Ritual and Storytelling: A Passover Tale

I would like to talk to you about a ritual that is built around storytelling. It is what we would call a metastory, that is, a story about telling the story, about passing on to the progeny the experience of the ancestors, and it's a familiar one to many of you. I like working with familiar materials because there are almost always elements whose specialness and profundity we have overlooked, and I think that looking at familiar materials retrieves them and gives them to us with a freshness that makes them more intense and more effective. The ritual I'm going to talk about is Passover.

Passover is the occasion when the children are assembled once a year in Jewish tradition and told, "Listen, this is what happened to your ancestors, but this happened to you as well, this is your story." And this ritual event, which Jews are admonished to engage in every year, is not merely told, it is also performed, so that the children have the experience of receiving and, to some degree, living through the story of their ancestors as if it happened to them. Only the "as if" is blurred, and it does happen to them when it succeeds.

So this is a very useful form of storytelling. We see its directness, its utility; we see the older people struggling to bring their progeny into contact with their heritage and their knowledge; and we see, in an interesting way, the struggles of the progeny to adapt the tradition and to get out of it. This introduces a whole way of looking at tradition that I think is very valuable and a much more dynamic one than we are accustomed to.

The work I'm going to describe comes out of a longer study of *yidishkeyt* called the Transmission of an Endangered Tradition. A number of us at the University of Southern California studied the transmission of *yidishkeyt* through various means—ritual, story, performance, and folk art. We videotaped many events and then proceeded, over the course of two years, to look

at them and look at them and look at them. This, then, is what I'm going to tell you: the story of a Passover seder that we videotaped. It's a four-hour-long tape that we looked at again and again, to try to figure out what was going on there. What makes this so important is that this is, indeed, the study of the transmission of culture.

In anthropology it is a truism that culture is, above all, learned; it is not innate. It is a set of agreements, a set of understandings, on how to adapt to the world, how to look at the world, that is passed on from generation to generation. But one of the things that we have looked at very little is how it is learned. What are those direct mechanisms of teaching and absorbing that make it possible to transmit a body of tradition? So what we are doing in this tape and in this discussion is, in effect, watching "the natives" tell themselves who they are and what their lives are about and why they should live as Jews in twentieth-century America when so much of their traditional experience has been broken apart, changed, adapted, assimilated. We watch them perform this for themselves, staring over their shoulders at their own text, at their own interpretations of themselves. We watch them move between text and interpretation, between reading to themselves about who they are and talking about who they want to be and how to understand who they are. We look at their world as a set of meanings, a web of understandings, that they somehow have to animate. And this, then, becomes our task: to see them seeing themselves.

Now as we looked at this ritual, this storytelling ritual, this performance of a story, trying to figure out what was going on and how to tell other people what was going on, what quickly became apparent to us was that we were struggling to tell two stories at the same time. One is the chronological story of the ritual which has a certain set of procedures, of fixed events that have to occur in a given order, and the other is the story of the family that is performing the ritual. And every family performs it differently, and every year it is performed differently, although one of the great myths about ritual is that it is always the same. This is the essence of ritual: it is the story that says, "This is always the same."

But of course it isn't. Common sense—which ritual banishes, and which it is supposed to banish in order to induce belief—tells us that, if we look at it immediately, every ritual has to be different. There are different performers, it's a different world, a different year. And yet we accept the

claim to perpetuity that ritual makes. Because it is rhythmic, because it is repetitive, because it uses a special vocabulary, all ritual takes ordinary things and makes them extraordinary. The means it uses are everywhere the same. Whether it's an African initiation ceremony in Botswana or a Jewish storytelling session in Los Angeles, ritual sets the ordinary apart by its use of language, gesture, costume, posture—sensuous things. And those sensuous things are very persuasive and invite us to suspend disbelief, exactly as we do in a theater. Ritual induces the same willing suspension of disbelief. The "as if" fades away, and we enter into the story, and it becomes, then, something that has its own reality. An imaginary life, an imagined reality, comes to life and is our own. And when we leave, something has changed, permanently; something which we formerly only talked about or heard has been made ours.

All rituals do this. And this is an interesting paradox about rituals: they all tell us that what has happened has always happened and is always true and will always be true, yet we have just had the experience of it happening to us in a unique and immediate way that makes it special and not always true. This is one of the paradoxes that we don't deal with in ritual—or, rather, ritual allows us to take up the paradox and not solve it. Because a real paradox is not solvable. Rituals, because they are repetitive and rhythmic in a distinctive physiological way, go around the critical functions of the brain, right into the deeper levels where emotional experiences take place, and so the doing is the believing. The senses persuade us, not the critical mind that says: "But wait! This doesn't go with this, and this doesn't fit here, and this can't be true." When ritual succeeds, something is experienced, something sensory. Walk into any church: candles, incense, the wealth and luxuriousness of detail, all that fleshing out of our imaginary worlds—these things become the stage where we are allowed to enter and perform ourselves as we might have been or should have been or perhaps as we really are. That is what ritual allows us to do.

