

PASSOVER 5780 Alicia Jo Rabins

as our ancestors
painted their doorposts
with lamb's blood
stayed inside and held
their children close

we wash our hands
wipe down our shopping carts
and keep our kids
off the playground
for the first time in their lives

in this plague spring
when the leaders fail us
we try to keep each other
alive we are midwives
of solitude and survival

when a baby is born
a mother touches the membrane
between life and death
and is forever changed
as we are changed

by this shadow
which approaches
closer every day
what is there to do
but lift up what we love

chanting pass over us,
angel of death, pass over
us all, turn back into the myth
you used to be before
you became the news

Chag Sameach!

This Pesach, for all of us, wherever we find ourselves, is already feeling very different than every other year. Last year, very pregnant with baby Lavi, Abe and I chose to make Pesach alone because we weren't in much shape to cook and host. This year, being alone feels like a cruel imposition. We wanted to cook for guests, we wanted to share conversation over our seder table deep into the night. Most of us are not having the Pesach we had in mind. And yet.

My hope is that this Pesach can allow for something else. Without dismissing the tremendous loss that social distancing dictates we endure this year, maybe having a smaller table, having nowhere else to go, perhaps this can give way to deeper conversation, slower, more meaningful time together.

I've prepared this document as a compendium to your Haggadah. For some sections, there are mini divrei Torah. Others have prompts with questions that I hope will enliven your seder table discussion (or your Zoom seder discussions!). As an introduction, I share a piece of wisdom from a teacher of mine, Rabbi Eliezer Diamond:

Someone just shared some dark humor with me: what if Pesach is canceled this year because of a plague?

Like every good joke, this one contains a deep truth: it will be difficult to sit at the table and celebrate freedom when we are threatened and trapped, physically and otherwise, by an unseen malevolent force uncomfortably reminiscent of the plague of the first born.

It is a frightening time indeed. And yet, without making light of our present situation: our ancestors celebrated Pesach through good times and bad, during the Crusades and the Black Death, during the Chmelnitzki massacres, in Auschwitz and in the gulags. Were they free? No, but they believed in the promise of freedom, and that gave them strength and hope.

And let us not forget: the very first celebration of Passover took place before the moment of liberation, before we actually left Egypt. But we conducted ourselves like a people sure that liberation was on its way, with girded loins, sandals on our feet and walking stick in hand, ready for the journey that we had faith would begin on the morrow.

In this moment we are not free. We are subject to a force that eludes our present efforts to halt and defeat it. Some of us will be sick; some will die. Some already have. But we cannot live without hope - not the passive hope that consists of waiting for God to make things whole again, but the hope that translates into action, into doing everything we can to counter this scourge. And let's take a page out of the Passover playbook. The first Passover reconstituted the Israelite families that had been cruelly torn apart by the dehumanizing forces of slavery. Today we are all one family. Call people you know and people you don't. Help others in every way you can. Participate in virtual minyanim and other events. We are stronger than we know. May this Passover bring us all redemption.

Every year, we end the seder by declaring "next year in Jerusalem." It's a statement of hope, a belief that each year, we might be more free than the past. I pray that this year that statement is more true than ever, that by next year we will celebrate with abundant joy and complete freedom.

Rabbi Sarit Horwitz

Kadesh

The kiddush, the first part of the seder doesn't actually sanctify the wine. The wine (or grape juice) is used to sanctify the day. One way of showing freedom is to pour for someone else. This might not be possible if you're Zooming, and that's OK.

-One way to start the seder might be to ask how else we can sanctify the day. Is there something we do that shows the specialness of the day?

Urchatz

It's not super difficult to make a connection this year between Urchatz, the first hand-washing, and the times we are living in. But, different than other ritual handwashings that we do (like before bread, later in the seder), we make no bracha, no blessing after Urchatz. Following with the theme of showing freedom, sometimes people will wash others' hands instead of their own. Since there is no ritualized blessing with this washing, consider offering a personalized blessing (even just one word) to someone as you wash their hands, or to others over the internet as you each wash your hands.

Karpas

We dip our vegetable in salt water to remember the tears in Mitzrayim. Why is it important to acknowledge the sadness during a day of freedom? What power does it have to begin the night from the tears of slavery? What are the different types of tears you have in life? What do we need to purify ourselves from? What are we purifying ourselves for?

Magid

Ha Lachma Anya

We start the Magid section - the telling of the story - by saying that this is the bread of poverty, and that all who are hungry should come and eat. We make claims here about what next year will be - next year in Jerusalem. This might have meant literal Jerusalem, but it could also mean the figurative one - the city of peace, the time of a peace, a time when things are better. A time when next year all are free.

-In a time when we cannot physically be together with others who are hungry, what does it mean to say "let all who are hungry come and eat?" How can we show that that sentiment remains true when we cannot actually have others over into our home?

