim*.

comment directs us to the succeeding verse in which G-d hears their cries and remembers his covenant with the *avot*. In its third comment, the *Maggid* then directs us to the *Shemot* 2:25, the concluding verse of the passage, reading into the phrase *and G-d knew* (and apparently making use of a pun),⁴⁰ a knowledge of the most intimate affairs of the children of Israel. The *Maggid* thus directs us to tell the exodus story in a clear, chronological manner as it appears in the book of *Shemot*. The *Maggid's* final commentary on the verse is a reference to *Shemot* 3:8, part of the passage in which G-d tells Moshe of his intention to liberate the children of Israel and take them to the land of Canaan.

Before that, though, the *Maggid* comments on the phrase *our toil* by directing us all the way back to Pharaoh's command, at the end of the first chapter of *Shemot*, to drown all the male Hebrew babies.⁴¹ This seems to contradict clearly the claim that the *Maggid* is taking us through the story in chronological order. However, once again, we simply have to turn to the book of *Shemot* to see what the *Maggid* is doing. The *Maggid* directs us from *and He saw our affliction* to 2:25 and from *our oppression* to 3:8. In between these verses we find the story of Moshe finding a burning bush whilst shepherding his flock, and discovering in it an 'angel of *HASHEM*'.

A reference to the drowning of the male babies can be read without difficulty as an allusion to Moshe. The structure of the *Maggid* here, though, is more sophisticated than that. The first three chapters of *Shemot* actually contain two separate interwoven stories that are drawn together only at the burning bush. The first is the tale of the enslavement of the children of Israel, their crying out to G-d, and G-d's recognition of their cry. The second is the story of Moshe's birth and being placed among the reeds, his being raised at Pharaoh's court, striking an Egyptian officer, and fleeing to Midian. The Torah tells these stories together in very rough chronological concert. However, they can also be related separately, one after the other, and this would be the easier option for oral storytelling. From *And the Egyptians did bad to us until and He saw our affliction*, the *Maggid* maps out the first of these stories. It then directs us to tell the story of Moshe from his birth until the burning bush, before moving on with the narrative.⁴²

⁴⁰ The connection to the word *our affliction* is established by the fact that the root *ה-נ-ע*, which in the original context of the verse refers to suffering, has a derivative meaning in which it refers to sexual congress. In Rabbinic literature, the root is frequently used in this sense and sometimes to mean its opposite: sexual deprivation. See S. Safrai *Haggadat Hazal*, pp. 137-8.

⁴¹ It should be pointed out that this comment of the *Maggid* is an apparent exception to the rule that each element from *parshat habikkurim* must be connected to the verses it is mapped to linguistically or thematically. Most commentators explain that *עמל* is connected to children. However, this comment is taken from *Sifrei*, where it appears without the words, 'these are the sons'.

⁴² It is arguably more correct to read the account of the drowning of the male babies in *Shemot* 1:15-22 as part of the story of the children of Israel, not Moshe, but the *Maggid* does the opposite.

We may make two observations at this point. The first is that when the *Maggid* maps *parshat habikkurim* to the exodus story, there is a great degree of variance in how narrowly it does so. Sometimes, as with 'And we cried out to HASHEM our G-d', it points us to very short passages, even a single verse. In other cases, as with 'our toil' we are directed to a passage containing dozens of verses. To a certain extent, the author was surely constrained in his freedom of action by the content of the phrases in *parshat habikkurim* and the narrative in *Shemot*. However, we notice that examples of the first type almost always refer us to parts of the narrative without which the story cannot be told at all, whereas the second type refer us to parts of the story that are no doubt important, but can be omitted or shortened without sacrificing basic narrative coherence. These sections can be told at greater or lesser length according to taste. Given that every father at a *Seder* is constrained both by the time available, and the different levels of intelligence, knowledge and interest among his audience, it is natural that the *Maggid* makes allowance for discretion in how much time to spend on non-essential parts of the story.

