

# The Jewish Speakers Bureau

Musings for the  
Passover Seder  
2017



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## The Jewish Speakers Bureau Musings for the Passover Seder 2017

The Passover seder is the shared experience of a collective 'memory.' At its essence, it is an opportunity to reflect on, and question, our values and nationhood.

This collection was written by the diverse members of the Jewish Speakers Bureau. You may not agree with all of these pieces - but a seder is meant, as much as to share a meal with family and friends, to stimulate new ideas and foster new understandings.

In this spirit, we invite you to join us in conversation.

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## Avivah Zornberg

### Then Our Mouths Shall Be Full of Laughter...

Celebrating Passover, one of the great Jewish festivals, stirs thoughts about the nature of celebration. On the face of it, nothing could be simpler than celebrating an archetypal moment of liberation. And yet, as Adam Phillips points out in a recent essay, sometimes our cures – or salvations or celebrations – ‘expose the full nature of our suffering rather than make it disappear.’ Sometimes we buy souvenirs to forget where we have been; in a sense, a souvenir celebrates the destruction of the memory, but in the guise of its preservation. Or else, as W.G. Sebald puts it, ‘perhaps in order to get the full measure of the horrific, one needs to remind the reader of the beatific moments of life.’

The beatific moment of the Exodus from Egypt takes place against a background of death and suffering. The many births that attend the creation of the new nation are like explosions of vitality from within a closed and suffocating world. The classic pun *mitzrayim/meitzarim* – Egypt/ straits – conveys the sense of Egypt as a soul-scape, a place from which no slave ever escaped; narrow straits that allow of no emergence. The newborn is steeped in blood, its life the life of the creature whose margin is death:

On the day you were born you were left lying, rejected, in the open field. When I passed by you and saw you wallowing in your blood, I said to you: ‘Live within your blood.’ Yes, I said to you: ‘Live within your blood.’ (Ezekiel 16:5-6)

We remember the narrative of the midwives, which conveys precisely this sense of life miraculously affirmed in the face of death: against Pharaoh’s decree they, protect and nurture the Israelite babies,

And Pharaoh said ‘...if it is a boy, kill him; if it is a girl, let her live (lit. she shall live).’ The midwives feared God and did not do as the king of Egypt had told them; they let the boys live (lit. they gave life to the boys). So the king of Egypt summoned the midwives and said to them, ‘Why have you done this thing, letting the boys live?’ The midwives said to Pharaoh, ‘Because the Hebrew women are not like the Egyptian women: they are vigorous (lit. alive). Before the midwife can come to them, they have given birth.’ Exodus 1:16-19)

The midwives are accused of ‘letting live;’ they respond by speaking of the life-force of the Israelite women. These women are potent creatures; quick, precocious, forestalling all suppression. Their issue will not be quietly strangled in the womb, as the system demands.

This irrepressible creaturely force has already appeared in the opening description of Israel in Egypt: ‘The Israelites were fruitful and swarmed and multiplied and increased very greatly and the land was filled with them’ (Exodus 1:7) – a six-fold celebration of fertility that leads the midrash to claim that in this explosive time ‘each belly carried six young.’ But if this is a celebration of fertility, we notice that it immediately triggers Pharaoh’s persecution policy: the Israelites multiply and Pharaoh declares: ‘Lest they increase – *pen yirbeh...*’ And then, as slavery begins, we read, ‘the more they were oppressed, the more they increased - *ken yirbeh...*’ – the word-play pulling tight the cords of suffering and fertility, celebration and catastrophe.

And when Moses the redeemer is born, and grows too big to hide, his mother places him in the very river of Pharaoh’s decree: ‘...throw him into the river’ (1:22). He is not submerged but is floated on top of the river of

death and life, in a closed box – teiva – well-sealed with ‘bitumen and pitch,’ the very materials of slavery. In this floating brick, Moses is found by another woman, the Egyptian princess, who opens the box and sees him as a crying na’ar – a youth – and takes pity on him. That is, from the rigid brick-shape emerges a raucous, precocious cry of life and of suffering – perhaps, suggests one midrash, the cry of a suffocating nation. She sees the uncanny force of the baby in the brick – and she is credited, at this moment, with seeing the Shechina, the divine Presence. There is a surplus here that captures her gaze and arouses her love and awe. Her vision births the child from death to life.

What is striking here is the way that birth comes always stained by the Egyptian darkness. Among all the many calamities of the Egyptian slavery, there are moments of celebration. But these moments have an almost excessive frenetic quality. Six births at a time – or is it twelve, or six hundred thousand? – the raucous cries of a baby in a brick, the emergence of a free nation of 600,000 families into a wilderness where all adults will die... What does it mean to celebrate when each birth is a dark reminder of before and after? Perhaps, as Adam Phillips (writing about Sebald’s vision) says, euphoria is too often the prelude to horror. Could it be that there is something defensive about our celebrations – an excessive, even mechanical quality about our tales of great light superseding the darkness? Are we determinedly refusing to think when we celebrate?

Perhaps Egypt represents not simply death but a disturbing surplus animation, an almost hypnotic sense of being rigid with energy. Egyptomania, then, would be the experience of being undead, neither alive nor properly dead. And Yetziat Mitzrayim – the Exodus, the birth from such a place – would have to be a genuinely enlivening experience. Can such a moment of shocking release be found in the biblical narrative?

I’d like to suggest that the word chipazon – panic haste – goes some way towards evoking this sense of explosive spontaneity. ‘You shall eat it [the paschal offering] in haste’ (13:11); ‘in haste you left the land of Egypt’ (Deut. 16:5). Birth, redemption occurs as a pure event, surprising both redeemer and redeemed. In a moment, a complex series of subtle interactions comes together and the child is born. Crying and laughing, a nation prematurely comes to life. At this moment, there can be no narrative, no celebration. The after-shock of release still reverberates. Later, there will be stories, versions of the event.

Looking for the history of such moments of paroxysm, we remember the laughter in which Abraham and Sarah gave birth to their son Isaac. Both father and mother of this miracle child laugh when told of his imminent birth. Abraham ‘fell on his face and he laughed, saying to himself, “Can a child be born to a man a hundred years old, or can Sarah bear a child at ninety?”’ (Genesis 17:17) Sarah is in her tent, listening to the conversation between her husband and the mysterious ‘man.’

