Echad Mi Yodea?

David Arnow

This song is based on several Midrashim from the 6th and 7th century. These texts elaborate on the retribution God doles out when, as recounted in the Book of Chronicles, King David conducts a census without divine authorization. Given his choice of punishment, David elects "three days of the sword of Adonai, pestilence in the land, the angel of Adonai wreaking destruction." (Here a day refers to a 12-hour period, 3 days equaling 36 hours.) The Midrash then elaborates: "Masters at pleading argued on Israel's behalf, each one asking God to set aside a single hour. The seven days of the week, the eight days from birth to circumcision… the five books of the Torah, and the three patriarchs- thus twenty three. And… the Ten Commandments and the two tables [tablets] of the covenant- a total of thirty five." In any event, there remained only 1 hour of pestilence. Still, seventy thousand perished.

The song's conclusion in the Haggadah makes sense for two reasons. As the Midrash implies, despite losses, Israel was spared from more than 97% of its allotted suffering, an outcome that Jews over the millennia would surely have envied. Second, the Midrashic source concerns a story to which the Haggadah itself alludes when it mentions, "His sword drawn in his outstretched hand against Jerusalem." It is this sword that the midrash's pleaders stay. David sinned by counting his troops, a practice that God forbids (Exodus 30:12-15). Against the grain of Jewish custom, which is often superstitious about counting, this song encourages us to count- to count what matters, not the size of our enemies, but the objects of our faith.

Carole Balin

Since the founding of the American Jewish Historical Society in 1892, Jews have attempted to demonstrate their patriotism by accentuating the achievements of those co-religionists who exerted themselves on behalf of liberty and justice for all. No better example exists than *The Bicentennial Passover Haggadah* issued in commemoration of the two-hundredth anniversary of the founding of the United States, which (among other gems) contains an updated version of *Echad Mi Yode'a?* called a "Bicentennial Ballad" with the following lyrics:

> One is the good ship Peartree which in 1654 brought the first Jewish settlers to these shores. Two are the early settlers Jacob Barsimon and Asser Levy who demanded the right to serve in defense of their country… Five are the synagogues of Philadelphia, Newport, Charleston, Richmond and Savannah praised by George Washington on his ascendancy to the Presidency [saying]: May the same Diety who long since delivering the Hebrews from their Egyptian Oppressors… whose providential agency has lately been conspicuous in establishing these United States continue to water them with the dews of heaven and to make the inhabitants of every denomination to participate in the blessings of that people whose God is Jehova… Eight are the words "And thou shalt proclaim liberty throughout the land!" taken from our Bible (Leviticus 25:17) by the founders of our Republic and fashioned by them into a ring for the Liberty Bell… Twelve and more are the American Nobel laureates of Jewish descent who have from this land broadened the horizons of health, science and peace.

Marc Brettler
The Book of Proverbs contains several numerical sayings, or example this gem from 30:21-23, "The earth shudders at three things,/ At four which it cannot bear:/ A slave who becomes king;/ A scoundrel sated with food;/ A loathsome woman who gets married;/ A slave-girl who supplants her mistress." These are isolated sayings and do not count up from the numeral one, as this song, which has no close biblical model, does. In offering examples, the poem mostly uses numbers from the biblical world, though there is reference to the rabbinic world and the natural world as well.

Larry Hoffman
This song exists historically only in Ashkenazi tradition and is a simple number game going from one to thirteen. The relevance of one (referring to God) is evident; but the number thirteen is also critical. The shorthand reference to thirteen "attributes" returns us back to the one God, by referencing God's thirteen attributes mentioned in Exodus 34:6-7.

Like most of the final songs, this one too is a relatively late addition to the Haggadah and of unknown origin. It is said to have been discovered in the walls of an old synagogue in Germany and, if so, it may go back to the time of Eliezer of Worms, a fourteenth-century halakhist from the movement known as German pietism or, as we refer to it today, Ashkenazi tradition. Some old versions of the song present it as a commentary on the Shma, Judaism's primary statement of God's oneness.

More likely, however it is a Jewish version of an ordinary German folk song entitled "Good Friend, I Ask You" (*Guter Freund Ich Frage Dich).* Its first verse reads, "One is our God who lives in and hovers over heaven" (*Eins ist unser Gott, der da lebt, der da schwebt im Himmel*). The first verse of the Yiddish version of "Who Knows One?" reads exactly like the German original.

Lawrence Kushner and Nehamia Polen
Rabbi Yaakov Yosef of Polnoye teaches that one who is wise understands that there is nothing in the world that is truly separate from God. Everything is single unity. The universe and God are like a snail "whose garment comes from itself." It wears what it is. The universe in all its fullness is a manifestation of God. And thus, to really speak and comprehend the words "I know one" is not just a child's counting game; it becomes the ultimate theological expression of faith.

