



WHY NOT FOUR RABBIS?

There must be something wrong. There are four questions, four sons, four cups of wine - but five rabbis. To be consistent, the Seder should have four rabbis, not five.

Let's imagine that we could tell one of the rabbis to stay home, leaving only four to sit at the Seder table in Bnei Brak and talk about the going out from Egypt all night.

Who were the five rabbis of the Haggada? Rabbi Eliezer, Rabbi Yehoshua, Rabbi Elazar ben Azarya, Rabbi Akiva, and Rabbi Tarfon.

They were five of the greatest sages of the Roman period. They somehow found new things to say about the Exodus each year even though none of them had ancestors who had been enslaved in Egypt (Eliezer, Elazar ben Azarya and Tarfon were kohanim, Yehoshua was a Levi, and Akiva was descended from non-Jews).

We probably would have expected a sixth sage to be there - Rabban Gamli'el, the rabbinic leader, but he was a difficult personality and the others wanted to depose him, and maybe the Bnei Brak meeting was a disguised anti-Gamli'el conspiracy,

though the five rabbis did not all agree concerning how to handle the problem.

If one rabbi could have been uninvited to the gathering, it could possibly have been Rabbi Tarfon, whose memory was not always completely reliable.

But the question of how many rabbis there should be is artificial, and in the end it doesn't really matter whether there were five rabbis or four.

HOW COULD MAIMONIDES LIVE IN EGYPT?

Three times the Torah has a command not to return to Egypt. Rambam says that a Jew is allowed to live anywhere but not in Egypt (Hilchot Melachim 1:1). Nonetheless, he himself lived there as the court physician.

Radbaz (16th c.) said that Rambam did not really want to live in Egypt, but he had to because his court post required it.

Maharshal (17th c.) thought Rambam had an ulterior motive for staying in Egypt, hoping that his public eminence would persuade the regime to facilitate a Jewish return to Israel.

Another comment by Maharshal is highly poignant, saying that in a harsh world Jews cannot be too fussy as to which country they reside in. But wherever we are, we have always been good citizens and contributed to the enhancement of society. **OZ**