Secondly, it has often been observed that the *Haggadah* ostensibly omits any mention of Moshe, and many have puzzled over why the *Maggid* instructs us to recount the exodus story without its central character.⁴³ The whole question is premised on the assumption that the text of the *Maggid*, read on its own or with an explanation, constitutes a rendition of the exodus story. If so Moshe's role in the story would, indeed, seem to have been deliberately omitted. However, if we understand the *Maggid* as dividing up the exodus story as it appears in *Shemot* into discrete chunks and referring us to each in turn, then the question never arises. By following the *Maggid's* directions, we include and give appropriate weight to Moshe's role in our redemption from Egypt.⁴⁴

The structure of the *Maggid* in this section is as follows:

Phrase in <i>Haggadah</i>	Verses in Torah	Section of story
ונצעק אל יי א-להי אבותינו	<i>Shemot</i> 2:23	The children of Israel cry out to G-d after the accession of a new pharaoh.

⁴³ See D. Henshke, "HASHEM Brought Us Forth From Egypt": On the Absence of Moses in the Passover Haggadah', *AJS Review* (31:1, 2007)

⁴⁴ As Kulp argues, the famous section beginning 'not by means of an angel...' should be read as excluding sub- or intermediary deities, not Moshe: Kulp, *Schechter Haggadah*, pp. 228- 230. This fits in well with our understanding of the comment as referring us to *Shemot* 3:13-5:2.

Arnou points out that the claim that the *Haggadah* text completely omits Moshe is something of a myth that derives from an overreading of a statement made by the *Gra*, which in itself is somewhat hyperbolic and possibly motivated by opposition to *Hassidic* theologies of the *Tzaddik*. See D. Arnou, 'The Passover Haggadah: Moses and the human Role in Redemption', *Judaism* (55:2006), pp. 5, 16-20. Arnou's identifications of places where the *Haggadah* gives a role to human agency are less convincing, but I believe this a result of asking the text to do things it cannot do as result of reading it in the wrong way.

וישמע יי את קלנו	2:24	G-d hears the cry of the children of Israel and remembers His covenant.
וירא את ענינו	2:25	G-d 'sees' the suffering of the children of Israel.
ואת עמלנו	1:15-2:22	Moshe is rescued from the drowning of the males, raised by Pharaoh's daughter, kills an Egyptian officer, flees to Midian, becomes a shepherd and finds the burning bush.
ואת להצנו	3:1-12	G-d tells Moshe that he is to be His emissary in freeing the children of Israel.

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ארמי אבד אבי וירד מצרימה ויגר שם במתי מעט ויהי שם לגוי גדול עצום ורב:

A wandering Aramean was my father, and he went down to Egypt, and he dwelled there, a few people, and he became there a nation, great, mighty, and numerous. (Devarim 26:5)⁴⁵

Go and see what Lavan the Aramean sought to do to Ya'aqov our father, since Pharaoh only decreed over the sons, but Lavan sought to uproot the whole, since it says '**An Aramean was destroying my father**'

And he went down to Egypt Forced, according to the utterance.

And he sojourned there teaches that he [Ya'qov our father] did not go down to be assimilated [into Egypt], but to sojourn there, since it says, 'And they said the Pharaoh, "To sojourn in the land we have come, since there is no pasture for the flock of your servants, for the famine is heavy in the land of Canaan; and now may your servants live in the land of Goshen."' (Bereshit 47:4)

A few people Like that which says 'With seventy souls they went down to Egypt, and now *HASHEM* your G-d has placed you like the stars of heaven for multitude.' (Devarim 10:22)

And he became there a nation teaches that Israel were separate there.

Great mighty Since it says, 'And the children of Israel were fruitful, and swarmed, and multiplied and become mighty to an extraordinary degree and the land was filled with them'. (Shemot 1:7)

And numerous Like that which says, 'Flourishing like the shoot of the field I placed you, and you increased, and you grew, and you came to (*i.e.* the age of) jewellery. Your breasts were ready and your hair had grown, but you

צא ולמד מה בקש לבן הארמי לעשות ליעקב אבינו. שפרעה לא גזר אלא על הזכרים ולבן בקש לעקור את הכל. שנאמר: **ארמי אבד אבי**

וירד מצרימה אנוס על פי הדב[ו]ר

ויגר שם מלמד שלא ירד [יעקב אבינו] להשתקע [במצרים] אלא לגור שם שנאמר: ויאמרו אל פרעה לגור בארץ באנו כי אין מרעה לצאן אשר לעבדיך כי כבוד הרעב בארץ כנען. ועתה ישבו נא עבדיך בארץ גשן.

