

"Halacha Sources" Highlights - Previewing the Haggadah on Shabbos HaGadol

Question: Is it proper to have a "preview" reading of the *Haggadah* on the Shabbos before Pesach?

Answer: In order to deal with both sides of the issue, we will address it in the following three steps:

- (1) the argument *in favor* of previewing the *Haggadah*,
- (2) the argument *against* previewing the *Haggadah*,
- (3) *applications* in practice.

Part 1: The Argument *In Favor* of Previewing the Haggadah

The earliest source I found for the *minhag* is the words of the *Ra'avyah* [*Rabbeinu* Eliezer ben *Rabbeinu* Yoel HaLevi, Germany (& France), ~1140 - ~1220, *siman* 425]: "The *minhag* is that the children read the *Haggadah* in advance on the day of *Shabbos HaGadol*, [etc.,] and this is [indeed a] proper [practice], for [in this way] they will arrange [the content] 'in their mouths' [i.e. they will familiarize themselves with it] and on Pesach [night] they will understand [the *Seder*] and ask [their questions]."

The "more recent" tradition stems from the statement of the "*Sefer HaMinhagim*" [*Rabbeinu* Yitzchak of Tirna (Austria), ~1400], which the *Rema* cites [in his *Darkei Moshe*] and codifies [in O.C. *siman* 430 of the *Shulchan Aruch*], that the *Haggadah* is read on the Shabbos before Pesach, *Shabbos HaGadol*, at [the time of the] *Mincha* [i.e. afternoon] services, from "*Avadim hayinu*" ["We were slaves" - i.e. immediately after the four "*Mah Nishtanah*" questions] until "*lechaper al kol avonosainu*" [i.e. the end of the "*Dayeinu*" poem - including its "follow-up" paragraph]. The clear implication is that adults are included, and although the reason of the *Ra'avyah* does not seem to fit this exactly, perhaps the basic idea is the same - to "prepare" for saying the *Haggadah* on Pesach night.

In any case, the *minhag* seems to be very clearly based on ancient sources.

Part 2: The Argument *Against* Previewing the Haggadah

The *Gra* [R. Eliyahu of Vilna, Lithuania, 1720-1797, known as "the Gaon (i.e. Torah genius) of Vilna"] writes that the reason for the *minhag* is that "at that time," i.e. the Shabbos before the Exodus (which we commemorate as *Shabbos HaGadol* [as discussed separately in the same *siman* of *Shulchan Aruch* - see our "Halacha Sources Highlights" discussion at <http://www.learnhalacha.com/ShabbosHaGadolMiracle.pdf>]), "the redemption began, through the taking [of the lambs for the Pesach offering]." The *Gra* does not make clear how this deserves to be considered the beginning of the redemption. But in any case, he then proceeds to argue *against* the *minhag*!

The *Gra's* argument is based on the Midrash (*Mechilta to Bo* 17, cited also in the *Haggadah*):

[From the (initial) words of the command that] "You shall tell your son" [the story behind the Pesach Seder (*Sh'mos* 13:8), it would have seemed reasonable that] the interpretation

could be [to do so as early as on] Rosh Chodesh [Nissan]. [Therefore, the Torah] comes to teach us [otherwise] by saying [the continuing words] "on that day" [i.e. Pesach].

If [we would have only the clarification of the word] "on that day," [it would have seemed reasonable that] the interpretation could be [to do so as early as] while it is still daytime [i.e. of the day **before** the holiday - when the Pesach offering is sacrificed]. [Therefore, the Torah] comes to teach us [otherwise] by stating [what to tell one's son in the wording of] "On account of **this**" [i.e. that the redemption was in the merit of the Mitzvahs of the original Pesach Seder]. [This phrase clarifies that] I said [to you (to tell your son)] only at the time when matzah and marror are placed before you [i.e. and consequently you can refer to **them** with the above wording: "On account of **this**"].

Clearly, concludes the *Gra*, the *Haggadah* is **not** meant to be "previewed"!

Part 3: Applications in practice

The *Mishnah Berurah* does not cite the *Gra*'s protest, except in his *Bi'ur Halacha*. This implies that his chief ruling is that the *minhag* of "previewing" the *Haggadah* is in fact valid.

The version of the *minhag* of the *Sefer HaMinhagim* and the *Rema* actually indicates a precise time on Shabbos afternoon at which to read the *Haggadah*. That timing is built on the *Ashkenazi minhag* to read a chapter from *Pirkei Avos* just before concluding the Shabbos *Mincha* services in the summer, and the chapter of *Tehillim* "Barchi Nafshi" during the winter. Since the *minhag* is not to begin with *Pirkei Avos* until Pesach itself, the *minhag* of reading the *Haggadah* is designated as **replacing** what would have been the last "wintertime" reading of "Barchi Nafshi" - effectively *ending* its "period of being read" (which is how the *Rema* puts it).

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