Abraham and Sarah were old, advanced in years; Sarah had stopped having the periods of women. And Sarah laughed within herself, saying, ‘Now that I am withered, am I to have pleasure – with my husband so old?’ Then God said to Abraham, ‘Why did Sarah laugh, saying, “Shall I really bear a child, old as I am?” Is anything too wondrous for God? I will return to you at the same season next year, and Sarah shall have a son.’ Sarah denied it, saying, ‘I did not laugh,’ for she was frightened. But he replied, ‘But you did laugh.’ (18:11-15)

Sarah, within herself, is preoccupied by absence, loss, the lack of pleasure. She is strangely animated in her inner accounting of the failure of the life-force. And she laughs; out of her undeadness, something explodes. Is this a skeptical laugh, as some have suggested? The man/angel affirms that nothing is too wondrous for God – or perhaps that nothing is hidden from God, who sees her through and through – and he interrogates her laughter. In fear, she denies, ‘No, I did not laugh.’ And he re-affirms, ‘No, but you did laugh.’

This cryptic scene, ending with the man/angel’s apparent reproof of Sarah’s laughter, leaves the reader baffled at his insistence – an almost comic verbal tussle between him and Sarah – and at the sudden ending of the story. But this moment takes place, according to midrashic tradition, on Passover – and the birth of Isaac will happen

on Passover – ‘the time of new life’ – ka’et chaya. If Passover is to be the time of new life, then perhaps laughter is essential. Sarah’s laugh, then, the midrash suggests, celebrates a new fact – she has suddenly become menstrual: ‘Now that I am withered, I have become menstrual!’ Suddenly, her body opens up. She laughs out of a complex sense that ‘This is incredible!’ – not skeptically, not forgetting her history of long dry seasons – but in baffled joy.

Or perhaps the very idea of such rejuvenation – its absurdity within the closed system of her body and Abraham’s – suddenly releases her into the spasm of laughter, which means overflow, excess; and the blood begins to flow. She has cracked up, and at first she is afraid, ashamed. But the man-angel insists, ‘No, you really did laugh!’ The words are left hanging in the air, insisting that Sarah own her laughter and the rupture it has made.

This, then, is the first Passover story: a barren body and the shocking moment of transformation that triggers laughter and is triggered by it. All Passover stories celebrate an awakening to unimagined life, a personal paroxysm of redemption within the calamities of a life: ‘In every generation, a person should see himself as though he had left Egypt.’ How to see that possibility of release, where a new world of possibilities may break through? But perhaps I alone can meaningfully celebrate, tell the story of an event that is always incomplete before I see it and laugh? Only now, and here, in the midst of life, can some fragment of the story be told. ‘Then our mouths shall be full of laughter.’

**Avivah Zornberg has been teaching Torah for the past 30 years at Matan, Yakar, Pardes, the Jerusalem College for Adults, and at Jewish, academic, and psychoanalytic settings around the world. She is the author of five acclaimed books on Tanach, most recently “Moses: A Human Life.” For more information on Avivah Zornberg, see:**

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## Mike Reiss

### Happy Passover from The Simpsons

I wanted to write about happy family Passover memories, but I don't really have any. My mother is a Jew from North Carolina (making her basically a Baptist) and my father is a Jew from Brooklyn (meaning he had very little patience). We were two plagues into our seder when my father moaned, "Can we eat already?"

That was our last seder.

Then I turned to my cartoon family, The Simpsons, to see if they ever handled the Passover story.

Five times!

Moses has appeared on our show five times. Noah only made one guest shot. I know this isn't a competition, but in your face, Noah!

The amazing thing is that in his five appearances on The Simpsons, Moses was played by five different characters. First, it was a straightforward movie Moses, played by Phil Hartman doing his best Charlton Heston. Seeing him, Homer the Israelite, yelps, "It's the boss! Everyone look busy!" He then begins furiously polishing a golden calf.

Later, the infant Moses was played by Todd Flanders. Next, he was played by Milhouse. Then, he was played by a bobble head figure – a step up from Milhouse. Finally, in our Veggie Tales parody, Moses was portrayed as a talking cucumber, thundering, "Let my pickles go!"

And we're not the only ones having fun with him. Mel Brooks played Moses in an excellent comedy. Dudley Moore played him in a terrible comedy. And Christian Bale played him in an unintentional comedy – "Exodus: Gods and Kings". Note to Hollywood: Never have the leader of the Jews played by a guy named Christian.

There are two things that we can learn from this. One is that the story of Moses is so dynamic and inspiring, it can survive anything. Even Milhouse.

Second: We never heard a single complaint about how we handled Moses. Jews love to laugh, even at their most revered figures. Other faiths aren't quite so forgiving.

You know how many times Muhammad appeared on The Simpsons? One less than Noah.

**Mike Reiss has won four Emmys and a Peabody Award during his 28 years writing for The Simpsons. He is also an award-winning mystery writer, playwright, and children's book author. He's written jokes for Johnny Carson, Joan Rivers, Garry Shandling, and Pope Francis! In 2015, the Pope named Reiss "a Missionary of Joy". Reiss has lectured on The Simpsons and Judaism in 20 countries. For more information on Mike Reiss, see:**

[www.JewishSpeakersBureau.com/speakers/mike-reiss](http://www.JewishSpeakersBureau.com/speakers/mike-reiss)







## Sarah Tuttle-Singer

### Judaism is a Wild Dance

My Judaism is a wild dance, red wine on my lips, Uncle Robert on guitar, and Aunt Caren on tambourine at the seder.

My Judaism is my father bellowing the wrong words in Hebrew because he chose our tribe when my mom chose him, and he's still learning, and he will never give up.

My Judaism loves family, and the history we've made around the table in the glow of thousands of Sabbath candles. The taste of kiddush wine and challah, of Great Gramma Celia's chicken soup, the recipe passed down with a promise that it could be revealed only to your children.

My Judaism loves the kiddush cup we fill for Elijah — the cup that survived a pogrom and a rocky boat ride, then a long drive, and then another, and finally even an El Al flight, to make it all the way home four generations later, to Israel.

My Judaism loves people — people who count rosary beads, or wear hijab or a yarmulke or a sheitl, people who have pierced everything (tattoos, too.) People who drink and toke, who get all rowdy on a Saturday night, people with quiet hands who heal with a simple touch. People who paint on walls. People who knit. People who make others laugh, people who make others think. People who love people, no matter what gender or race or religion or house at Hogwarts they're in.