OR

Who would you want to invite to your seder this year? How can you invite their qualities to join you at the seder? What are stories of theirs that you want to remember?

Mah Nishtana/4 questions

What other questions, besides these 4, feel pressing this year?

It might be worth having a conversation that gives a modern, 2020 answer to "how is this night different?"

The Talmud teaches a story about the sage Abaye, when he was a student. He was invited to the seder of his teacher, Rabba. They were still at the beginning of the seder and Rabba ordered his servants to clear the table. Abaye was shocked and amazed and asked him, "why are you removing the seder plate and everything before we've even eaten?" Rabba responded, "Abaye, your question has served the same function as the usual four questions/Mah Nishtana. Let's get rid of those questions and continue straight to the telling of the story."

My Four Questions this Passover by Rabbi Aaron Weinenger

1. Our hearts are broken. How will they reach neighbors while keeping six feet apart?
2. Our skin is broken. Will our poor hands endure more washing at the Seder?
3. Our matzah is broken. Must we go hide and seek the afikoman alone?
4. Our souls are broken. Do we have it in us to celebrate this season?

O God of Bravest Responders and Costco Shoppers, of Zoom Muters, and Facebook Live Producers:

With broken hearts, may waters part in their cracks for us to find dry ground and dance with distance.

With broken skin, may our hands find healing in loving acts of kindness toward ourselves and strangers.

With broken matzah, may our decisions lead us to flatten the curve of illness.

With broken souls, may our song have space to rise and reach souls who lived before us in the quest of freedom.

We are broken as we ask. We are mending as we answer. Be with us, Holy One, as we ask and answer tonight and every night. And let us say: Amen.

Avadim Hayinu

We are supposed to say that we were slaves in Mitzrayim, and that if it weren't for God's power, we'd still be oppressed. The Haggadah then tells us that it doesn't matter our status or our level of Torah learning - whoever we are, at whatever stage, it's a mitzvah to tell the story. Why might the telling be more important than the learning? What does this say about the importance of doing it over and over again, each year, no matter how much of the story we 'know'?

The Haggadah tells us, right after Avadim Hayinu ('we were slaves'), that we should each tell the story of Exodus from Mitzrayim. It doesn't matter how wise we are, how much Torah we know, or how many times we've told the story before - we each have to tell the story on Seder night. I think part of the reason we have to do this is because telling our story builds our sense of resilience. There is a sense of empowerment in being the arbiter of how our story is told. We get to be the ones that shape it, we get to tell our own story from our perspective. That, in and of itself, is a part of freedom. We embrace our sense of liberty, as we build our resilience, through

the power of continuing to tell and shape our story. What is part of your own story that's important to keep telling?

Barukh haMakom/4 Children

How is each of the four children present within each one of us? This is a relevant question to ask when we're flying solo at the seder. Check this out by Jordan Namerow [The Four Children and COVID-19](#), and use it to have this conversation with yourself and/or others.

*It's interesting that the 4 children is immediately preceded by a somewhat generic praise to God. It doesn't say anything specific about Pesach or the Exodus, it's praising God for giving us the Torah and general praise for God. But this comes immediately before the articulation of the 4 children, the 4 types of learners, the 4 very different experiences at the seder. Perhaps this is a way of saying that God is in each of those different children. God is present even when we don't know how to ask, God is present in the one who is simple, God is present even in the one that other write off.

Vehi She'amda

Check out this beautiful version of Vehi She'amda by Israeli artist Yonatan Razel. <https://youtu.be/KKV07h85IHY>

Vehi-She'amda is a story of resilience and overcoming challenges. What are challenges you have overcome in your life? Who supported you? Who have you supported?

We declare here that the promise that God made to our ancestors, the promise to protect us and keep a covenant with us, to bring us to redemption, is true for us just as it was true for our parents and ancestors. This part of the seder acknowledges that there are people, for all time, who have sought out the destruction of our people, but God 'saves us from their hand.' In stating this, the liturgy of the Haggadah jumps very suddenly from the trials of the past, the literal exodus from mitzrayim, to every moment that is a moment we feel pain. No doubt, there have been many Pesachs past that our people have been in the midst of pain and devastation and still said these words, still believed that God was saving them. How do you think they said these words with integrity and honesty? What might we be able to learn from them on this Pesach that we celebrate?

Arami Oved Avi (My ancestor was a Wandering Aramean)

In many ways, this is the core of the seder liturgy. In fact, Maimonides teaches that the explicit mitzvah (commandment) on seder night is not to tell the story of the Exodus and mention our redemption, because we do that all the time! But here, on Pesach, we are meant to reference this specific passage understand its lesson to us. One way to do this would be to look at the passage in its context. It describes (you can see the text in your Haggadah, and if you want to see any more, pull out a Tanakh - Deuteronomy chapter 26) our ancestor who would come to Jerusalem would bring a basket of their produce to the Temple. They would declare in front of the priest that they are here because of what God did for their ancestors. That individual locates themselves inside of our communal story and expresses gratitude for what enabled them to arrive at this moment.