Now let me briefly say what Passover is. This is a formal holiday celebrated each spring by Jews since the time of the dispersion from Palestine, after the destruction of the Temple. They are admonished to assemble to retell the story of their deliverance from Egypt and from slavery. This is the heart of the story: the release from affliction, the release from oppression. This leads to a reaffirmation of the wandering through the desert where, at the end of forty-nine days, they receive the Covenant on Mt. Sinai, and the

Torah is given, and the Jews come into being as a constituted entity. The Bible requires that this account of exodus and freedom be repeated. The parents tell it to the children every year when the children are told to ask, "Why do we assemble?" They are asking: What's special about Passover, in addition to that historical or mythical event, so that this is the only formal holiday of this seriousness that takes place in the home, instead of the synagogue?" Friends are there, family members are there, personal ties give the whole thing its context. It takes place among one's primary group, so that sacred beliefs are again put in touch with the ordinary people of one's life, and those ordinary people take on an extra dimension. They become the characters in the great drama itself. And this revitalizes family relations. It doesn't always make them harmonious or even affectionate, but it certainly intensifies them.

The leader of the Passover seder is the father who, on this occasion, serves as the teacher and the high priest. *Seder* means "order" in Hebrew. Passover refers to "the passing over" when the Angel of Death flew over the houses of the Jews, sparing their firstborn sons. The laden table, the feast, is equated with the altar: it becomes the great sacrificial feast. Since the destruction of the Temple, this has occurred in the home. Those who are there and hear the story and ask questions are blessed, and those who assemble and remain indifferent are unredeemed.

This is a very important issue; this goes through the seder again and again. People are urged not only to participate, but also to experience it as their own. If they do not, it fails. There is a section where four sons are described in the written text, "one wise, and one wicked, and one simple, and one who does not even know how to ask," and each of them has some difficulty in hearing the story. The interesting thing is that the wicked son is the one who says, "This is not mine. I am not in this story." The written text that goes with the ceremony instructs the father: "Say to him: 'This is what the Lord did for me when I went forth from Egypt.' *For me,* not for him. Had he been there, he would not have been redeemed." The emphatic message is: this is your story.

Again and again, in the course of the evening, the people involved are urged to question, to argue, to debate. They are told, at one point in the formal text, that they are to argue like the rabbis at B'nai B'rak, the great wise old rabbis who stayed up "during the whole of that Passover night," arguing about the meaning of "telling about the outgoing from Egypt." This story

about storytelling is included in the written text, so that the example of the old rabbis not only serves to give permission for argumentation, but also becomes a memorable set of instructions as to how the story is to be told. Interruption and dialectic are explicitly built into the ritual of telling the Passover story.

Now this is an interesting contradiction. I've just said that ritual is to be persuasive. But here we are being told to question and ask and argue. The heart of argumentation is urgency, the sense that the things we are talking about matter. This is where the issue of indifference—of wickedness—comes in, where the problem of nonparticipation comes in. The dialectic becomes the means by which the rust of inattention is scoured away, and the text is made vital and urgent.

Let me tell you about the text. It is called the Haggadah, which means, literally, "the telling."

There are many versions of this book. Now people write their own to suit their present circumstances. Different families have their own version, and they don't like the others. Within families, there are often arguments about which version to use. If the critical one got lost, this is a big problem. But no matter what the version, there is always some written text called the Haggadah, which will always be followed. And that is what you call, in anthropology, part of the Great Tradition. This is the allegedly permanent, official, written record of how the story is to be told, with stage directions: "Now you drink a glass of wine. Now you hide a piece of matzah."

Then there is the oral tradition that goes alongside this: "Well, this is the part we leave out." "That's where Aunt Sadie put in this other part." "Aren't you going to do this one?" "No, we don't have time for that. Let's do this one instead." Often the agreements that come out of these differences get penciled in. And so a family's history can be read in and through its Haggadah. We have a group of people who are doing this together year in and year out. The participants are always changing somewhat. Someone has died, someone has been born, someone is out of town, someone brings a guest. But there is some stable group of people who are always present year after year, and they, in effect, become the elders who guard the tradition.

So their family story over the years, their oral stories, their particular histories go along with this Great Tradition. The Little Tradition of local people on the ground, alive in time, goes along with the Great Story, and they

intermingle, contradict one another and jog along more or less side by side, hopefully ending at the same time. So these two stories, then, are simultaneously told: the Great Story, which is in the Haggadah and which is written down, the written tradition and history of how the people came out of Egypt and received the Covenant, and the individual family story. And these become inseparable, because you cannot understand the one without the other. You are reading both stories at the same time. The seder is contrapuntal.

The other thing that makes this a special event, a particular kind of ritual, is that the children must be present. The whole point of it is for one of the children—allegedly, the youngest son—to ask the leader, "Wherefore is this night different from all other nights?" This is the first of the Four Questions, which the child asks at the beginning of the seder. This is a marvelous piece because it permits the child to say: Why are we doing this? What's this ritual for? Why do we lean tonight? Why do we eat bitters? Why do we eat of unleavened bread?" All these questions are saying: "What's all the specialness for?" And this is a setup. You can almost hear the voice of the Great Tradition say: "Ah, I thought you'd never ask." It's what makes the whole thing happen.

At different seders this section is adapted in various ways that are extremely important. I've been doing some work with the Gay Synagogue in Los Angeles,[1] and I went to their seder last year. Their biggest struggle in adapting the tradition, and their greatest source of pain, comes from the fact that for them there are usually no children around. Since the point of this holiday is to tell the story to the children, what do they do about this? They very explicitly become the children. They say: "We are children to ourselves. We are passing this on to ourselves." They have to deal with this question. They can't gloss it. They have to say how their seder enacts a story on continuity.