My Judaism chooses love — always.

And my Judaism loves sex, and believes it's a way to transcend, sometimes, if you're lucky.

My Judaism loves history, and that spark of truth in each story we pass down, from generation to generation, as it is written.

My Judaism looks at the stories in the Torah as important guidelines, and a reflection of a time in our history when we were a fledgling people. My Judaism embraces our past, and looks for ways to build a better future.

My Judaism walked away from a man who put his foot on my neck until the world darkened into one exquisite spark. That one exquisite spark was me, and I chose that spark.

My Judaism is not afraid of failing, because I know I'll get it right some day.

My Judaism chose not to be a mother at 19, to ask for help where she knew she would find it. And my Judaism is the rabbi who looked into my frightened eyes and said "anything you need."

My Judaism accepts the past, makes peace with it, and moves ahead.

My Judaism held my mother in her arms when she took her last breath, in the very bed where she nursed me when I was a baby. My Judaism screamed FUCK CANCER at the top of my lungs, then smashed a mirror, and tore her shirt.

My Judaism will not say "blessed is the true judge," because cancer is bullshit, and my mom should still be alive.

My Judaism is latkes and presents and spinning the dreidel, and being tucked safely into bed at night with the doll my parents got me for Hanukkah.

My Judaism searches for the Afikomen.

My Judaism is guiding my daughter's hand when she lights the candles on Shabbat, it's pouring grape juice in a glass of my son so he can lead kiddush. It's sprinkling salt on challah, and breaking it for the three of us.

My Judaism is imagining what's next, and how to make the world a better place.

My Judaism is, and was, and will be.

My Judaism struggles with the world that Is, while imagining a world that Could Be. A struggle with raw material, with reality, with the status quo... Always seeking ways to make things better, brighter, stronger, kinder, always staggering under that heavy weight to the right side of history.

My Judaism loves the spark of human potential deep within each of us, where the God in me sees the God in you, and it's all good because "God" is just that moral compass guiding us on that path...

...But: My Judaism recognizes that mine isn't the only way, that so long as we each follow our moral compass (call it whatever you want, it's all good) we'll all get there, somehow. Tired, hungry, grouchy, too... but we'll get there.

We've gotten this far.

**Sarah Tuttle-Singer lives in Israel with her 2 kids and cat, in a village next to rolling fields. Sarah is the New Media Editor at Times of Israel — the fastest growing news site on Israel. She writes about her life for a variety of places including Times of Israel, Kveller, TIME.com & Jezebel. She loves talking to strangers, and exploring the complex and wonderful country she is making her home. For more information on Sarah Tuttle-Singer, see:**

[www.JewishSpeakersBureau.com/speakers/sarah-tuttle-singer](http://www.JewishSpeakersBureau.com/speakers/sarah-tuttle-singer)



## Gershon Baskin

### My Pesach Challenge

We all remember those sad years between 2006 and 2011, when we had an empty chair at our seder table for Gilad Schalit. In my family this was especially meaningful, because they knew of my non-stop efforts to create a direct, secret back-channel between the Government of Israel and Hamas in order to secure Gilad's safe return.

My efforts began on July 1, 2006, six days after Gilad was abducted to Gaza, with a phone call from a Hamas leader. Two and half months after Gilad was taken to Gaza, I convinced Hamas to release a hand written letter from Gilad proving that he was alive and that I was in direct contact with those who were holding him in captivity; but despite that, it took another five years for the Prime Minister of Israel to authorize the use of the secret direct channel that I initiated and ran.

Gilad came home on October 18, 2011, after five years in captivity.

During the years that I ran my contacts, through my main interlocutor, Dr. Ghazi Hamad, a senior advisor and confidant of Ismail Haniyeh, the Hamas leader in Gaza, we helped to secure several ceasefire understandings and managed to prevent several very dangerous escalations. We are still trying to do that. We are also trying to bring home the bodies of Hadar Goldin and Oron Shaul, two Israeli soldiers who were killed in Gaza in the summer war of 2014 and three Israeli civilians, Abera Mengisto, Hisham Sayed and another Israeli Bedouin, who have been held by Hamas for more than two years.

These days, the news is full of Israeli intelligence reports that Hamas is planning a major terrorist attack in Israel during Pesach. There is no doubt that Hamas is a very difficult enemy, still committed to the destruction of Israel. But it seems that even from within there is pressure on Hamas to change its platform, its covenant and its stated goals. Hamas does not enjoy a majority of support from the people of Gaza. Hamas has failed to provide the good governance that they promised when they ran for elections in 2006 under the title "change and reform". They promised that they would not be corrupt and that they would be responsive to the needs of their people. But they have not been responsive. They have plundered resources to "invest" in tunnels and rockets and building their military machine, while two million people in Gaza suffer from poverty and despair. Meanwhile, Israel continues its policy of "isolation," a form of collective punishment, which doesn't really effect Hamas, but hurts the people of Gaza. And so the people of Gaza blame Israel for Gaza's horrible situation rather than Hamas. This could change – and it is Israel's hands to make it change.

While we contemplate our own freedom this Pesach, I propose that we think for a moment, rationally and logically, about the plight of the two million Palestinians who are trapped in Gaza. These people will forever be our neighbors. Israel, together with Egypt, maintains control over Gaza's external borders. Nothing gets into Gaza or out of Gaza without the inspection of Egypt's security forces or Israel's. Unemployment in Gaza is out of control; youth unemployment is above 65%. There are more than 100,000 university graduates in Gaza with no hope of ever having a job, a family and a normal life. They are physically cut off from the world, but they are not living on another planet: They are right next door. All of the young people in Gaza have smart phones and they are connected to Facebook and to Twitter and other social media. They see the world around them that they are not a part of, and they wonder why they don't have the same rights as young people all over the world. They have no contact with Israelis or with Jews. They have never met an Israeli or a Jew, never talked to a Jew or an Israeli. And

most Israelis and Jews have never met someone from Gaza or talked to someone from Gaza. This is not normal, and it certainly does not contribute to creating change for a better future.

So this is my Pesach challenge: Find someone from Gaza online. Someone you think you could have a conversation with. Knock on their Facebook door and say hello. Tell them that you want to know them. Tell them that you want to listen to their story – you want to know who they are, and what their life is like.

