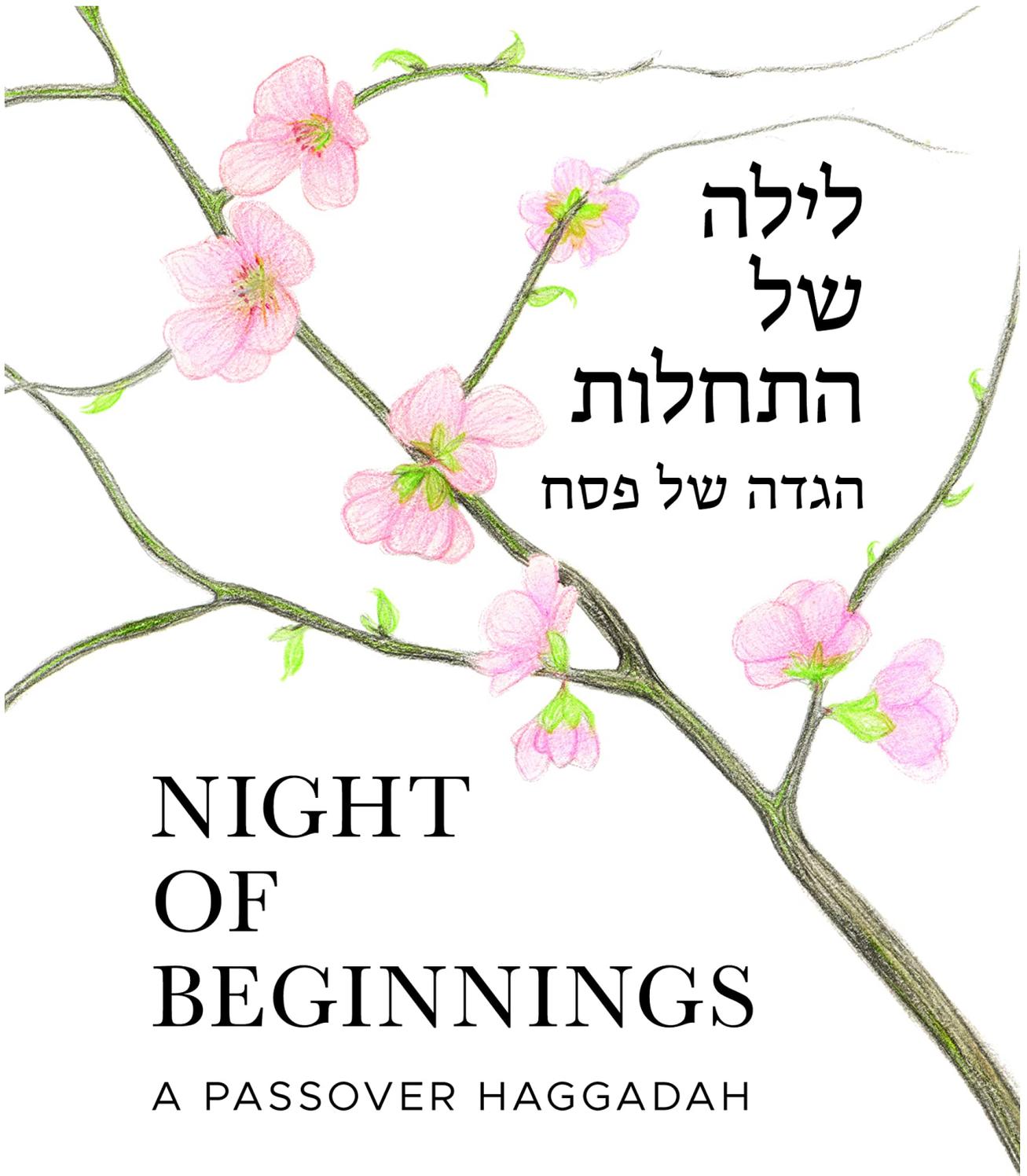




# A New Haggadah for Deeper Meaning for Passover this Year

01.04.2022 | Ron Kronish

**Marcia Falk: Night of Beginnings, A Passover Haggadah. Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2022. 232 pp. \$19,95**



לילה  
של  
התחלות  
הגדה של פסח

NIGHT  
OF  
BEGINNINGS

A PASSOVER HAGGADAH

Marcia Falk

With drawings by the author

*In every generation,  
one must see oneself  
as having gone out of Egypt.  
On every seder night,  
with each new Telling—  
a new chance to see myself  
becoming free.*

Marcia Falk, from *Night of Beginnings*

In Israel, we have been having a few days of spring weather in the middle of the winter. When I think of spring, I think about *Hag HaAviv*, the Festival of Spring, one of the names for the holiday of Passover, which is only about 6 weeks away. Without doubt, my favorite and most meaningful Jewish holiday is Passover, especially *Leil Haseder*, Seder Night, when my family gathers around a table to celebrate *Hag HaHerut*, the Festival of Freedom, with song, prayer, discussion, and good food. Every year, I look for a new haggadah to bring to the seder, and this year I have found a very good one.