Children are obviously very symbolic, they represent many things: the future, innocence; above all, they are symbols of perpetuity. So the children have to be present throughout the seder. Ideally, they should be awake, but because the seder goes on a long time, it's not guaranteed. So various devices are put in to make sure the children are awake throughout. There are songs, there are riddles, and there are all sorts of opportunities and invitations for misbehavior. It is understood that the children will get drunk because every-

one present has to drink four cups of wine. The children usually tipple throughout the evening. They spill and they drink, and they spill and they drink. There is an opportunity, which I will describe later, when they are actually encouraged and allowed to spill. This is quite a thrill. And then there is an actual ransom of a piece of matzah.

Now matzah, which is unleavened bread, is the symbolic food that is eaten during the eight days of Passover. There is a very important piece of matzah called the *afikoman,* which is understood as dessert, and it is broken. The ceremony cannot be completed until its two halves are reassembled. So it has become the custom for the leader to break this piece of matzah and put it in a conspicuous place where a child will see it and steal it and hide it. And the child holds it for a ransom. After dinner, when there is more ceremony to do—by then it is usually very late and everyone is very tired and impatient—the seder cannot be completed, and the Messiah will never come, unless the *afikoman* is recovered. But the child does not give it back until the leader pays for it, and the payment varies with the times and the economic community. It can be a bicycle and it can be a quarter, it all depends on what you can get away with.

Interestingly enough, when I took my eleven-year-old to the gay seder, he was just aghast because he was not the child who was allowed to steal and redeem the *afikoman.* The interesting thing was their utter consistency in adapting the ritual. Here, as in asking the Four Questions, they were the children to themselves. One of them stole it and redeemed it, and they gave the present to an adult. My eleven-year-old thought this was scandalous and sacrilegious. But they did it right, they really thought it through. It was not a child's present, it was a casserole dish.

The seder has all sorts of additional meaning and subtexts, and different groups adapt it in different ways, depending on their political, social, and historical orientation. For example, this has always been known as a spring ceremony of renewal, and there are ecologically-minded folk who do that one up properly. It was the sacrifice of the paschal lamb in front of the Temple, so the sacrificial aspect can be brought in. It is a ceremony of freedom and affliction and redemption, so it has great opportunities for Marxist or left-wing readings. There are all sorts of questions as to who the afflicted are, and I'm going to come back to this again: who gets to be the afflicted in the

retelling of this story of freedom? Oppression itself may become the enemy, and freedom itself may become the hero.

So the Haggadah can be read and used in many different ways, it is a very flexible text. But to have integrity, the core of it must come through, and the heart of the story is that the news of perpetuity is passed on to the progeny. This is what it is designed to do: to assure that the story will continue to be told, to be kept alive—that is where the fighting comes in—to be retold, generation after generation.

Now the Jews in America—and I'm speaking of non-Orthodox Jews here—are great experts in living on the edge, not having disappeared through assimilation, yet always quivering on the edge of that possibility, but still struggling to be themselves, and yet not exclusively themselves. What they are doing in their retellings of the Passover story resonates far beyond Judaism and represents a dimension of experience that is common to immigrants, common to ethnics of whatever kind.

In American, or in any multicultural society, one finds ethnic enclaves where the heart of ethnicity is kept alive in the family, in the home. That's where the special foods are eaten, where the special language is spoken, that's where festive or holy garments are worn, that's where the vitality of one's own tradition is really exercised. All this is most intense in childhood. The first words the child is likely to hear, the lullabies, the foods—all these things come ethnically inflected. And they become, for the child, associated with survival itself.

Moving toward maturity, the child moves out into the secular world. It begins with school, and it peaks around where making a living becomes urgent. That's where young people more fully enter into the secular world and have to speak the dominant language, wear the costumes of the majority and all the rest of it. In middle life the ethnic origins have to be submerged. Then in old age, frequently, when the urgency of the marketplace—the secular world—is less intense, the ethnic traditions may emerge again and become powerful and enacted. The old language may be revived, returning with remarkable fluency and allowing the old ones to return more feelingly to the things of childhood, making for a powerful continuity, connecting one's childhood with one's old age, making an affinity between one's self as an old person and the memories of one's ancestors and all that is associated with

home: with the early days, with all that was a sacrality, that is, a sacred body of experiences.

I don't mean the sacredness of the church or the government, I mean the sacredness of culture. Deeply embedded, profoundly familiar, used every day, the most common ways, inside one in ways that are never eliminated, it is a form of authority: the authority of usage and the authority of emotion and passion and first experience. And this sacredness of origins is associated with home and with ethnicity in a society like America. This is true for Jews, but not only for Jews; it is true for any ethnic group living within a secular society that requires them to leave behind some of their traditions in order to "pass" in the marketplace.

