Two Passover Haggadot: From Slavery to Freedom (1946-1948) / Hezi Amiur

The 1940s were a fateful decade for the Jewish people, beginning with persecution and genocide and culminating in freedom and independence. The story of the Exodus from Egypt as retold in the Haggadah, which inspired both Jews and non-Jews throughout the ages, became the story of this generation as well, which they expressed in various non-traditional Haggadot written for their communal Passover seders.

How did it feel to be a young Holocaust survivor celebrating the first Passover seder following the liberation? In 1946, members of the United Zionist Youth Movement prepared their own Haggadah in the DP camps in Germany. Their version of the rabbinic text voiced their deep regret at having been blind to the Nazi threat and their unequivocal commitment to "the exodus from Europe," namely, to Zionism and immigration to the Land of Israel.

The verses describing Egyptian bondage were dramatized in a series of woodcuts created by one of the survivors, Zvi Miklos Adler ("Ben-Binyamin") and depict the starvation, back-breaking labor, and precariousness of life in the concentration camps.

Two years later, the struggle for freedom took on a new aspect – this time involving the Jewish defense forces in pre-State Palestine. In 1948, in decisive days of the War of Independence, the week preceding Passover and just three weeks before the declaration of Statehood, the Palmach twice tried and failed to conquer the Nabi Yusha fort in the Upper Galilee, losing twenty-six soldiers. The Haggadah created for the Palmach unit celebrates Passover with hope for imminent national renewal. It also acknowledges the toll exacted by the holiday of freedom and glorifies the sacrifices made to complete the Jewish people's journey from slavery to freedom.

These non-traditional Haggadot are original Israeli artifacts. Both Jews fighting for the establishment of Israel and those participating in Zionist movements in the Diaspora fulfilled the Haggadah's ancient injunction to regard themselves as if they too had been freed from bondage by telling and retelling their story.