Don't start by arguing and trying to prove that you are right and they are wrong. Don't try to win a debate on whose narrative is true and whose is false. Listen! Actively. Ask questions but try to understand the world from their vantage point. You are not negotiating and you do not represent the Government of Israel or the Jewish people. Be yourself. Be human and seek human interaction. It won't be easy – that I promise you. It may be difficult to even find someone. There is so much suspicion and fear – on both sides. But don't despair. Keep on trying until you find someone to talk to. And then talk. Use Google translate if you have to – it's not the best, but it can help.

Our conflict will never end if we don't talk. Don't fall into the trap of believing that “we have no partner for peace.” Partnership is first of all a decision – then you work on creating it and building it.

Feel free to contact me and tell me your progress and your challenges, I would be happy to listen to you.

**Gershon Baskin founded IPCRI (Israel Palestine Center for Research & Information), a joint public policy think tank. He is country manager for Palestine and Egypt in Gigawatt Global. His book *The Negotiator - Freeing Gilad Schalit from Hamas* was published in 2013. His new book *In Pursuit of Peace in Israel & Palestine*, Vanderbilt University Press, 2017. For more information on Gershon Baskin, see:**

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## Amotz Asa-El

### Middle Israel: How to Read the Passover Haggadah

Reading the haggadah throughout the ages Jews were conditioned to believe that history is a play, where God is the director and they are extras at best, spectators at worst.

Having just confessed that he once killed a man bare-handed, the Russian president in TV's *House of Cards* asks his American peer: "Do you think you're capable?" This of course happens in a theater of the absurd, where the world's two most powerful men sit in a bunker and dialogue wearing military fatigues that complete this tele-drama's Purim-spiel realism.

Most real-life leaders, even the vicious, send others to kill, rather than kill by themselves with their bare hands. Most, that is, except Moses.

Moses did kill with his bare hands, having "turned this way and that," and seen "no one about," and then "struck down" his victim. Yet unlike the dramatized Viktor Petrov, who killed to survive, Moses killed for justice.

Now, how many leaders do we know who would kill personally, with their bare hands, and not for themselves or anyone else, but for justice, and at the risk of being executed? Moses's story already reads like fiction, but not as science fiction, which comes next when he sees a fire that does not die, hears a speech delivered without tongue or lips, and flees a snake that seconds earlier was the rod in his hand.

Initially this departure from nature is witnessed by no one except Moses, but in due course there appear disruptions of ecology, geology, meteorology and astrophysics. Blood floods rivers, hail descends from the heavens, plague targets firstborns, the sea parts, and pillars of fire and cloud march ahead of a multitude that soon hears God from a smoking mountain wrapped in thunder, fog and flame. So dizzying is this setting that some secularists dismiss the Exodus story lock, stock and barrel as biographical legend, science fiction and political fantasy. They are wrong.

The first secular voice to salute Moses was Zionist thinker Ahad Ha'am, who saw in him a model dissenter. The historical Moses, he explained in his classical essay "Moses," troubles researchers, but we Jews have our own Moses, "whose shape is fixed in our nation's heart... from antiquity to this day."

This popular Moses's existence does not depend on scholarship's findings. And that Moses was governed by a quest for truth and justice so uncompromising that he was barred from entering Canaan, where the voyage he led had to give way to routine, and routine means compromise, a disposition for which he was not suited. Scholars were inspired by this intellectual pragmatism.

Berkeley political scientist Aaron Wildavsky hailed Moses as a political leader who shaped a system that balanced government and freedom. Princeton philosopher Michael Walzer saw the Exodus as revolution's paradigm: Moses, he noted, is depicted as a mortal of flesh, blood and impulse, and his revolution unfolds within history, demanding a 40-year trek because its original participants' slave mentality could not otherwise be shed.

All this is very nice, but there is one problem with these rational narratives, a problem that is intertwined with the miraculous narrative: they leave the people passive. Reading the haggada through the ages, Jews were conditioned to believe that history is a play where God is the director and they are extras at best, spectators at worst. Unlike his modern sculptors, our forebears couldn't see in Moses a real-life legislator, statesman or revolutionary. To them, he led not because of his convictions, but because of God's command. To them, Moses captured his

initially skeptical audience not with charisma, but by producing a snake from a stick, a la Harry Potter.

Moses' plan was not to rebel but to escape, to the desert where God recruited him, and which he initially refused to leave. Moses, in short, read to our forebears not as a shaper of history, but as God's pawn.

For a people who took literally God's vow to Moses that he will stiffen Pharaoh's heart, history had to seem divinely engineered. What to our modern eyes is courage, vision, revolution and statesmanship, to our forebears was but a tale of obedience, an efficient messenger's transmission of God's message to a wicked king.

The results of this reading were catastrophic. Our ancestors were conditioned to believe that God micromanages history. A Jew was to sit back while manna falls from the heavens, the sea is parted with a cane, and enemies are crushed when Moses raises his hand. This reading of history as a continuum of miracles and punishments, rather than a sum of human actions and inactions, left generations of Jews politically passive in the face of their discrimination, libeling and murder. That is why when Theodor Herzl prodded the Jews to seize their fate, most rabbis derided him, ordering their flocks to stay put in Europe. God, they preached, would redeem the Jews, not man.

There were two sages who, though each other's inversion, craved Sinai, the mental no-man's-land that sprawled between our forebears' sovereignty and bondage. One, ultra-Orthodox Rabbi Elazar Menachem Shach, said that "the Torah was given to Israel in the desert, in a place of desolation," which to him, even after the Holocaust, meant that sovereignty was expendable. "We did not have the Land of Israel then," he said of the Exodus, "yet we were an eternal nation." The ultra-Zionist Rabbi Zvi Yehuda Kook craved Sinai for a different reason. "Sinai," he wrote, "is part of the Land of Israel, and it is strictly and severely forbidden by the Torah to abandon any portion of it to gentile sovereignty." It was an absurd ruling, as the Jews never inhabited or claimed Sinai, the Promised Land's antithesis, the predator that swallowed the Exodus' original participants, a wasteland that had to vanish from Israel's path before it could enter its land. Both these crooked visions, one of Sinai as our land's extension and the other as its alternative, are where assumptions about God's management of history ultimately lead.

