

Lullaby for Moses, by Yakov Azriel ("In the Shadow of a Burning Bush: Poems on Exodus" 2008)

When she [Yocheved, mother of Moses] couldn't hide him any longer, she took an ark made of papyrus for him, and lined it with clay and pitch; she placed the child inside and put it among the reeds by the bank of the Nile. (Exodus 2:3)

Yocheved:

Lullaby,
Hush, don't cry,
The reeds and water will shelter you;
Lullaby,
Hush, don't cry,
My son, my
Little goat that *Abba* bought for two pennies. *(ref. to Passover song, Chad Gadya)*

No cat will scratch you, No dog will bite you.
No stick will beat you.
The reeds and water will guard you,
I swear.

My son, may you grow to be a scholar,
The letters of the Torah —
The raisins and almonds you'll eat;
Its verses—your milk,
Its words—your honey.
Lullaby,
Hush, don't cry,
My son, my *yingele*. *(yingele: Yiddish
for a boy)*

How can I hide you?
How can I hold you?
The reeds and water have sworn
To watch over and guide you
To a haven.

Pharaoh's daughter:

*Lullaby,
Hush, don't cry.
The reeds and water have sheltered you and brought you to me,
Little one.
No fire will burn you,
No ox will gore you,
No butcher, no angel of death...*

Source of poem: "Nashim: A Journal of Jewish Women's Studies and Gender Issues,"
Indiana University Press, #8, Fall 2004 - www.muse.jhu.edu

Commentary on Yakov Azriel's Poem, "Lullaby for Moses"
by Gail Lipsitz

This fascinating poem highlights the vital role of women in the Exodus story. Without Moses' mother Yocheved, his sister Miriam, and Pharaoh's daughter, Moses would never have survived and grown up to lead the Children of Israel out of Egypt from slavery to freedom. (The midwives Shifra and Puah, who defied Pharaoh's order and refused to kill the male babies, and the wives of the male Hebrew slaves, who insisted on procreating with their husbands, also are credited for their courageous roles in saving the Jewish people.)

The Bible provides the inspiration for many of Azriel's poems. As he does here, he often begins with a direct Biblical quotation, and weaves Biblical references into his writing. To understand the context of this poem, I would suggest that you re-read chapter 2 of the Biblical book of Exodus. The text tells the story of the birth of Moses, and how, when it is no longer safe to keep her Jewish baby, his mother Yocheved lovingly places him in a basket to float in the Nile, hoping that someone will find him and save him. As you no doubt recall, it just so happens that Pharaoh's daughter comes down to the Nile to bathe and spies the basket. "When she opened it, she saw that it was a child, a boy crying. **She took pity on it** and said, 'This must be a Hebrew child.'" With the timely intervention of Miriam, Pharaoh's daughter hires Moses' real mother to nurse the child. And "when the child grew up, she [Yocheved is implied] brought him to Pharaoh's daughter, who made him her son and named him Moses..." (Exodus 2:5-10).

Interestingly, the central role of Moses' sister Miriam is not part of Azriel's poem. I think this may be because Azriel wants to emphasize the bond between Yocheved and Pharaoh's daughter that exists before they even (briefly) meet each other. While as different as can be and the most unlikely of conspirators (Yocheved is a poor Hebrew slave, while Pharaoh's daughter is the rich and privileged Egyptian princess), they share the quality of **compassion**. This is symbolized by the way the two women sing exactly the same lullaby to Moses ("Lullaby, Hush, don't cry.")

In making the heart-wrenching decision to let her baby drift to his fate in order to try to save his life (as so many parents of children during the Holocaust did - "How can I hide you? How can I hold you?"), Yocheved blesses her son, expressing confidence that "the reeds and water have sworn to watch over you and guide you to a haven." Anticipating centuries to come, she also prays like a *Yiddishe Mama* for her "*yingele*", her little boy: "May you grow to be a scholar" for whom the Torah's words will be like milk and honey, and like raisins and almonds. These are allusions to the Eastern European tradition of putting honey on the first words of Torah a child learned in *cheder*, and to another lullaby, the Yiddish *Rozhinkes mit Mandlen*, by Abraham Goldfaden (written ca. 1880).