What happens, because those traditions are associated with early experiences, is that a pastiche of nostalgia enfolds them. They become doubly sacred, because memory mythologizes them. They are remembered with great sentiment, as one remembers one's mother's face. So often they are things that never actually occurred. Memory and affection distort them. But the attempt is made to restore them: to make the spaghetti the way Grandma did or to have a Passover seder the way *zeyde* did or the way I knew these things in my youth. And this is impossible. We seek again and again to have that, to do that, to go back and do it right, and it doesn't really ever happen, it's never fully satisfying. A friend of mine who works in the theater, Richard Schechner, has a wonderful phrase for this: he speaks of the "restoration of behavior," the continual seeking to restore what went before. The nature of this seeking can best be understood when one adds a word to this phrase and speaks of "the restoration of imagined behavior." I love Dylan Thomas's *Child's Christmas in Wales* for this quality. It is probably one of the most sentimental, fully fleshed-out documents of a Christmas which we know never happened. And a Navajo woman recently wrote, "I yearn to hear the drums of my childhood—the drums I never heard."

All this brings us to a particular Passover, the four-hour one we taped. It was a four-generational ceremony. It took place in the home of an old couple—East European, Yiddishists, not Orthodox people. Arnold was then ninety-two, Bella was eighty-nine. He was something of a poet and a writer, a philosopher. She, in old age, had become an artist, and a rather serious one. Their daughter, who is my closest friend and my age, was then in her middle forties. Deena is a feminist, a poet herself, divorced. Her two sons, Marc and

Greg, were twenty and nineteen at the time. A non-Jewish girlfriend of one of the boys was present. They were both religiously ignorant, with the same nostalgia, yearning back to the tradition but feeling they did not really possess it, really lost as to their own way, but full of desire for something Jewish that was their own. I was present with my husband and my two sons, who were then six and nine. There was a bunch of older people who dropped in, during the course of the evening, Yiddishists, all of them, who had carried on a long conversation, day in and day out, with the old couple. And there was a Russian family which had been in America for three months: a man and a woman and their twelve-year-old son. They had been refuseniks, they had just been smuggled out of the Soviet Union. They knew nothing Jewish, except they had read and heard about the Haggadah, but they had never participated in Passover themselves. You can imagine their presence lent immense power to this occasion because all the stories of oppression and escape and exodus were here personified by these people. They spoke no language in common with anyone except the old man and woman, who spoke Russian. So there was a serious language problem, plus considerable confusion created by the fact that the Russian family had reason to believe that every Jewish seder was videotaped, and the lights and the microphones were regular features, which they didn't object to. They couldn't.

So there we were, all assembled. Now for many a year—I have been going to these seders for many a year—Arnold has been flirting with some essence: he has begun the seder by saying, "This will be my last seder." And that is difficult to receive on many levels. It has to be treated with respect and also with a measure of skepticism. He announced it this year as he had in the past. He also announced that he was deeply set against the videotaping, he didn't like it and didn't want it to happen, but he was going to accept it because his daughter had asked him to do it.

His wife thought it was a terrific idea. So we went ahead and we did it.

Arnold was very aware that his grandsons didn't know anything Jewishly, and he wanted this tradition passed on. So after saying the opening prayers, he introduced his older grandson and said, "My grandson Marc will lead the seder." Greg had been given a chance to lead the seder a couple of years before, so Marc was expecting this, and he said under his breath as he came into the house, "If he tells me to lead it and breaks in and interrupts it and takes it over, I want you to know I'm leaving." He said this to his mother

as we all went in. So we were all very tense. This combination of intentions does not make for a relaxed evening, but seders are never relaxed.

It was a sacrifice for the old man to give up leading the seder, because it was something he loved to do, but he was doing this to assure that his grandsons would be prepared to carry it on. What happened during the course of the evening was that the boy slowly changed into a man. You could see it happening before your eyes—this is the wonder of working with videotape—and it became a rite of passage for him. It was the bar mitzvah that, in a sense, he had never had. He began the seder as an ignorant, unsure boy, and by the end of the evening he was commanding the situation with a good deal of authority.

It so happened that by the end of the evening he was rather drunk as well. So the videotape has this wonderful mixture of authority and slippage. When his grandfather put him in charge of the seder, he began to take a lot of wine because he was very nervous, and his grandfather turned to him and said, "You can't do that, you're supposed to have four cups." The grandson said, "Look, these are my sacred cups, and then over here I have my other cup, I'm drinking from that one, and I do the required four cups at the right time." And the grandfather said, "That's an interesting idea. Do you think I could do that too?" And so an innovation was made that you knew was going to get passed down, and that generations from now in this family they would tell the story of how this came about.

The grandson also imitated, in a completely out-of-character way, some of the sexist behavior that went on in the family. Implicit in this family, and in all families, there is a basic antagonism and competition between ritual and food. The women usually take responsibility for the feast. They want the meal to be appreciated, eaten hot, and people do get hungry. So the women are usually put in the position of lingering in the kitchen when they are supposed to be out there praying or singing or whatever, and then hurrying the men through the prayer because the soup is ready. So, to hear this young man keep saying, "Would the women please come out of the kitchen!" was somewhat incredible—it was very out of character. He was, after all, the well-trained son of a feminist mother. But now, as leader of the seder, in the role of father and high priest, he began to ape the authoritative manners of his forebears. When you see transformations like this occur, you know that you are in the presence of the family story as well as the Great Story.