Middle Israelis are not atheists and they don't think God is indifferent to history. Yet they believe he is there not as history's manager but as its actors' potential inspiration, as he was for Moses when he brawled for justice regardless of gain and risk. We don't purport to know how God works. Perhaps it was he who salvaged some Jews when the rest were massacred, but that cannot be assumed, least of all in advance, and it certainly gives no license to be passive in history's face, as ultra-Orthodoxy is, nor to be adventurist, as ultra-Zionism is.

There was a house opposite ours in Katamon, where Levi Eshkol lived when he became prime minister. One seder night, as my father read the haggada's "pour out your fury on the nations that do not know you," his voice cracked as he burst into tears, rose from his chair, opened the door, stood for several minutes on the balcony, and then returned to us, closing the door between him and the house of Eshkol, the affable Yiddish joker who never killed anyone, least of all with his bare hands, but still defeated three armies in six days.

"Pour out your fury on the nations that do not know you," we now picked up from where our father had left off, "for they have devoured Jacob and desolated his home."

Years after my father passed away it dawned on me that what came to his mind was his own father, who was also named Jacob, and of whom we don't even have a photo. He, his wife, and most of their family were devoured, in spring '44, the spring that began with what would be their last seder, when they said "every generation and generation they rise up on us to annihilate us," before asserting: "And God saves us from their hands."

**Award-winning journalist Amotz Asa-El, the former executive editor of the Jerusalem Post, is the Jerusalem Post's senior commentator, senior editor at the Jerusalem Report, and political commentator at Israeli TV's English news. Author of *The Diaspora and the Lost Tribes of Israel* he holds advanced degrees from Columbia and Hebrew Universities. For more information on Amotz Asa-El, see:**

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## Michael Freund

### Passover Among a Lost Tribe of Israel in India

For Mendel Kingbol, in his mid-90s, Passover and its message of deliverance resonate. Kingbol is of the Bnei Menashe, descendants of the Jewish ‘lost tribe of Menasseh’, residing in the farthest reaches of northeastern India.

A century ago, British missionaries to India were astonished to find local tribesmen who worshiped one god, knew the Bible, and were practicing a form of Biblical Judaism, including the Sabbath, kashrut and family purity.

Before long, the missionaries succeeded in converting most to Christianity. A core group, however, continued to adhere to the ways of their ancestors and came to serve as the basis for what is now the Bnei Menashe Jewish community.

In 2004, as the founder of Shavei Israel, which is dedicated to assisting lost tribes and hidden Jewish communities to return to our people, I was instrumental in facilitating Sephardi Chief Rabbi Shlomo Amar’s recognition of the Bnei Menashe as “descendants of Israel” on a collective basis, and their return to Israel.

Over the past 15 years, some 3,000 Bnei Menashe have made aliya to the Jewish state, where they have undergone formal conversion to Judaism to remove any doubts regarding their status. Among them are Kingbol and his family.

Now, comfortably ensconced in the Galilee, he is adjusting well to his new surroundings. Asked about Passover, he proceeds to recount the remarkable manner in which the festival, known in the Mizo language as Chapchar Khut, was commemorated by his ancestors. “Chapchar Khut is an ancient ritual that I have always believed is strongly connected with Passover,” Kingbol says.

The holiday was typically celebrated for seven days during the spring, in the month of March, and at its center was a ceremony with remarkably Jewish overtones. “The Bnei Menashe in Mizoram live in mountainous villages, so to grow crops we needed to make a clearing,” he remembers. “This period of clearing, which was done immediately before Chapchar Khut, was regarded as a new year for us,” much in the way that the Torah enumerates the Hebrew months starting with Nisan, when Passover falls.

Along with clearing a field for agricultural purposes, the Bnei Menashe would also fashion a new road as part of the traditional observance of the holiday. This, it appears, was intended to symbolize the long journey out of Egypt that lay ahead of their ancestors at the beginning of their deliverance from bondage.

Since this was considered the start of a new year, a blessing for the entire community was recited, with the village priest taking four or five people with him to the outermost edge of the settlement where, while beating the bushes, he would chant: “Behold, bushes of above and below! Make way, for the sons of Menashe are coming!”

On the first night of the festival, Kingbol relates, the villagers would all gather at the hut of the local chief, where they would sing and dance until the early hours of the morning. The celebration started precisely at midnight, Kingbol says, because that is when all the first-born of Egypt were slain in the 10th plague, as recounted in the Bible. “The next morning, on the threshold of the village, everyone had to eat a quick and hurried meal,” he says.

“They did this because our ancestors, when they left Egypt, did not have time to bake their bread. The villagers would feed each other very quickly. This was known as chhawng hnawt - I don’t know exactly what this phrase means, but it signifies something that had to be done hastily, because our ancestors were under pressure to leave after Pharaoh’s command to depart Egypt.”

While Kingbol’s recollection of Chapchar Khut revolves around the social and communal aspects of the holiday, another Bnei Menashe elder named Yossi provides an additional perspective on how the Bnei Menashe celebrated its ritual components.

On the first night of the holiday, after sundown, the village priest would don special white garments in preparation for carrying out the sacrificial rite. These garments included, according to Yossi, one that had strings dangling from its four corners, recalling the tallit. “The priest would take an animal and slaughter it, and then collect the blood in a special pouch,” Yossi says. He would then dip a branch or leaf into the blood and smear it on the doorways of people’s homes, just as the Israelites had done before leaving Egypt. The priest then had to carefully separate the meat from the bones of the carcass, for if even one bone were to break, it would invalidate the animal for use in the ceremony. For anyone familiar with the Torah’s description of the Passover sacrifice, this requirement will sound more than a little familiar (see Exodus 12:46).

Having successfully completed this task, the priest would place the animal on an altar and offer it up to G-d, in the process reciting a series of ancient Bnei Menashe chants and prayers. Perhaps the most extraordinary of them is “Miriam’s song,” as it is known among the community. “We had to cross the Red Sea,” it began. “Our enemies were coming after us with chariots but the sea swallowed them all as if they were meat. We are led by the cloud during the day and by fire at night. Take those birds for the food, and drink water coming out from the rock.”

The echoes of the Biblical account of the Exodus and its aftermath are unmistakable - a Bnei Menashe version of the haggadah as it narrates the story of how their ancestors left Egypt, together with our own.

