

New Haggadah aims to make Exodus relevant today

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Staff Reporter

A new Passover Haggadah that emphasizes individual freedom and the role of human beings in bringing about an ideal world has been written by Rabbi Ronald Aigen and published by his Reconstructionist Congregation Dorshei Emet.

Wellsprings of Freedom, The Renew Our Days Haggadah, colourfully illustrated with original art, contains a line-by-line translation of the Hebrew text of Exodus into an English that is gender neutral and contemporary in idiom.

This translation serves as a commentary on the original text.

Rabbi Aigen explains in the introduction that his goal is to bring “a fresh perspective to a familiar tale. As well as tell our collective story – the journey of our people out of Egyptian slavery – this Haggadah helps us to make the seder our own individual journey of liberation.”

His version puts the focus on the characters in the story, including the women: Yoheved and Miriam, but also the lesser-highlighted Shifra, Puah and Bityah.

The pages have a “split screen” format

with the traditional story on the top and its possible meaning to each person in his or her own life today at the bottom.

Interestingly, Rabbi Aigen has included more of the original Torah text and rabbinic legends than are found in most Haggadah, as well as some previously untranslated chassidic interpretations.

Each of the components of the seder is linked to a reflection on a modern issue or everyday concern related to freedom. Along with the traditional four questions about why this night is different from all other nights, additional contemporary questions are offered throughout the service to encourage discussion.

For example, karpas, the dipping of greens into salt water, raises the theme of “freedom and nature”; *tzafun*, finding the afkoman, begs consideration of the relationship between “freedom and concealment”; and *Barech*, the grace after the meal, introduces the concept of “freedom and gratitude.”

This Haggadah completes Rabbi Aigen’s *Hadash Yameinu* (Renew our Days) series revamping the traditional liturgical texts, published by Dorshei Emet. The earlier siddur and machzor, for instance,

avoid depicting Jews as the chosen people, but rather as a nation endowed with the responsibility to act ethically and stress human, rather than supernatural, action in the pursuit of liberty and justice.

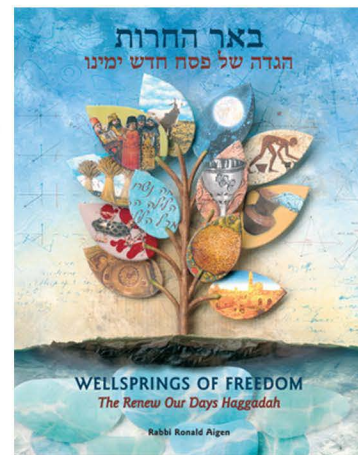
“My intention was to create a Haggadah that engages the contemporary spiritual seeker while conforming to the traditional structure of the Passover seder celebration,” Rabbi Aigen said. “The concept of freedom is central to human dignity. It is easy to take the Passover story for granted and forget that we need to renew it for each generation.”

In addition to its cover showing a sprouting tree leaved with biblical scenes, *Wellsprings of Freedom* has 15 full-page colour illustrations by Montreal artist J.W. Stewart, providing familiar and imaginative interpretations of the Exodus story. It is hoped they, too, will enliven the talk around the seder table.

Advance praise for *Wellsprings of Freedom* has come from Rabbi Zalman Schachter-Shalomi, co-author of *Jewish With Feeling*. “It is a delight to the eyes, the heart, the mind and the soul. People, using this beautiful work at their seder will have the shared experience of a current-day Exodus,” he wrote. Rabbi Laura Geller, senior rabbi of Temple Emanuel of Beverly Hills, commented: “This new Haggadah is a wonderful mix of traditional and innovative insights into the story of Passover.”

Rabbi Aigen’s siddur and machzor, published in 1996 and 2001, respectively, are used by congregations and rabbis throughout North America that are looking for a modern approach to the Shabbat and holiday prayers.

Wellsprings of Freedom will be launched March 11 at 4 p.m., at Dorshei Emet, 18



The cover of a new Haggadah written by Rabbi Ronald Aigen and published by Congregation Dorshei Emet, featuring an illustration by J.W. Stewart

Cleve Rd., Hampstead.

Copies of *Wellsprings of Freedom* can be purchased either at the launch, or ordered directly through the synagogue. Excerpts of the text and artwork may be viewed online at www.wellspringshaggadah.com.

Dorshei Emet, founded in 1960, describes itself as “an egalitarian, participatory community of Jews where women have always been equal partners and full participants in Jewish ritual life.”

Rabbi Aigen, a native of Brooklyn, N.Y., has been its spiritual leader since 1976. He is the current president of the Montreal Board of Rabbis and a fellow of the Institute of Jewish Spirituality and of the Shalom Hartman Institute in Jerusalem.