In a radio interview, I was once asked, “Why is the Haggadah written in Aramaic?” I suspect the interviewer was used to leaving the Seder quite early because only the first paragraph in the Haggadah is written in Aramaic. The rest is written in beautiful Mishnaic Hebrew.

What is true is that the Haggadah is not exactly what I would have written, if I had been asked to compose a popular text for the entire Jewish people. It simply contains Torah discussions, with no historical anecdotes or references to current affairs. Yet it remains remarkably popular and beloved. This fact reminds me, every year, that the project I have dedicated most of my life to is actually not that important. What’s in the Haggadah? A lot of Midrashic verses, some clearer than others, some halachic sayings, paragraphs of praise and traditional songs. Almost all hard-core Torah, perhaps with the exception of Chad Gadya. In contrast, I devote my life attempting to make Judaism and its messages accessible through contemporary language and modern concepts. The Pesach Haggadah is seemingly the most popular Jewish text of all, and it makes no attempt to be accessible whatsoever. No stories about Churchill, or even Alexander the Great – no anecdotes, no wisecracks. And still, the vast majority of Jews – religious or not – read some or all of the Haggadah every single year.

I said “And still,” although perhaps I should have said, “And because of that.” It appears that what really grabs people, what hits deep, are specifically not the texts that come to you, but those that invite you into them. This is true not only for texts but for the entire Seder Night, even for food. In many homes, the hostess prepares intricate gourmet foods for the Seder meal, yet the ongoing memory is of matzah, which we eat because it’s a mitzvah, and the kneidlach, which we eat because of tradition. On Seder Night we don’t view things broadly, but we look for depth; not right and left but behind and ahead. Not to our friends and contemporaries, but to our ancestors, alive and dead, and to our own children – those not yet born as well as those currently spilling wine on the tablecloth.

I don’t think it’s bad or unnecessary to mediate Jewish values through stories about Napoleon, Churchill quotes or philosophical concepts from the 21st century. I think it is necessary for certain people. Me for example. But I know that the importance of this is minimal when compared to the classic engagement with Torah in our eternal texts. After all, even Churchill did not quote Churchill, but the Bible. In one of the history books he wrote, he devoted a chapter to the wasted 1930s, which Britain did not use to build a strong army. He called this chapter, “The Years the Locusts Ate.” How did this incredibly busy statesman so easily remember such an unfamiliar verse from the book of Joel?

If you tell me there is no contradiction, you are undoubtedly correct. One can write new Torah ideas on Tractate Chullin and popular current-affairs-related Torah too. Yet one must know what is important and eternal and what is less important and temporary.

I think of this on Seder Night, when I open the Haggadah. Those who are engraved on our people’s collective memory are the Rabbis debating the story of the Exodus – or according to the Tosefta, the laws of Pesach – all night. It is to them and their Torah we return and the rest is the chaff to the wind.

So is my conclusion that my life’s work is really not very important? Certainly not. My conclusion is that my life’s work is not my writing, but my children. With all due respect to books, Facebook, even to this column, they are not my portion in this world.

I close my eyes tonight and remember Seder Night in Haifa 40 years ago, as a little boy, sitting between Abba David and Saba Moshe. And then I open my eyes, and I’m sitting on Seder Night between my eldest, David, and my youngest, Moshe, and next to them their beloved brothers and sister, who also carry the names of our ancestors, and I know I have done something good in this world.

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