Nowadays, the 7,000 Bnei Menashe still remaining in India observe Passover in the same fashion as Jews throughout the world, gathering in their homes for the seder, going to synagogue for festive prayers and keeping alive the memory of deliverance and freedom, as they await the day when they too will depart for Zion.

Earlier this year, Shavei Israel brought a group of 102 Bnei Menashe on Aliya, and the Israeli government has granted us permission to bring another 600 by the end of year. In the coming years, our goal is to bring all the Bnei Menashe back home to our people and our Land.

And so, after so many centuries of wandering, the Bnei Menashe are once again setting out on the long journey back to the Promised Land. May the road ahead lead to their safe and quick return.

**Michael Freund served as Deputy Communications Director for Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. He is the Founder and Chairman of Shavei Israel ([www.shavei.org](http://www.shavei.org)), which assists Lost Tribes and hidden Jewish communities to return to the Jewish people. Freund is also a syndicated Jerusalem Post columnist. A graduate of Princeton, he also holds an MBA from Columbia. For more information on Michael Freund, see:**

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## Beth Steinberg

### Making Your Seder More Inclusive

If your family is like mine, there's the divide between those who love a snappy seder - quick, tasty, to the point, and done by midnight - and those who like a long and leisurely evening of games, song, good food, and much discussion.

We have our own set of variables, set into play by our youngest, Akiva, who has disabilities. While Akiva loves seder songs and rituals - indeed he listens to holiday music all year long and is always ready for whatever holiday is 'on deck' - navigating a long evening in an unfamiliar setting is always challenging. For us, for his brothers, and most of all, for him.

When he was small, we often hosted two seders at our home in Brooklyn, figuring it was the easiest way to make the evening successful for all. (When we moved to Israel, we solved the problem of two seder nights.) As Akiva's seder skills developed, the challenge became alerting the table to his needs, and making the most of his favorite seder moments.

The good news? Making your seder more welcoming is easy. The haggadah was written with everyone in mind, with a range of texts that encourage tackling bigger issues like exclusion and oppression, freedom and revelation, alongside festive songs, glasses of wine, and endless food.

#### Five Thoughts for Your Seder Festivities:

- Slow Down and Smell the Maror. Choose a few moments for a slowdown of your seder's speed in order to accommodate a range of needs, from those guests who don't read Hebrew well, or are less familiar with the seder, to those like Akiva who simply sing much more slowly than the average person. Especially if your table is filled with seder regulars, this choice has a way of reminding everyone that inclusion means literally taking time to include everyone in the seder experience.
- Ha Lach'ma An'ya. Hospitality and the seder. We begin the seder with our doors open, inviting in the hungry, the needy, and the enslaved, offering up the matzah as part of our welcome, that "bread of oppression which our Fathers ate in the land of Egypt." Not exactly an enticing invitation of plenty for someone in need who might prefer a heartier meal, but is a message offered freely, and inclusively to all.

Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks, in his Pesach haggadah, writes "...What transforms the bread of oppression into the bread of freedom is the willingness to share it with others..." Being willing to share and include is also the first step in creating community buy-in and acceptance of those with disabilities, while freeing ourselves of that very human fear of difference. Breaking matzah together can ease the way towards reducing discomfort - over an evening replete with ice-breaking conversation and group activities.

An inclusive community is reminiscent of those first seders in Egypt - doors open, tables set, bags packed - ready and hopeful for a community adventure all would experience together.

- Nuancing the Four Children. Whether it be gender diversity, disability and difference, mental illness, parenting and anger management, the four children are an obvious place to discuss difference. How can we deepen this important conversation?

Rabbi Miriam Spitzer in *My Jewish Learning* writes, “The haggadah begins with ‘k’neged arba banim dibra Torah.’ This is usually translated as: ‘The Torah alludes to four children.’ But perhaps it could also be rendered as: ‘The Torah speaks **against** the notion that there are four children.’”

Intuitively, we know this responds to that larger question of who those children are, and what they can represent: Their questions, the haggadah’s answers, and our responses. Rabbi Spitzer notes, “...Too often, our categorizations of children become self-fulfilling prophecies, because of the power of our responses to influence future behavior.”

Thinking beyond categories and labels, and breaking through the disability-label-divide and often uninformed ideas about functioning abilities and disabilities, are the steps needed in order to think more openly about all of our community’s children.

- **Haroset and Wall Building.** As evidenced by the pyramids in Egypt, the walls of the Old City, and other ancient walled cities in good repair today, walls are a specialty of the human race. The walls we build between understanding and acceptance in all elements of our lives - private and communal - are exemplified by the haroset eaten at the seder table. Take a minute to consider the walls you’ve erected, whether by fear, misperception, or lack of experience, and vow to use your haroset to build a shared community, free of obstacles that impede the inclusion of those who have not yet succeeded in joining.
- **Dayenu, or Enough is Enough.** The seminal song of the seder, sung early on in the evening is Dayenu, a “rising crescendo of thanksgiving,” writes Morris Silverman in his edition of the Passover haggadah, “beginning with gratitude for physical deliverance and ending with gratitude for the spiritual blessings of the Shabbat and the Torah. Freedom is not enough. The Exodus must lead to Sinai.”  
If Exodus means freedom, then Sinai, and the receiving of the 10 Commandments, means responsibility. If we are to meaningfully include people with disabilities in all elements of Jewish communal life, we must admit to our fears and misconceptions about difference. We can be honest with ourselves, and say Dayenu.

Chag Sameach!

**Beth Steinberg is the co-founder of Shutaf Inclusion Programs, offering year-round, informal-education programs for children and teens with disabilities in Jerusalem. Shutaf welcomes all participants - with and without disabilities - regardless of religious and cultural differences. Beth is also the Artistic Director of Theater in the Rough, engaging audiences with free summer Shakespeare. For more information on Beth Steinberg, see:**

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## Benji Lovitt

### Passover Haiku

It's Passover time  
Would you like something different?  
Seder through haikus!

#### WELCOME TO OUR SEDER

Passover seder  
Time to meet the family  
And talk slavery

There's the seder plate  
Each food looks worse than the next  
Shank bone: DELICIOUS!

Pass the Hagaddah  
Tales to tell from wise sages  
And from Maxwell House

Bread of affliction  
We Jews sure love to suffer  
And tonight, more so!

#### KADESH

The four cups of wine  
Each a symbol of great joy  
...But Manishevitz???