Marcia Falk's groundbreaking new haggadah entitled *Night of Beginnings*, is a beautiful book, both in its design and content. Richly layered and revolutionary, it offers new insights, readings, blessings and especially poems and meditations to enrich your experience of the Passover seder.

Marcia Falk is well-known in the world of Jewish liturgical innovation, poetry, and translations. Some of her previous books have become classics, such as *The Book of Blessings* and the *Days Between*, especially for contemporary English-speaking Jews in the Diaspora. In addition, Falk is greatly appreciated among modern Jewish feminists, for her courageous theology and for her inclusive use of language in Hebrew and in English.

Falk received her undergraduate education at Brandeis University (as did I, in fact we graduated in the same year) and she went on to do a doctorate in English and Comparative Literature at Stanford in northern California. She also knows Israel and Hebrew well since she was a Fulbright Scholar in Bible and Hebrew Literature at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, and later, a postdoctoral fellow at the same university.

In her introduction to this new haggadah, Falk explains what her intentions were in writing this new liturgical book, and why the pursuit of greater meaning for anyone who wants to delve into Passover deeper is at the heart of the matter:

*The intention of Night of Beginnings is to do more than 'update' the traditional liturgy, to do more than make it consonant with contemporary thinking and sensibilities. This haggadah is an attempt to go beyond these aims to reveal meanings beneath the surface of the Pesach ritual and to deepen our personal connections to the holiday.*

After perusing this haggadah, I can say that Falk has undoubtedly achieved her goal. Let me give you some examples.

First of all, Falk has totally revised the telling of the story, known in Hebrew as the *Magid* (the "telling"). As she points out accurately in her introduction, the traditional *haggadah* does not actually tell the Exodus story. It does not offer a real narrative. Instead, it is just one long rabbinic *midrash* (interpretation), which I might add makes very little sense to the contemporary reader, including myself. (In many homes, this section is just mumbled to get through it or skipped).

Instead, Falk offers a compressed narrative of the journey from Egypt to the Promised Land, as a

way to provide a more direct connection for modern Jews. In addition, her telling of the story includes the voices not just of Moses and his brother, Aaron, but also of the female characters who play a crucial role in the story, including Moses' mother and his sister Miriam and Pharaoh's daughter, who adopts the baby Moses, and the midwives, Shifrah and Puah, who save the lives of Israelite male infants.

After quoting from the relevant passages in the book of Exodus that highlight the roles that these women play in the narrative of moving from slavery to freedom, Falk writes:

*The empathetic acts of all the women in the story exemplify an ethic of care. While the biblical narrative focuses on the male characters, the fate of the Hebrews is equally dependent on the less-elaborated acts of the women. As Rabbi Avira expounded: 'Israel was redeemed from Egypt on account of the righteous women of that generation' (b. Talmud Sotah 116; Exodus Rabbah 1:12).*

Falk's innovative interpretations, like this one, are interspersed throughout the haggadah.

In addition, in her own unique way (which she has done beautifully in previous books), Falk offers us new *b'rakhot* (blessings) which are re-creations, in Hebrew and English, of traditional blessings, as well as *kavanot* (intentions or directions of the heart), which is a genre that is new to the recitation of our foundational historical narrative. Each of these new elements are designed in a strikingly beautiful way, which helps them stand out for us, the readers, and they add multiple layers of meaning for us on this special night.

In her *b'rakhot*, Falk uses inclusive language, to make room for contemporary women. Another main innovation is that some of her revised blessings open with active verbs, such as *n'varekh* (let us bless) and *nodeh* (let us thank). In Falk's humanistic theology, this calls upon us to perform the act of blessing, rather than asking God to do it for us.

Many of her *kavanot* (directions of the heart) are profound and inspiring. Even though they are written in prose, they sound like poetry.

For example, in her *kavanah* about Elijah, she writes:

*What voice do we hear? What is ours to fulfill and do? Is it time for us to take over Elijah's calling and work to bring about redemption?*

Many of her reflections, like the one above, catalyze us to think about our role in bringing redemption, justice and peace to the world. Another example can be found in her meditation on *Hah Lachma Anya* (This is the bread of affliction) in which she focuses on the meaning of freedom and raises essential questions for us to think about:

*How many in the world are suffering enslavement, oppression, dehumanization? How many know hunger, poverty, homelessness? How many are being wounded by the vestiges and after-effects of these evils? How much of this pain are we awake to? What are we doing to end and to repair the damage? How much does our freedom depend on the lives of others, who may not share in our good fortune?*

In addition to all these major innovations, Falk has also embellished this wonderful liturgical book with poems, psalms and songs (traditional and contemporary) which help make the evening fun and poetic. Falk is at heart a poet. In her introduction, she tells us this explicitly.

*This is a poet's Passover, and as we read aloud from it [the Haggadah], we all partake in poetry's power to reveal. In this sense we are all poets.*

I genuinely love this new haggadah. It speaks to me very deeply. It is beautiful not only in its colorful design, which is superb, but in its theology as well as in its profound liturgical innovations. It has already helped me to begin to prepare for *Pesach* this year with some new meaning. I will definitely bring it with me to my *seder* this year.

About Ron Kronish [see here](#).

Source: [The Times of Israel](#), March 2, 2022.