First we must understand the unity, then we examine the apparent multiplicity of variegated forms, and finally, we return to a deeper understanding of the great unity. We read in Isaiah 41:4, "I am the first and I am the last." Indeed, atop the kabbalistic s'firot tree, the place of Keter and Ain Sof, and symbolizing still the primal unity out of which the universe has yet to flow, all is one; likewise, the bottom of the s'fira, Malkhut or Knesset Yisrael, is also called "one," because it is mystically referred to as "I," meaning the personhood of God.

The unity ascends from the first chorus, "I know one," all the way to the thirteenth. But even there the repeated chorus returns back to "one." Yaakov Yosef then cites a teaching ascribed to theBaal Shem Tov maintaining that this is a theological statement: Each one of the increasing numbers is a metaphor for our experience of the world in its increasing complexity. And when we arrive at thirteen, we realize that, according to gematria, the numerical value of the word for one, echad, spelled aleph (1), chet (8), and dalet (4)- also totals thirteen. And in this way, thirteen becomes one.

Chad Gadya

David Arnow
The song is filled with confusing imagery and none is as curious as "the Angel of Death." We read in Genesis, "But as for the tree of knowledge of good and evil, you must not eat of it; for as soon as you do, you shall die." Talmudic traditions connect the Angel of Death with the evil inclination and envision God slaying both in the messianic era. Midrashic literature elaborates: "God said: 'In this world, because the evil inclination is present, people kill one another and die, but in the time to come, I will uproot the evil inclination from your midst and there will be no death in the world." The world of *Chad Gadya* finally ends. A midrash known as the *Letters of Rabbi Akiva* puts it this way: "Then My people will dwell… in untroubled places of rest without the Angel of Death…" The Seder's last words bring us back to the beginning, not of the Seder but back to the Garden of Eden and a world of peace and eternal life.

Carole Balin
Haggadah for the Liberated Lamb (1988) is for "vegetarians and… everyone concerned with unbridled cruelty." Complete with recipes for vegetarian liver and a "Seder roast," it suggests replacing the z'roa with olives, grapes, and grains, which "symbolize the commandments of compassion for the oppressed found in the Bible." It maintains that God chose Moses to lead the Israelites because of his heroic behavior toward animals, as in the midrash where Moses returns a strayed lamb to its flock. Despite its zealous campaign against cruelty toward animals, the *Haggadah for the Liberated Lamb* ends with the traditional rendering of *Chad Gadya*, the song about the kid, which was gobbled by the cat, which was bitten by the dog, which was beaten by a stick.

Chava Alberstein, the popular, political, and prolific Israeli singer who has recorded nearly fifty albums over forty years, is an icon of folk music whose defiant songs include a version of *Chad Gadya*, written in 1989 in response to the first intifada. Her provocative adaptation opens with the original Aramaic, accompanied by a simple Hebrew translation and followed by verses implicitly criticizing Israeli policies toward the Palestinians. Alberstein prods the listener:

> And why are you singing *Chad Gadya*?
> Spring isn't here yet and Passover hasn't arrived.
> And what has changed for you,
> What has changed? [*mah hashtanah]*
> I have changed
> This year.
> For on all the night, all the nights [*she bechol halelot]*
> I asked only four questions [*arbah koshiot*].
> This night I have another question:
>
> How long will the cycle of horror last
> The pursuer and the pursued
> The striker and the stricken
> When will this madness end?
> And what has changed for you, what has changed.

In reaction to the powerful lyrics, Alberstein received death threats, and government-controlled radio stations barred the recording until public pressure ultimately caused the ban to be lifted.

To this day, the song reverberates in Israeli culture. Most recently, Amos Gitai, the award-winning film director, used Alberstein's *Chad Gadya* as the book end for his movie *Free Zone*. The film, which was originally shown at the Cannes Film Festival in 2005, depicts the complex relationship of three women (an American, an Israeli, and a Palestinian) who encounter each other in the tax-free zone between Jordan and Saudi Arabia. The movie opens with a ten-minute single shot of the Israeli-born star Natalie Portman as she cries while listening to Chava Alberstein sing her version of *Chad Gadya*. The song provides a fitting accompaniment to Gitai's raw depiction of the uneasy co-existence and tangled reality of the Middle East.

Marc Brettler

This poem, in structure and content, is totally foreign to the biblical world, mentioning, for example, "the Angel of Death," who is absent from the Bible. (The Bible also does not mention any cats!) However, the main point of the poem, that God is powerful and stands above and controls all, is very biblical and is emphasized in particular in sections of the Book of Job. For example, Job begins his response to Adonai's second speech from the whirlwind by noting, "I know that You can do everything,/ That nothing You propose is impossible for You" (Job 42:2).