#### WHY WE RECLINE

Why lean to the left?  
To appreciate freedom  
So "pillow now", slave!

#### URCHATZ

We wash before food  
Like always, but without prayer  
Nuff said, moving on

#### KARPAS

Dip a green veggie  
In salt water, then eat it  
Fun for the vegans!

#### YACHATZ

Break middle matza  
Put part back on seder plate  
Hide rest (no peeking!)

#### MAGGID

It's the four questions!  
Youngest asks per tradition  
Deal with it, you kids

Let's read the ten plagues  
Toads, boils, blood, frogs, lice and more  
Sucks for you, Egypt

Let's sing "Dayenu"  
"If only this, nu, enough"  
Such a Jewish song

#### RACHTZA

But first, second cup  
Are you feeling the wine yet?  
At least it's not juice

Now wash hands again  
This time we say a blessing  
First part done, LET'S EAT!

#### MOTZI MATZA

Now say Hamotzi  
Huh? The customary prayer?  
Yeah, right, "this is bread"

#### MAROR

Now take bitter herbs  
Dip them in the charoset  
And stop reclining

## **KORECH**

Maror and matza  
With charoset in sandwich  
Nice honor, Hillel

## **SHULCHAN ORECH**

The meal is now served  
Don't get too excited, folks  
It's still Passover

## **TZAFUN**

Go for it, kiddos!  
Find the afikoman now!  
Winner gets cheap prize

## **BARECH**

Third cup just got filled  
Birkat Hamazon is said  
Invisible dude

## **HALLEL**

Thank G-d, songs of praise  
We can't do that enough, right?  
Oh, and the fourth cup

## **NIRTZA**

Good job, all, we're done  
Next year in Jerusalem  
Here comes the last part

## **FINAL SONGS**

Goats and "Who knows one?"  
Some add hand motions and fun  
Seder two, Galut!

**Benji Lovitt's observations on Israeli society, combined with his lifelong involvement in Jewish education, create a hilarious and uplifting narrative that has brought smiles to faces all over the world. His perspectives have been featured in publications such as USA Today, Time Magazine, and the Times of Israel and he works regularly with Jewish organizations to promote and discuss Israel. For more information on Benji Lovitt, see:**

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## Miri Shalem

### Ma Nishtana? What Has Changed?

It is the quintessential question of the Passover seder. “Ma Nishtana Halayla Hazeh Mikol HaLaylot? How is this night different from all other nights?” Every year, we read this line from the haggadah and ask, “Ma Nishtana? What has changed?”

But for me, “Ma Nishtana” is a question I ask daily.

I’m CEO of the Institute for Zionist Strategies and a Social change activist from Bet Shemesh, a city of 100,000 which will soon grow to be 250,000 and Israel’s largest haredi city. Religious tensions are high in the city, as extremists work to make the entire town run on the principles they espouse, while the municipality does nothing to stop them. This has real-life effects on the city’s residents. On certain bus lines women are told to sit in the back of buses; in local publications and on billboards and posters, images of women and girls are hard to find.

In Israel, where religion and state are intertwined, it is up to us, the activists, to push back when religion impinges on citizens’ civil rights. My work, my activities — my life, is dedicated to upholding the civil and human rights of Israel’s citizens, specifically that of women and girls.

So, I ask myself on a regular basis, Ma Nishtana? What has changed and what has not — and then I work to fix it.

I founded the Municipal Council of Local Women to create bridges between women from different sectors, and change the way they see one another. As a result, women of all backgrounds have become close friends and have committed to raising their families to be more accepting of those who are different from them.

I took 200 women with me to dance in a street protest that made the news, after daily demonstrations by extremists harassed a local girls’ school and a haredi man spat on a little girl because she was not “modest”.

I am part of a group of women suing the Bet Shemesh municipality for allowing signs which tell women not to stand in a public area, so as not to ‘bother’ men. We also added images of women to the marketing billboards of a large construction site that only had pictures of men and boys.

I participate regularly in Knesset committees that work to fight against the exclusion of women.

I write a weekly column in an Israeli newspaper in which I discuss the current situation for women in the country, and call for change.

Professionally, I head an NGO which works to foster change in Israeli society by strengthening both its democratic and Jewish identity — and we succeed in many areas.

Sometimes, changes are small and take time. Sometimes you need a lot of patience. Sometimes you need a microscope to see the changes, but these changes lead to more and greater changes, which multiply and expand.

Other times, the changes are large and lasting, and give you the strength to keep going.

Every year on Passover, we tell the story of the Jews in Egypt. Why tell the story of something so long ago? It is so we can learn from it. Learn of the heroes great and small who worked tirelessly for the sake of their people. Learn of the challenges faced, and battles won, and of the faith they kept that one day, the oppressed would be free.

I believe that stories inspire others, and I would love to share my story with you. The story of women who love their country and want it to be one where everyone's rights are protected, while still honoring their shared tradition.

It is true that at times things can seem bleak, but I can tell you from experience that we can make a change. We can make things better. I have seen myself how a small amount of light can chase away a great deal of darkness.

**Miri Shalem is an Orthodox Sephardic activist from Bet Shemesh, Israel. She is the CEO of the Institute for Zionist Strategies which deals in shaping Israel as the state of the Jewish People, promoting liberal values. She writes an editorial in the weekly paper, Makor Rishon. She has a BA in Economics and Political Science and an MA in Gender Studies. She is married and a mother of four. For more information on Miri Shalem, see:**

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## Aaron Leibowitz

### The Truth Shall Set You Free

For the last few decades, a significant buzzword in the world of education has been ‘Experiential Education.’ The Pesach seder demonstrates that Jews have known this for thousands of years. But like any educational endeavor, if the teacher is going through the motions, but not aware of their purpose, it becomes much less effective.

The fourth Mishna in the tractate of Pesachim says:

*...And here the son questions his father. And if the son has insufficient awareness, his father teaches him: Why is this night different from all nights? On all nights, we eat leavened and unleavened bread, on this night, only unleavened bread. On all nights, we eat all kinds of vegetables, on this night, bitter herbs. On all nights, we eat meat roasted, stewed or boiled, on this night, only roasted [meat]. On all nights, we dip once, on this night, we dip twice. And according to the son’s da’at (awareness), his father teaches him.*

As the Mishna dictates, we launch our own seder with ‘The Four Questions.’ But when we take a deeper look we notice that the title ‘The Four Questions’ is a misnomer. It’s actually just one question, with four examples: ‘How is this night different than all other nights?’