במתי מעט כמו שנאמר בשבעים נפש ירדו אבתיך מצרימה ועתה שמך יי א-להיך ככוכבי השמים לרב.

ויהי שם לגוי מלמד שהיו ישראל מצויינים שם.

גדול עצום שנאמר: ובני ישראל פרו וישרצו וירבו ויעצמו במאד מאד ותמלא הארץ אתם.

ורב כמו שנאמר: רבבה כצמח השדה נתתיך ותרבי ותגדלי ותבאי בעדי עדיים שדים נכנו ושערך צמה

⁴⁵ In this section, square brackets are used to indicate letters or words not used in the text of Rav Amram Gaon, but present in the modern *Haggadah*.

were naked and bare. [And I passed over you, and I saw you wallowing in your blood, and I said to you in your blood "live!", and I said to you in your blood, "live!"]
(Ezekiel 16:7,6)

ואת ערם ועריה. [ואעבר עליך ואראך מתבוססת בדמיו ואמר לך בדמיו חיי ואמר לך בדמיו חיי].

The *Maggid's* treatment of this verse presents the greatest problems for our theory. One reason is perhaps that, unlike the rest of the *Maggid*, a significant part of it is taken from *Sifrei Devarim* on the verse itself.⁴⁶ What follows is a provisional explanation of the *Maggid's* treatment of this verse.

The *Maggid* opens by interpreting the first phrase, non-grammatically, to mean 'an Aramean was destroying my father', and points us to Lavan pursuing Ya'aqov. It is widely assumed that, in so doing, it is echoing (if not simply quoting) *Sifrei*. In fact, *Sifrei* interprets the verse twice: once, in a *p'shat* manner, as a reference to Ya'aqov, and secondly, aggadically, as a reference to Lavan.⁴⁷ The *Maggid's* decision to cite only the second reading – ostensibly an irrelevant outburst on *Seder* night – is perhaps an indication of where we should pick up the story: after Ya'aqov's final exchange with Lavan. If so, we are presumably being directed to recount the Yosef narrative, explaining how the children of Israel came to dwell in Egypt. This is somewhat problematic, though, since in between Lavan's pursuit of Ya'aqov, and the Yosef story the Torah relates the reconciliation with Esau and the rape of Dinah, neither of which, one would think, have to be included in the *Seder* night's story. The explanation for this probably lies in the fact that this statement, or a shorter equivalent formula, is one of the few universal features of earlier skeletal *haggadot* from both Bavel and the land of Israel.⁴⁸ Perhaps the author of the *Maggid* felt it necessary to include it at the beginning of his version even despite it not being a perfect fit.

The *Maggid's* comment on *and he went down to Egypt* is 'forced, according to the utterance'.⁴⁹ This appears to be a reference to *Bereshit* 46:1-7 in which G-d enjoins

⁴⁶ One of the reasons the *Maggid* has been so chronically misunderstood is that commentators have assumed that all or most of it is taken from *Sifrei*. Were this to be the case, it would have to be read as a commentary explaining the words in *parshat habik'urim*. See the sources quoted in Safrai, *Haggadat Hazal*, p. 66. Modern resources, including *Sefaria*, perpetuate this mistake. https://www.sefaria.org/Sifrei_Devarim.301?lang=bi (May 15, 2017)

⁴⁷ Safrai & Safrai argue that *Sifrei* reads the word *arami* as referring to place and not a person, so that the verse would read not 'my father was a wandering Aramean', but something more like 'my father was lost in Aram'. See S. Safrai, *Haggadat Hazal*, p. 131.

⁴⁸ The other two are the famous 'not by means of...' comment on '*And Hashem brought us out from Egypt*' and the derivation of the ten plagues by means of adding up twos.

⁴⁹ This statement is found in earlier *haggadot* from the land of Israel, as well as the versions of Rav Sa'adya and Rav Amram Gaon. However, it is absent from the *haggadah* of Rambam and the version attributed to Natronai Gaon, as well as the manuscript from the Schechter collection. If it is, in fact, an intrusion into the *Maggid*, this would only strengthen my thesis, since it does not follow the formula of the rest of the *Maggid*. In that case, Ya'aqov's descent to Egypt would be included when elaborating either the previous or succeeding element of the verse. See Safrai, *Haggadat Hazal*, p. 271.