What is also very interesting is that you could see family traumas and conflicts being worked through the template of this ritual the whole time. I knew a lot about this family, but I analyzed the tape with strangers, who could see these conflicts as well. So, for example, there was a great deal of identification between the father and the daughter, as writers, and a great deal of competition between the mother and daughter for the father's attention. It was clear at a glance that this had been going on for a very long time. You could see it happening in explicit ways. Every time the father and daughter would start to talk about philosophical matters, the mother would cut in and do one thing or another with the food and interrupt them. There was also the struggle of the aging father to get his daughter's attention, to get her to really listen to him. You can see her sneaking out, slithering out whenever he tries to talk to her. She cuts him off, pats him and doesn't really listen. He does all the things that make people impatient—he talks very slowly, he forgets what he started to say. And you watch her slip away from his attempts to hold her. But in the end he made a great success of it, by using the very device he hated—the video camera. I will tell you about that later.

Now I want to tell you about three fights, three struggles that embody some of the issues which are dealt with in ritual, struggles that give us a view of how tradition is passed on.

I said before that anthropologists and others have not studied the transmission of culture systematically. We have a rather mechanical view—we get it from the secular world—that education is something like a bag of potatoes in a relay race. One generation hauls it forward, and the children pick it up and continue with it, as if it were a mechanical thing that you thrust onto the youth and they take it and continue it. But this is simplistic and erroneous.

What happens when we view the transmission of tradition in the context of this Passover seder? Mind you, we are dealing here with family and with sacred materials. Again, I say "sacred" meaning a form of authority that does not come from God. I mean what carries authority because it goes to the heart of what makes you a human being, it's what you carry with you all your life. And that isn't something you take dutifully and receive and then you say "Thank you" and go on. Anyone who is a parent knows this. That is not the way you teach your child to be a *mentsh* or the way you teach your children to do what you do or teach them what you believe in. Not at all. On the con-

trary, common sense tells us that socialization—which is the teaching of sacred things—is ambivalent, it is a struggle. And the problem is how to get the children to receive what you have to teach in some form that you consider valid and recognizable, and to take that version and make it their own. That is the struggle of the parent or the one who is passing it on.

The struggle from the children's point of view is how to take that stuff and make it have something to do with their lives, how to adapt it, how to make it useful, how to make it speak to the world around them. If either of these tasks fails, the whole thing fails. If the children take the traditions and change them, bowdlerize them, alter them too profoundly, so that the older people say, "I don't understand what's going on. I don't recognize this, it has nothing to do with us," then from the parents' point of view this has been a failure, they don't care any more. If, on the other hand, the children have had something imposed on them that doesn't speak to them, that is not vital to their lives, then it's a mechanical act of obedience, and it's useless.

So that means there is a built-in tension, a built-in antagonism between the generations about the sacred word that has to be passed on. So there has to be some negotiation. Both parties have to give something up, and both parties have to agree in the end that they recognize what it is that has been given and received. This is a very different model from the mechanical one that goes "Here it is" and "Thanks." This, again, is a dialectic. And that is why Passover is such a useful thing to study as an example of socialization. The children come in and say, "What is going on here?" And working that out, then, becomes what the evening is for.

The first fight that took place was a fight about language. This issue is probably a very common one, the issue of "what language to have the ceremony in, anyway." "Is this in Hebrew or in English?" The older people, of course, want to do it in Hebrew, which is the sacred language, the language of their sacred youth, and the children don't understand Hebrew, so there is a struggle. On the videotape we hear the grandson who is leading the seder saying, "I have to do this in a language I understand." And Greg, the younger brother, who turns out to be more of a traditionalist, saying, "But I don't like the sound of it in English, it doesn't sound like what even I remember when I was a kid. Even if I don't understand it, I still want to recognize the sounds." And the old man saying, "What kind of seder do you call this if it's not in Hebrew, if the prayers aren't in Hebrew?" So there's a tussle about language.

Meantime, the older man and the older woman, whenever they come to a stumbling point and they want to have a little argument aside, talk in Yiddish. This brings in all their cronies from their own generation, and all the children are then left completely in the dark. They are very annoyed, they say, "Come on, come on, let's have this in English, we want to know what you're talking about." So there are three-way struggles there.

At this seder there is an additional struggle because they have invited this family that only speaks Russian. You don't ask people into your home and have a ceremony and then not tell them what's going on. So at the very beginning Bella stops everything and gives the Russian family a formal welcome. She says this in Russian, they answer. She translates the answer into English, then says the prayers in Hebrew, adds Yiddish commentary, she translates all this into Russian, they ask a question—by then an hour has gone by and we're on page one. And it has become clear that some terrific compromise is going to have to take place. So everyone begins leaping wildly through the pages. What's going to be left out? Which parts should be translated? And into what language? How do you make this balance between the sacred language of the text and the contending languages in which it can be understood, between the urgency of having everyone there understand the ritual and the urgency of carrying out and completing the ritual? The seder night is passed striking and re-striking ever-shifting balances.

The question of language is further complicated by the issue of gender. The Haggadah, as written, is fiercely and resolutely and relentlessly sexist in its language, as Jewish liturgy is in general. It's not as easy as you'd like to think to change this on the spot. There are feminist Haggadahs, but it almost goes without saying that this family wasn't going to use one. Nobody had gone through the Haggadah and worked over the language, that takes a long time, so they were trying to improvise as they went along, out of courtesy and genuflection to the times in which we live. Everybody but the old couple was more or less willing to make a real effort to say, "It's not the sons who ask the Four Questions, it's the children who ask," and not to say, "O Lord Our God King of the Universe," but to say, "Ruler of the Universe." All that went along reasonably well until we got to the part about "our forefathers" coming out of Egypt.

