

A Graduate Student Haggadah

Leader: Welcome to the Graduate student Seder. Every year we gather together to tell the story of our forefathers' liberation from graduate school.

Participant: Retelling the story of our time in graduate school is a sacred duty. Even if all of us were postdocs in hot labs, even if all of us were management consultants or patent attorneys, even if all of us were tenured professors, it would still be our duty to tell the story.

Participant: Traditionally, the story is told at night, before we return to lab.

Participant: Here I am, a grad student of seven years, and yet I was never able to understand why one is obligated to work at night until Professor Jose of Gamliel University explained it thusly: Our tradition commands: "You shall work in lab all the days of your life."

Participant: "The days of your life" refers to the days, while "All the days of your life" refers to the nights.

Participant: And the postdocs say, "The days of your life" refers to the weekdays; "All the days of your life" includes weekends, too.

Participant: Professor Elazar of Azrah University saith, "Of course, this assumes that you have a life."

The Ten Plaques

(With each word, the test tube is tipped to spill one drop of virus onto a petri dish with a bacterial lawn)

Group:

- 1) Contamination
- 2) Broken equipment
- 3) Radioactive spills
- 4) Missing reagents
- 5) Incomplete protocols
- 6) Buildup of freezer ice
- 7) Radiation safety training
- 8) Sloppy labmates
- 9) Reagent backorders



10) Rejection of the first paper

Participant: And it is written, "The graduate students went unto MIT biology and for six years they sojourned there."

Participant: Professor Akiba of Beersheba U sayeth, "The motto of MIT is "Mens et Manus", "Mind and Hands." Thus, the grad students were smitten with the mind and both hands of MIT with 12 years of grad school in all.

Participant: And Professor Lawrence of the Technion sayeth, "How may one prove that the students were smitten with 24 years of grad school? Well, it is written each year of graduate school was filled with challenges, frustration, difficulties and toil. Thus, the students were afflicted not with 18 years of graduate school, but with 24 years in all."

Participant: And Professor Leffin asketh "How one may show that the students were afflicted with 120 years of graduate school? I have no idea, but if I ever have to write a grant proposal demonstrating it, I'll bet I can come up with something."



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Leader: We begin with the Passover plate. The four foods on this plate symbolize the years of graduate school.

Leader: The first item is the bitter herbs.

All: The bitter herbs were painstakingly prepared over several years.

Leader: The second item is the chocolate covered-pretzels.

All: The chocolate-covered pretzels symbolize the food which our forefathers ate while attending evening talks.

Leader: The third item is the day-old chocolate covered pretzels, some with bites missing

All: The day-old chocolate covered pretzels, some with bites missing, symbolize the breakfast which our forefathers ate the morning after the talks.

Leader: The fourth item is the chinese food.

All: For it is written, in haste did they buy their dinner from the chinese truck.



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The Four Questions



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(To be chanted by the youngest member present, while tearing her hair out)

Why is this Mike different from all other lab members? All other lab members will reorder agarose when we run out. Why can't Mike?

preps

Why is this plasmid prep different from all other plasmid preps? I followed the exact same protocol each time. So why didn't this one work?

Why is my paper so much worse than the papers that actually got into PNAS? They seem about the same to me.

What must I do to graduate?



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The Hiding of the J-32 Centrifuge Rotor

Leader (displays two centrifuge rotors): Earlier in the ceremony, there were three centrifuge rotors. Following our tradition, a member of our group has taken one of the centrifuge rotors and hidden it. By tradition, we now ask everyone who had it last. Was it you?

Participant: No. Was it you?

Participant: No. Was it you?

Participant: No. Was it you?

Participant: No. Was it you?

Participant: No.

Leader: The ceremony cannot continue until the centrifuge rotor has been found. We now offer bribes or threats to anyone who can tell us anything about its location.

Participant: I haven't seen it in weeks

Participant: Never used it.

Participant: What's a centrifuge?



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The Four Defense Committee Members

Leader: By tradition, our Thesis Defense Committees have four members, including our advisor. From this our tradition infers that there are four types of Defense Committee members, the wise Committee member, the evil Committee member, the simple Committee member, and the uninterested Committee member.



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Participant: The wise Committee member asks, "What is the meaning of the experiments, and the context in which you did them?" To her you shall explain all your experiments, hypotheses, and experimental approaches, right down to the very last details of your negative controls.



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All: It is the wise that ask the questions from which we learn.

Participant: The wicked Committee member (your thesis advisor) says "What is the meaning of the meaning of the such-and-such data which *we* have observed?" By saying "we" he implies that he contributed more to your thesis than your pet rock did. To him you shall speak in a stern voice, beginning, "The meaning of the such-and-such data that *I* have observed"

All: For had he been there when the experiment finally worked and you told everyone within shouting distance of its significance, he would not have needed to ask.

Participant: The simple Committee member asks, "What did you learn from XXX?" By asking this, he makes clear that he has not read your thesis. Him you shall first praise for his insightful question, and then summarize your entire thesis in three minutes.

Group: To those of open simplicity, we give a straightforward answer. For grad school teaches us it is that some things are not worth wasting time on.

Participant: As for the Committee member who does not even care enough to ask, you must begin gently with him, saying "Er, professor? I'm sorry to interrupt your reading, but I thought you might be really interested in my observation that..."

Group: It is the ones who don't even care which make one wonder.

Conclusion

As this year our experiments have not worked, and we have published (if at all) in obscure journals, so next year may all our experiments work beautifully. And we say together:

NEXT YEAR IN NATURE

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