Ya'aqov, 'do not be afraid to go down to Egypt'. In its next comment, the *Maggid* directs us explicitly to the next chapter when Yosef's brothers meet Pharaoh and are sent to be shepherds in Goshen. The next comment, on *a few people*, alludes, albeit indirectly, to *Shemot 1-6* in which Ya'aqov's group is numbered at 70. In its comment on *great and mighty*, the *Maggid* directs us to the next verse in which the rapid growth of the children of Israel in their new setting is described.

We have now mapped the entire first chapter of *Shemot* to *parshat habikkurim* through the *Maggid's* comments. However, there remain two comments which appear to have no place in our system. The first, on *and he became there a nation*, is indeed problematic. It can be read quite easily as an editorial commentary, but this would be out of keeping with the format of the *Maggid* as we have described it. We note that this comment is one of only two in the entire *Maggid* that is taken word for word from *Sifrei*.⁵⁰ Perhaps the author of the *Maggid* thought it an important and authoritative piece of information that must be included in the *Seder* night's narrative of the exodus. It is also possible that it is an addition to the *Maggid* made by someone working from *Sifrei* who was not conversant with the method of the original author. Alternatively, the *Maggid* may be directing us to flesh out one of the sparser parts of the story with some aggadic detail. There may, of course, be some other explanation that I have not thought of.

The *Maggid's* other anchorless comment, however, on *numerous*, is easier to explain. The *Maggid* here refers us to a verse from an allegorical passage in the book of Ezekiel, linked by the root ג-ר. It is at this point that many *Seder* participants simply give up on trying to understand what is going on. The sense of confusion is heightened by the fact that modern *haggadot* quote two verses (16:7 and 16:6) in the wrong order. Millions of Jews have probably wondered why a grown woman with fully formed breasts should be rolling around in blood and imagined the passage to be rather more obscene than it actually is. For those in the know, however, it looks like a reference to a midrash in *Mekhilta d'Rabi Yishmael* in which the verses are also quoted in this order. According to this midrash, G-d gave the children of Israel two *mitzvot* involving blood – circumcision and the *Pesah* sacrifice – in order to provide them with sufficient merit to be redeemed.⁵¹ However, even those aware of this midrash might be confused as to why the *Maggid* should direct us to these events, which occurred much later in the story, at this early stage in the recitation.

⁵⁰ The other being Rabi Yehuda's mnemonic.

⁵¹ *Mekhilta d'Rabi Yishmael* (ed. Berlin, Jerusalem, 1997), p. 15 (*Pisha* 5).

In fact, in *Geonic* and medieval *haggadot*, verse 6 is absent. It was inserted by a later author, probably Yitzhak Luria, in an act of back formation.⁵² Instead, as Kulp argues, the *Maggid* is alluding to a different part of *Mekhilta*, which uses the verse to demonstrate the great fecundity of the children of Israel.⁵³ This would appear, however, to be a mere repetition of the *Maggid's* previous comment on *great, mighty*. The *Maggid*, on such a reading, has run the risk of confusing its audience to no real purpose. Following our theory, we can suggest that there is something more to it than that.

The verse quoted ends with a description of the young lady as 'naked and bare'.⁵⁴ In its original context this is probably no more than a description of the adolescent Israel's vulnerability. However, in the above-mentioned passage in *Mekhilta*, and subsequently in the midrashic tradition, it is taken as description of the Jewish people's lowly ethical/spiritual state in Egypt.⁵⁵ The *Maggid* refers us to this passage in between directing us to *Shemot* 1:7, which describes their prodigious growth, and 1:8, in which the Egyptians resolve to enslave them. Perhaps the *Maggid* is thus telling us to *add* something to the story, which is not present in the biblical text, but which we have good reason to want to include. It is clear that the enslavement of Avraham's descendants was foreordained for the purpose of manifesting the greatness of G-d to humanity. However, one can object that the suffering of those generations who were born and died in slavery cannot be justified by such a plan. Our conception of G-d as just can most easily be maintained if those who were enslaved as part of G-d's plan also deserved it. The *Maggid* is directing us to explain that, while enjoying remarkable demographic growth, the children of Israel succumbed (as they would do on many subsequent occasions) to the temptations of plenty, and fell into sin.