Then the woman, my friend, said, "Wait a minute! We cannot do it this way. Where were the foremothers? Where were the women?" Her father

decided to give a very learned reply to this. He said, "You understand that these people have been in Egypt a long time, they have intermarried a lot, they intermarried with Egyptian women, so it really isn't important if we leave *them* out when we talk about coming out of Egypt." And she answered, "We assumed they married. But they had daughters as well as sons. Did *they* not come out of Egypt as well?" This kicked off a great controversy about the meaning of forefathers. "Well," said the father, "forefathers means forefathers and foremothers!" The daughter replied, "It is not good enough just to mean it, it has to be said."

Greg, the younger son, the traditionalist, explodes. He says, "Look, once a year I have a chance to do things exactly as my forefathers did. I don't want to bring politics into this." And Deena says, in response to both her son and her father, "Next year I'll just do my own seder." This is a very ambivalent, middle-aged woman who isn't sure she even wants to be there and suddenly she finds she is committing herself to writing her own Haggadah and doing her own seder a year from now. Her father says, "It doesn't matter anyway, this is not my kind of seder, it doesn't make any difference." There was no resolution on this one, but opinions had been aired, and the seder limped along. Although the issue of gender wasn't smoothed out, by the time the discussion turned to other things it was in everyone's consciousness.

Then came the issue of the ten plagues. This is the recitation of all the afflictions that the Lord visited upon the Egyptians. Deena said, "Now we get to my favorite part of the seder, and I see that my father has just crossed it out. He wants to leave it out for all the right reasons because we don't want to talk about the suffering of our enemies here. But I must say that I always liked this part because it keeps us from being sanctimonious. It reminds us that we are all in symbolic Egypt, we are all suffering, and I really feel this should be put in."

A big argument develops around this question: "What does it mean to talk about these plagues, anyway?" And they are terrible plagues: they are vermin and boils and locusts and cattle disease and blood and slaying of the first-born—really horrible things. So a big discussion ensues. "What are we doing when we talk about all this?" Her son Marc says, "Look, there is nothing wrong with including this. All we are doing is saying that these things happened to our enemies, and because they happened, we do not fully

rejoice." Now what happens when you say the names of the plagues is, traditionally, you put your finger in your cup of wine and take out a drop, and you drop it on your plate for each one of the plagues, as you recite them: "Boils . . . murrain . . . locusts . . . frogs. . . ." So Marc says, "We're not celebrating these afflictions, we are simply making our own rejoicing less, we are making our cup less full because our enemies suffered." He is moved by the nobility of this. And Greg says, "I don't think that's what we're doing here at all. We are rejoicing. We are saying: 'Look what we did! Look what happened to our enemies!' "

This went into a discussion of "who are the Egyptians." "Who is the 'us' and who is the 'them'?" This is the point in the seder where we acknowledge that our enemies are part of humanity, they are like ourselves, and that is why we are diminishing our cup: what happened to them happened to us. This, then, is the "humanism versus particularism" issue.

As soon as it is raised, someone inevitably chimes in and says, "Yes, and we also diminish our cups for the Vietnamese." Someone else says, "South Vietnamese or North Vietnamese? Or all the Vietnamese?" "What about South Africa?" "What about people of color here in America?" "And women!" All those present bring in their favorite groups of the oppressed. "Students! . . . children! . . ." My children always say that to be a child is to be oppressed. And what happens is that this list of the oppressed enlarges and enlarges until it finally verges on being absurd, then everyone pulls it back in. But before they do, there has been a big, very big, discussion of boundaries, and the boundaries have been moved by force of these questions: "Who is 'them' and who is 'us'? Are we Jews? Are we human beings? Who are our co-sufferers?" Frequently, and in their best moments, Jews acknowledge that the point of their suffering is to enlarge their humanity, not just to live through it. Because of their history, Jews very often expect themselves to know more about this form of morality, they expect themselves to identify more with the oppressed, wherever they are geographically and whenever their oppression occurred historically.

This makes it difficult to talk about who the enemies are. You have a lot of problems within ethnic groups unless you have an enemy. Once you've included everybody as your partners in common humanity, it's very hard to say just who the enemy is. The list of specific oppressed groups has been

transformed into the issue of oppression, and that is not as easy to deal with in terms of identification. The question now is how to continue feeling like a "we" without a "they."

While the boundaries between Jews and Egyptians are shifting and thickening and dissolving in discussion, the camera is wandering back and forth across the table and comes to rest on my six-year-old son Matthew. He's doing the plagues. And seeing him do the plagues on videotape, I understand exactly why the plagues will never be eliminated. There he is, sticking his finger in the cup and flinging the wine, so that it hits the tablecloth—the white linen tablecloth, on which the others have been accidentally spilling their wine. But he is allowed to do it, he is even encouraged to do it. He is reciting these plagues in Hebrew and putting these drops of wine on his plate, and some of it gets flung elsewhere. You see why there will always be resistance to making certain changes in ritual, you absolutely see that this is a moment of great excitement and satisfaction for a child. There is this overlay of "yes . . . yes . . . friends . . . enemies. . . ." But what he is really going to remember, besides getting a present and getting drunk, is spilling the wine on the tablecloth and not being scolded for it.