Neil Gillman

It is thoroughly appropriate that we conclude the celebration of our festival of redemption with the ultimate redemption, the redemption from death. Not for a moment should we believe that this song is introduced into the Haggadah only to keep the children awake to the end. Its message is properly theological: God's power is ultimate. God is even more powerful than the Angel of Death.

That God, at the end of days, will resurrect the dead is a central teaching of Judaism at least since the second century BCE. Most Bible scholars claim that Daniel 12:2- "Many of those that sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to eternal life, other to reproaches, to everlasting abhorrence"- is the sole explicit biblical reference to life after death. That verse, part of a more extended passage (Dan. 10-12), conventionally dated to 165 BCE, is part of an eschatological vision that anticipated the approaching conflict between the Syrian-Greeks and the Maccabees, whose victory we now celebrate on Hanukkah.

But this concluding stanza goes a significant step beyond the doctrine of resurrection: not only does God have the power to resurrect the dead, God even has the power to destroy death forever.

The assumption that underlies this claim is that death itself is a residue of the chaos that God, in time, will banish from creation. That is not a popular assumption today. Many of our contemporaries would argue that death is a blessing, a way to keep nature fresh and young. Every creature dies and is replaced with a new creation. This is clearly not the view of our tradition. There is no clear indication, in the Bible itself, on why or how death entered the world- though the conventional view is that it is the result of Adam's sin as recorded in Genesis 3- but in time, the Bible proclaimed that death does not mark the end of God's ability to affect our destiny. If it did, then death would be more powerful than God, and we should properly worship death- which would be intolerable. In proclaiming that God has the power to resurrect the dead and now, in this last stanza of our song, that God slaughters the Angel of Death, the Bible and the later Jewish tradition celebrated God's power as ultimate.

These very last few words of the Haggadah sound the last note of the theme of redemption and, at the same time, represent the climax of the trajectory that took us from disgrace to the glory, from the bad things to praise.

Lawrence Kushner and Karen Polen

Rabbi Yaakov of Polnoye offers the following interpretation of *Chad Gadya*. The song was probably intended as a parable of Jewish history, wherein the Jews are the kid, and everyone and everything else are the nations that sought to destroy us. Yaakov Yosef reads Isaiah 41:4, "I am the first…" to imply that Jewish history all begins with a "father" (God) who purchased a "kid" (Israel).

But Isaiah adds also, "I am the last." These two dimensions of time, embracing ultimacy (from first to last), encompass all that is: the reality of this world and of the world-to-come. And they, likewise, correspond to the ten s'firot. Alas, when the s'firot are garbed in earthly garments, we count them as separately as ten, but they are, in truth, only different manifestations of the same underlying unity, as we read in Isaiah 30:20, "Your Master will no longer hide his garments, and your eyes will behold your Master." Of the "two" eras (this world and the world-to-come) that are really not two, but one, this verse is an allusion to the world-to-come: in messianic times, the power of the Angel of Death will be no more. And this is the implication of Zechariah 14:9, "On that day, Adonai will be one, and God's name will be one."

This is a radical teaching- In the eschaton it will be revealed that even the Angel of Death- another way of saying the evil inclination, even demonic- was a hidden aspect of the Divine. The unity of which Zecahriah speaks is a mystical unity of all that leaves nothing outside- even that which seems to us now as incapable of assimilation into the sacred.

Larry Hoffman

Of all the concluding songs, this one has received the most attention. It has been seen as an allegory on Israel's fate, each of the victors in the song representing another (and later) kingdom or ruler to which Jews were subservient. In reality, it was probably meant as nothing more than an amusing song akin to "The House That Jack Built." Like other Jewish folk songs, this one too is based on a popular German table song that may itself be related to an earlier French one.

Nonetheless, it is not surprising to find the specific content of the song coming from Jewish tradition; even in folk songs, people use images and ideas that they know best. In this case, the model may be a midrash with a similar chain of inference: Nimrod tells Abraham to worship fire; Abraham objects, "Better to worship water that puts out fire." Nimrod agrees, so Abraham suggests worshiping clouds that carry water. The midrash continues in that vein until Nimrod loses his temper and refuses to "play the game" anymore. An equally likely influence in Mishnah Avot 2:7, which pictures Hillel watching a skull float downstream and saying, "Because you have drowned other, other have drowned you; and in the end, those who drowned you will themselves be drowned." Our song is about the almost endless chain of retribution.

What makes the song so very Jewish is the same sort of conclusion that we saw in "Who Knows One?" The end in both instances is God, the single God who is "one" for "Who Knows One?" and who is the final judge and arbiter, even over death, for "An Only Kid."

Chad Gadya was probably composed in the Yiddish vernacular and only then translated into our familiar Aramaic version.

The Songs of the Haggadah:

A study of
"Echad Mi Yodea"
&
"Chad Gadya"

Rabbi Bradley G. Levenberg