A provisional account of the structure of this section of the *Maggid* would look like this:

Phrase in <i>Haggadah</i>	Verses in Torah	Section of story
אַרְמֵי אֲבֹד אֲבִי	<i>Bereshit</i> 33:1-45:28	The sale of Yosef through to his invitation to the family to settle with him in Egypt.

⁵² In so doing, he was tilting the text towards an interpretation that had already been suggest by others, including *Ritva*, *Avudraham* and *Orbot Hayyim*. See *Haggadah Torat Hayyim*, pp. 92-3.

⁵³ *Ibid*, p. 60 (*Pisha* 12). See Kulp, *Schechter Haggadah*, p. 225.

⁵⁴ It may be significant that while the *Seder* of Rav Amram Gaon usually quotes only the first words of a cited verse, here he also quotes the last two. *Seder Rav Amram Gaon* (ed. Goldschmidt, Jerusalem, 2004), p. 114.

⁵⁵ Note that, according to this reading, the *Maggid* is drawing on *both* passages in the *Mekhilta*, which is in keeping with its author's evidently formidable grasp of midrashic sources.

וירד מצרימה	46:1-7	G-d instructs Ya'aqov to descend to Egypt and promises to bring back his descendants.
ויגר שם	46:28-47:12	Ya'aqov's family are settled in Goshen.
במתי מעט	<i>Shemot</i> 1:1-6	The counting of Ya'aqov's clan.
ויהי שם לגוי	N/A	?
גדול עצום	1:8	The children of Israel rapidly expand.
ורב	N/A	The children of Israel prosper and fall into sin prior to being enslaved.

Conclusion

The *Maggid* surely has the highest commentary to content ratio of any text in the Jewish canon, possibly of any text in the world. This is a testament to generations of Jews trying to make sense of what seems to be a uniquely opaque text, read just when clarity is called for. Some Jews make a virtue of being bewildered, others search for esoteric meanings, or attempt to piece together a persuasive account by splicing together multiple different commentaries. Many have abandoned using the *Maggid* altogether, and many more would doubtless follow if they believed themselves permitted to do so.

I submit that the *Maggid* can be understood as an innovative tool to retell the exodus story whilst adhering to the *halakhic* framework specified in the Mishnah, one that is both sophisticated and remarkably simple. The *Maggid*, of course, incorporates material from diverse sources and eras. However, it does so in a coherent way that is more than the sum of its parts.⁵⁶ To understand the *Maggid* in such a way, we need only change the basic assumption we make before reading it. Instead of understanding the *Maggid's* comments on the elements of *parshat habikkurim* as explanations of the verses themselves, we should look at them as a midrashic tools to turn *parshat habikkurim* into a map for recounting the exodus story as told in *Shemot*. In short, the *Maggid* is not a commentary, still less a 'litany',⁵⁷ but a set of lecture prompts.

The best evidence for this theory is, I believe, the structure of *Maggid* itself, as it has been elucidated above. No other interpretative method can so successfully solve the numerous individual problems of interpretation in the text, or render it as a

⁵⁶ *Haggadah* scholarship has reluctantly resigned itself to the view that the *Maggid* is a cut-and-paste job, substantially composed of out of context materials, that doesn't amount to a great deal. As Kulp puts it, 'In my opinion it is extraordinarily difficult to speak of the "intention of the Haggadah". At best, we can speak of the intention of "this specific text" or the intention of the editor who inserted this specific text into the Haggadah'. Kulp, *Schechter Haggadah*, p. 230 and *passim*.

⁵⁷ See J. Rovner, 'Two Early Witnesses to the Formation of the "Miqra Bikkurim Midrash" and Their Implications for the Evolution of the Haggadah Text', *Hebrew Union College Annual* (75:2004), pp. 76, 100-101.

coherent whole. In the second part of this essay, I will explore other possible lines of evidence in support of this theory, as well as reviewing various objections and making some suggestions about why the author of the *Maggid* would choose to construct his text in such a way.