This, Maimonides teaches us, is the primary mitzvah of Pesach. To fit ourselves inside of the story of our people, and to emerge with a sense of gratitude.

The Ten Plagues

We often end up using the Ten Plagues as a part of the seder to have fun - having jumping green frogs grace our table and styrofoam ping-pong balls tossed at a guest across the table. But what can we allow for if we actually think about this moment seriously. What does it mean to grapple with a past, a past that includes pain inflicted upon our enemies in order for us to be free? That infliction may have been needed, but it's worth paying attention to the cost. There's a midrash that depicts dialogue between God and the angels just as the people are crossing the sea. According to the midrash, the angels are about to begin a celebratory song, knowing that Pharaoh and his army are going to die. But God reprimands them saying, "My creatures are drowning in the sea and you wish to sing?!" From this we learn that the joy of salvation must be tempered by sorrow over the destruction of the enemy, as expressed in Proverbs 24:17: "Do not rejoice in the downfall of your enemy." We rejoice in the redemption of our ancestors as they crossed the Sea, but the joy is restrained, because so many Egyptian lives were lost. Our inclination might be to celebrate their death because it allowed for our freedom. But God reminds us in this midrash that all people are creatures of God, and any loss of life is painful for God. This is meant to cultivate a sense of radical empathy inside of us, an acknowledgement that all life is holy.

Dayeinu

Make a list of all the things you're grateful for in your life. Use the liturgy to list them out: *Since I have _____, Dayeinu.*

Pesach, Matza, Maror:

Rabban Gamliel teaches us that this is the part of the seder that is required - explaining the significance of these three elements of the seder plate: the Pesach lamb, the matza, and the Maror.

Is there another symbol, in addition to these 3, that you would include your Pesach celebrations this year? What might feel particularly meaningful? What might appropriately represent this moment in time?

B'chol Dor vaDor

In some ways, for us modern Jews in 2020, the Exodus from Egypt is very much not our story. But in other ways, it is a story that is repeated inside of us over and over again. Rabbi Nachman of Bratzlav would teach that the Exodus from Mitzrayim happens in every human being, in every era, in every year, and even every single day. He wanted to instill a sense of connection that we have to the original Pesach story, but he also acknowledged that we each are always overcoming internal battles. We are each, always, all the time, trying to be liberated from something. The seder is the time when we reach inside of ourselves, empathizing with that original liberation, and trying to see how it plays out in each of our own lives.

The Second Cup

We supplement our 'boreh peri hagafen' blessing (thanking God for the fruit of the vine) with a blessing about redemption. But we start this second cup of wine with a declaration that we are ready to perform the mitzvah. This statement is one that asks us to cultivate a sense of presence in the moment. We have to first ground ourselves where we are, acknowledge what we are here to do (think about redemption), and declare our purpose. Where else in our lives would that be useful? Where else might our presence be necessary?

Rochtzah

What is different about washing your hands to prepare yourself "do something" as opposed to washing away something?

Motzi Matzah

From Rabbi Shai Held: I've always been struck by the fact that matzah is simultaneously the bread of affliction and the bread of freedom. The point, I think (or one of them at least), is that the very things that can liberate us can also enslave us and bring us great suffering. Every year matzah makes me wonder: what are the things in my life that I embrace in hopes of liberation that bring me enslavement instead? and what are the things that enslave me that could be turned to tools for liberation?

Maror and Korech: Lots of the steps of the seder are reliant on our senses, and on experiencing the story of the seder in our bodies. Spend some time thinking about sensations, and on how the sensory nature of the seder helps us think more deeply about empathy.

Tzafun

I've often thought there is a particular type of joy, really total elation, that is experienced when you find something that you thought was lost. Even for something little, it's a joy about experiencing something totally unexpected. Sometimes it catches you off guard, and it's not an emotion you can necessarily prepare for.

When was a time that you found something you weren't expecting? How did you feel?

OR

What are we hiding from ourselves? What would be possible if we allowed ourselves to find the truth? Why is it important to finish the meal with "being found"?

Barech

At the end of this section we bless the third cup of wine and we fill Elijah's cup. In my family, we have a tradition of passing Elijah's cup around the table. Each person around the seder table pours a little bit from their own glass into Elijah's. While Elijah's arrival traditionally announces the coming of the Messiah, each of us pouring from ourselves reminds us that it will take the efforts of everyone to bring the world to a better place.

Nirtza

We end the seder with a poem, hoping that our seder was sufficient, and hoping that next year it will be different next year. We declare that we hope God will bring us to Zion in joy. What would that joy look like? What does ultimate joy look like to you?