When I moaned and groaned about how badly behaved my children were at this, as at all other seders, a wise friend of mine said, "Don't you understand when you read the text that *this* is what it's about, that it has always been this way? From the times of the Temple, as long as there has been a Passover ceremony, it is to keep the children awake, it is to keep them involved. It's because they're not behaving themselves and the adults aren't rebuking them that they really know this night is special, different from all other nights, and they're given additional energy by this permission. It's because they do grow sleepy after all the wine and talk that you have to bring them back, to complete the ceremony. So for the ceremony to succeed, the children must be allowed to mess up. This misbehavior—this space for the children's spontaneity and innovation—is at the heart of the Passover story, which is the story of a family getting its children to pay attention, and this is always difficult." I found this very wise and very consoling.

Now what happens is that the older woman, Bella, announces that she wants to read a poem. Because we've enlarged what the Passover is about—is it just about the Egyptians? is it about the Vietnamese?—she wants to include a poem that she says is a Holocaust poem. It turns out to be a poem about

Stalin's liquidation of Yiddish writers and intellectuals, so that Hitler and Stalin are now conflated as enemies of the Jews, and she feels it's essential to bring this in.

Her husband objects very much. He says, "No. No. We don't make our own Haggadah. We are doing this traditionally." Of course, this is not, strictly speaking, true. But he needs to say that. And she says, "But we mustn't forget." And her grandson overrides his grandfather and says, "You're right, absolutely, we should put this in."

Then the grandfather and grandmother have a fight in Yiddish, and in Yiddish they come to an agreement. She can put it in later if she does it at the place where the Prophet Elijah is supposed to enter and drink the wine that's been left for him in a symbolic cup.

This is a fascinating solution. This is where you can see the unconscious at work, shaping the ritual. Elijah stands for hope. In redemption stories, Elijah is always there when the Messiah comes. There is a subtext here that when all Jews perform the ceremony properly all over the world at the same time, the Messiah will come, the world will be completed. There is no danger of that. But the acknowledgment of Elijah as a presence is made by this cup. There is a moment when the door is opened, and the cup is miraculously emptied, and everyone acknowledges that hope and redemption have entered the room. Unconsciously, I'm quite sure, Arnold was saying that you can only put in the "Holocaust poem" in juxtaposition with Elijah. The tension evoked by Hitler's elimination of Jews was overwhelming to him, and he agrees to have it put in next to hope, so that these things are made bearable by their contradiction, by their opposition.

Bella says, "All right, I'll do it then." Marc, in a conciliatory way, says, "And don't forget." She says, "No, no. I won't forget. We must never forget." He says, "No, I just meant—don't forget. . . ." Then she makes this spontaneous speech about "we must not forget," which is all a misunderstanding because he meant, "Don't forget to come in with the poem." She says, "We will never forget. I want to tell you everything. I want to tell the ugly parts, the vicious parts, the painful parts, the good parts. I will never forget." This is her particularizing of the ceremony. She is saying, "This is what it is for me: it is the remembrance."

In between the formal parts that have to take place, there are a lot of empty spaces, there's a lot of what I call filler—a lot of skipping of pages,

bringing in food, business, particulars. In those empty spaces where the momentum flags, what happens is that people start telling stories, and they spontaneously tell their own stories. What to me was the most interesting part of all is that they all tell exodus stories. Every single person there who tells a story, tells one or another kind of exodus story. One woman tells about escaping from Eastern Europe to America with her grandmother's samovar. Arnold tells a most amazing story about his escape from Russia to London. Marc tells a story about what it's like to be a young wino in Hollywood—this is what he calls himself. He describes himself in picaresque terms and tells of a lost journey of a young man through a wasteland. Every single person, informed or uninformed, inflects a story of his or her life through the story of the exodus from Egypt.

This is a wonderful moment when you see how stories shape individual lives, how people take the ordinary stuff of their lives and equate that with some larger issue, which is then something that happened not just to the Jews in Egypt, but to themselves. So through this occasion they have found a form in which to pour the details of their lives. This is the stuff that anthropologists just never study. This is when the camera is usually turned off and you think nothing is happening, everyone is resting. But that's when they are taking the grand moments and enlarging their own private lives with them.

In just such a moment as this, Bella does, indeed, read the poem. And it's a stunning poem. It speaks of deep graves, red graves: "I lost my home." It tells of "those killed in houses like these, killed near graves, my own aunts and uncles and children." The poem is very long, and it ends by saying that "there will come a better time, and children will play near the graves of those who were marked, near those deep graves, the red clay, and the way we were will disappear, and we will have a home, and children will play on the red graves." It's a poem that dips truly down into the darkest time and then rises again with this note of hope of the return of the earth, to the natural redness of the earth, after the time of the blood-soaked earth, and the children will play. And Bella puts this in. It's a note of great redemption and hope.

There is another such moment, a filler moment, if you will, and a very dramatic one. Deena catches her father in front of the camera and, after a wonderful passage that I'll describe in a moment, she says she wants to ask him this: "What is this seder to you? What does it mean to you?" And he says, "This? This is a *shande,* a scandal. This is not a seder. This is exhibition-

ism." And she says, "You loved your parents very much. Imagine if you had a record of your parents to keep. That's why we're taping this. What would that mean to you?" And he says, "Why, it would mean everything to me."