This short and seemingly simple poem has yet another layer! Azriel weaves into his unique way of telling the story of Moses the song "**Chad Gadya**" (one only kid) which is sung near the end of the Passover seder. Moses' mother compares her baby to the little goat that "Abba," the father in the song, bought for two *zuzim*, equivalent to a couple of pennies. The little goat is eaten by a cat, and then a dog and each of a series of increasingly large animals attacks the one before it, until finally the angel of death arrives, whereupon God Himself arrives to vanquish the angel of death. (Please see the lyrics and an explanation of "Chad Gadya" below.)

Picking up the refrain, Pharaoh's daughter promises to keep baby Moses safe from the life-threatening forces recognized in "Chad Gadya." In essence, she is promising to keep Moses safe from the measures enacted against the Hebrews by her own father, the Pharaoh. And, in a final touch of irony, Pharaoh's daughter unknowingly anticipates the night of Passover and the Exodus, which will not come for another 80 years -- the fateful night when the 10th plague kills the first born of Egypt, while the angel of death passes over the homes of the Hebrew slaves, who, led by Moses, will finally be freed.

I can only conclude: what an amazing poem!
Happy Passover.

Chad Gadya

Chad Gadya or **Had Gadya** (Aramaic: אֶחָד גָּדְיָא *chad gadya*, "one little goat, or "one kid"; Hebrew: "אֶחָד גְּדִי *gedi echad*") is a playful cumulative song in Aramaic and Hebrew. It is sung at the end of the Passover Seder, the Jewish ritual feast that marks the beginning of the Jewish holiday of Passover. The melody may have its roots in Medieval German folk music. It first appeared in a Haggadah printed in Prague in 1590, which makes it the most recent inclusion in the traditional Passover seder liturgy.

□ As with any work of verse, Chad Gadya is open to interpretation. According to some modern Jewish commentators, what appears to be a light-hearted song may be symbolic. One interpretation is that Chad Gadya is about the different nations that have conquered the Land of Israel: The kid symbolizes the Jewish people; the cat, Assyria; the dog, Babylon; the stick, Persia; the fire, Macedonia; the water, Roman Empire (which ruled Palestine from 63 BCE - 135 CE); the ox, the Saracens; the slaughterer, the Crusaders; the angel of death, the Turks. At the end, God returns to send the Jews back to Israel. The recurring refrain of 'two zuzim' is a reference to the two stone tablets given to Moses on Mount Sinai (or refer to Moses and Aaron). Apparently this interpretation was first widely published in pamphlet published in 1731 in Leipzig by Philip Nicodemus Lebrecht. This interpretation has become quite popular, with many variations of which oppressor is represented by which character in the song.

From Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia

(Lyrics of Chad Gadya below)

Chad Gadya

An only kid, an only kid
My father bought for two *zuzim*, an only kid an only kid.

There came a cat and ate the kid my father bought for two
zuzim. Chad gadya, chad gadya.

Then came a dog and bit the cat that ate the kid my father
bought for two *zuzim. Chad gadya, chad gadya.*

Then came a stick and beat the dog that bit the cat that ate
the kid my father bought for two *zuzim. Chad gadya, chad
gadya.*

Then came a fire and burnt the stick that beat the dog that bit
the cat that ate the kid my father bought for two *zuzim. Chad
gadya, chad gadya.*

Then came water and quenched the fire that burnt the stick
that beat the dog that bit the cat that ate the kid my father
bought for two *zuzim. Chad gadya, chad gadya.*

Then came an ox and drank the water that quenched the fire
that burnt the stick that beat the dog that bit the cat that ate
the kid my father bought for two *zuzim. Chad gadya, chad
gadya.*

Then came a slaughterer and killed the ox that drank the
water that quenched the fire that burnt the stick that beat the
dog that bit the cat that ate the kid my father bought for two
zuzim. Chad gadya, chad gadya.

Then came the angel of death who killed the *shohet* [butcher] who
killed the ox that drank the water that quenched the fire that
burnt the stick that beat the dog that bit the cat that ate the
kid my father bought for two *zuzim. Chad gadya, chad gadya.*

Then came the Holy One Blessed be He and killed the angel of death who
killed the *shohet* who killed the ox that drank the water that
quenched the fire that burnt the stick that beat the dog that bit
the cat that ate the kid my father bought for two *zuzim. Chad
gadya, chad gadya.*

zuzim: coins, currency used by Jews in Palestine under Roman rule