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New American Haggadah



Synopsis

Read each year around the seder table, the Haggadah recounts through prayer, song, and ritual the extraordinary story of Exodus, when Moses led the Israelites out of slavery in Egypt to wander the desert for forty years before reaching the Promised Land. Now, Jonathan Safran Foer has orchestrated a new way of experiencing and understanding one of our oldest, most timeless, and sacred stories, with a new translation of the traditional text by Nathan Englander and provocative commentary by major Jewish writers and thinkers Jeffrey Goldberg, Lemony Snicket, Rebecca Newberger Goldstein, and Nathaniel Deutsch. Ravishingly designed and illustrated by the acclaimed Israeli artist and calligrapher Oded Ezer, New American Haggadah is an utterly unique and absorbing prayer book, the first of its kind, that brings together some of the preeminent voices of our time.

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Customer Reviews

I will forego making a joke on the "Foer Questions." Several years ago, Jonathan Safran Foer said that most translated Haggadot lack the imaginative punch to inspire people toward a greater commitment for social change. He said, "We talk about slavery every year, we talk about the movement toward freedom every year. But when was the last time a Seder made you really feel those things in a deep way" about Darfur or Energy Independence (because we are slaves to energy right now.) And so began Foer's quest to create a new American Haggadah, "American" because Haggadot, such as the Sarajevo Haggadah, are usually named for the place they were published. (This one is published in America, but printed in Singapore.) Seders have been

celebrated for over 100 generations, and perhaps there have been over 7000 known versions of the haggadah, whether it is from a religious movement, a kibbutz, Maxwell House, Mesorah, a commune, Cokey Roberts, or your own family. Foer writes that a new haggadah does not imply that earlier ones are failed, he just saw a need for one that looks at current issues in today's idiom. This haggadah is an exciting new one and will prompt many seder-table discussions for years to come; the "hyper-literal" translations into English will fascinate. But first, some information on the style: The Haggadah flows from right to left. On each page are illustrations, or Hebrew with English translations. There are NO transliterations, not even for a Kiddush or Had Gadya. The Hebrew has vowels. The Haggadah is a hardcover and delivered with a removable red paper wrapper (bellyband); when removed, you are left with a cover with Hebrew printing on a white background. The spine has the Haggadah's title and editors' names.

"Our translation must know our idiom, our commentaries must wrestle with our conflicts, our design must respond to how our world looks and feels." So Jonathan Safran Foer as editor and Nathan Englander as translator preface their ambitious version of "the oldest continually practiced ritual in the Western world." Certainly their choices of phrasing will spark a lively discussion at this virtual seder table. Concentrating upon Englander's choice to follow male-gender "faithful" translations ("Lord God-of-Us, King of the Cosmos") forces readers and users of this handbook to rethink their relationship with thousands of years of this venerable account. Many readers will be surprised at this linguistic fidelity from a hipster-era tale teller who writes from the complicated position of a former Orthodox student turned critic of the culture he once participated in. It starts off with verve. The opening call to all participants previews the seder table as it is made holy, Kadesh. This is rendered: "Sanctify/ And Wash/ Dip/ Split/ And Tell/ Be Washed/ And Bless/ The Poor Man's Bread/ Bitter/ Bundle/ And Set Down to Eat/ Hide It/ And Bless/ Praise It/ Be Pleased." One problem looms large for many who will follow along at a possibly more hipster seder: no transliteration. While juxtaposing Hebrew with English alone makes, as in the example quoted, a dramatic presentation enhanced by Oded Ezer's graphics (of only the letters, no images, as if faithful to traditional commands not to venerate images), the power of the page layout all the more prominent. This lack of phonetic equivalents, training wheels for the uneasy, makes this a challenging seder guide to the "order" of Passover that must be recited in each generation anew "as if it happened".

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