Now before this takes place, she has asked him what he thinks they have in common. Why are they both writers? At that point he does the very thing he insisted he would never do. He simply pulls the curtain away. This is a man who floats in and out of attentiveness, selectively senile. A curtain parts and he says, "Since you ask, now then. . . ." This "since you ask" is very important because he's got her, the television cameras are on, she can't get away. You can see on some level he knows that this is the moment he has been waiting for.

And he comes up with a twelve-minute speech in which he is holding her and making her listen. And she is stunned by it. She goes from restlessness to something close to awe. And what he tells her—I'm going to summarize—is this:

"In my opinion all of life is nothing but a story, and it's the job of the father to make the story as eloquent as he possibly can, so that the children will hear it. But, above all, the story has to be told with love because the story is the love of the father for his daughter, and without that there is no story and nothing should be told. You ask why I became a writer. Let me tell you what happened to me. When I was very young, I remember a time when I had a dream, and in this dream the sky opened and God came to me and said, 'If you would be righteous, you would have a good life. You should be a righteous person.' I didn't know what to do with this immense knowledge. I woke up, my mother was calling me and telling me to go to school, and I didn't know what to do with this knowledge. I thought to myself, 'How do I be righteous? Ah, I should be like the prophets.' I always liked the stories of the prophets. I thought, 'I should be like the prophet Samuel.' He was the one I liked best. But what did they prophesize about? I was a little boy. I had no life to prophesy about. But I thought, 'The prophets told about their lives. So I should tell about my life, and that would be my prophecy.' That was how I became a writer. Writing about my life became my fulfillment of this dream."

She's very moved by this and thanks him for it. This is the point at which she says, "What does that mean to you?" And he says, "This is a shame. This is a disgrace. This is nothing." And she says, "But I will have this record to give to my grandchildren, whom you will probably not see. What

does this mean to you? Here my grandchildren will see you and know you through this record that we are making." And he says, "Your grandchildren? Those will be my grandchildren." Instead of saying, "They will be my great-grandchildren," he says, "Your grandchildren are my grandchildren." Here again, unconsciously, he is making a statement of tremendous importance: he has completely identified with her. And he says, "If there is a life after death, which I do not doubt, my spirit will be back to comfort you—and only you. Over time a man loves a woman, and little by little that passes away. It's you who will carry this on, it is my love for you and my love for your grandchildren that makes me want to give this to you."

What he has done in this passage has been to make a series of associations. He has talked about the father creating and passing on himself and his story to his child, which is very much as God has done to him when he told him, in effect, to become a writer. As God is to man, so is the writer to his story: "My whole life is nothing but a story, and all of it is told to the child with love, and love is what the story is." He has also identified himself with the prophets and with his ancestors and has identified his forebears as his own. So he has made this series of associations: as the father is to the child, the writer is to the story, the forebears are to ourselves, and God is to man. In a way that would be considered sacrilegious if it were ever said—and it should never be said—he has equated his human life with that of God Himself. In some religions this is the height of the religious experience. In Judaism, you get as close as you dare, but you don't quite say, "Man is divine and God is in man." You always allow a little space, and in that little space great inferences are exhaled. He has come as close as he dares to equating his life with the loftiest life of all. This man, then, has done what a great many religions do, what the most holistically and fully imagined religions do again and again, all over the world. Through ritual they persuade us that each human being is a microcosm of the Great Story which is the macrocosm; each person is the living embodiment of the greatest story of all or the greatest being of all, and these partake of each other. And that has, in fact, occurred in the course of this twelve-minute speech.

The evening is by then over. There is a good deal of chaos, and then some silence when everyone realizes it has come to an end, very inconclusively. Enough has been successful so that the grandparents have recognized what has happened, even if they say it isn't theirs. They have compromised.

The children have compromised, and they recognize that this seder has something to do with their lives. The exchange has taken place.

We have seen these people for four hours passionately arguing about what is going on there. Every single one of the major people, during the course of the evening, has said, "This is a terrible seder. This is not my kind of seder. I would never do it again. Next year I have other plans." You know that they'll all be back. You know that much of this will occur again.

Ritual has the power to generate its own need to be redone. It's never the mythology that was wrong, it's not the Haggadah. The family didn't do it right. So next year you get to do it right. When a medicine man loses a patient—and this is as true of our medicine men as of Indian medicine men—it is never the mythology or the germ theory of disease that is at fault. The question of whether the gods do, indeed, hear our calls never arises. There is always some reason that explains why it was the practice that was wrong and not the theory or the mythology. So here, too, they don't look at the Haggadah and say, "There's something wrong with this text." They say, "Next year we'll do it better, we'll do it different, we'll do it right."

And so they conclude. Spoken into the tense silence that then occurred, probably the only little silence that occurred during the evening, are the words that Marc says, somewhat lamely and very touchingly: "Next year in Jerusalem." This is as close to an agreement and a success as any ritual needs to come. Its very imperfections require that it be done again—differently, better—the following year, and somehow "next year in Jerusalem" will never come, need never come, should never come. And so it is that human beings struggle to reinvent the reason for coming together and performing the great stories that tell them who they are, why they are located in history and in the moment as they are, and what their individual lives with their struggles and their confusions have to do with the great stories of their people.