On a simple level this opening can be understood as good pedagogy. Clearly when setting the stage of the seder as a conversation between parent and child, as the Mishna does we are casting the seder as an educational opportunity. One of the basics of experiential education is that the best teaching always seeks to spark curiosity and stimulate the student in preparation for the learning to come. But if our goal was simply curiosity would that not be better served by a list of distinct questions, rather than one question with four examples? What specifically is being brought to our attention, dwelling only on the idea that this night is different?

In order to understand this better, let us look at the criterion the Mishna specifically identifies as the primary modality of the seder – da’at, awareness.

The root of knowledge is distinction and discernment. To know and understand something is inherently connected to identifying that which it is not. Observe the process of how human beings develop their own awareness. For a newborn, everything is the same, an endless extension of self. From the discovery of its own moving hand as a distinct part of his body, to the discovery that there are people out there, some of whom are special, to the three year-old declaring insistently that the ball is ‘mine’, these are all steps on the path to da’at. In Jewish law one achieves the official status of da’at at the age of adolescence, when a deeper awakening to the profound otherness inherent in gender occurs, and the physical body responds in arousal to another. Thus the erotic biblical inference of the word da’at, to ‘know’ another.

Another indication of the connection between discernment and da’at can be found by looking at the blessing over discernment, Havdala. We bless Hashem who discerns between the blessed and the profane, light and darkness, Israel and the nations, between the seventh day and the work week.

The night of the seder is a night of freedom and therefore it must be a night of discernment of the da’at that creates heightened awareness. Because freedom is ultimately a state of mind, the ability to understand the world around you and act with true agency, true choice. In this light the seder is not an opportunity to discuss freedom — it is a process creating freedom. It asks us why this night is different from all other nights, and in asking that

question it teaches us that there are things that make a difference. It is that knowledge, that discovery itself, and the ability to explore what matters to us, what makes a difference to us, which makes us free.

This process is the opposite of what the seder for many has become. Indeed it runs against the manner in which many practice Torah and tradition. A fundamentalist view of Torah often discourages asking questions, and seeks to limit freedom and personal agency. As an Orthodox Rabbi, I am committed to a traditional practice in my path of Torah, but I refuse to cease asking hard questions. What Pesach teaches me is that God does not desire us to be slaves; rather, that we be servants in service of freedom, in service of truth.

**Rabbi Aaron is the founder of 'Hashgacha Pratit', an alternative community based Kosher food supervision challenging the monopoly of the Israeli Chief Rabbinate. His smicha is from Rabbis Shlomo Riskin and Chaim Brovender. He is an Orthodox City Council member who believes in an inclusive and pluralistic city. He is also a master teacher, a gifted storyteller, and a serial social troublemaker. For more information on Rabbi Aaron Leibowitz, see:**

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## Susan Silverman

### Casting Lots

Adar, at three-years-old, wished he could remember his birth mother — from the day he was born.

But there was no remembering for him, no recollection of a face or the anchor of a story. No who or what or how or why to understand his coming to be. And I had none of that to give him. I had only a messy mosaic of stories — our family inside the unwieldy unfolding narrative of the Jewish people — within which he could weave his life. Appreciating mystery is the only way I could honestly approach Adar’s origins. It was the only way I could fathom God. In this way, Adar was a portal to kedusha — holiness. I Will Be What I Will Be was God’s answer to Moses’s question, “Who Are You?” God-as-future. God-as-becoming. Moses’s future was becoming known, even as his origins were unknown to him. How could he have remembered his mother, Yocheved, placing him in a basket she had lined with bitumen and pitch, the small boat in which the river would carry him away from the Egyptian edict of death. How did she get her hands to obey her intention and let go of that basket? My deepest fears formed themselves into prayer even when I was simply buckling my child into his car seat.

Moses’s cry carried beyond the hum and thrum of the river, and pierced the conversation of Pharaoh’s daughter and her handmaids as they bathed. Thus, the grown daughter of Pharaoh “heard the cries of the child.” Tragically, inexplicably, Yocheved hid herself in order to save her child. Perhaps Adar’s birth mother prepared him in a basket, wrapped and warm, protected from mosquitoes, sun, and rain. Perhaps she, like the woman who released Moses to the Nile’s flow, “stationed herself at a distance” to ensure his safety as long as she could. But never did Adar’s birth mother get to “lift her eyes” to redemption, at least not with him.

She and I were a team, like Yocheved and Pharaoh’s daughter. Did Yocheved call out for her son Moses once he was ensconced in Pharaoh’s palace? Did the daughter of Pharaoh, raising her beautiful, wise boy, cry for Yocheved’s loss?

Oh, Adari. Your birth mother has taken her place in the long line of women who could only save their children by leaving them.

Excerpted from Casting Lots: Creating a Family in a Beautiful, Broken World by Susan Silverman. Copyright © 2016. Available from Da Capo Press, an imprint of Perseus Books, LLC, a subsidiary of Hachette Book Group, Inc.

**Susan Silverman is an author, teacher, activist and founder of Second Nurture: Every Child Deserves a Family — And a Community, a program to find permanent, loving families for all children — with the added bonus of supportive communal contexts for their families. She is an advocate for social justice and making Israel the place where Jews can be their conceivable best. For more information on Susan Silverman, see:**

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## Dr. Rabbi Tzemah Yoreh

### Exodus Alternatives

Did the Exodus really happen? Was there a man named Moses? Did the Israelites wander the desert to the promised land? We often wonder about the truth of the Exodus story as we celebrate Passover and recount the myth of our origins.

For answers, scholars generally turn to sources outside of the Bible, such as inscriptions, archaeological evidence, and extra-biblical literary sources. Most people ignore the evidence from the Bible itself that the Exodus was not the only story of origins going around. Some of the most exciting research in modern biblical scholarship focuses on alternative stories of origin found within the Bible.

Maybe the descendants of the Patriarchs never left the land. Consider an account where the great-grandsons' sons of Jacob were rustling cattle in the land of Israel/Canaan at a time when by most other accounts they should have been enslaved in Egypt (I Chronicles 7:20-23). Or that, when read at face value, the multiple promises to the Patriarchs that they and their descendants would inherit Canaan seem to refer to their immediate descendants, not those descendants alive 500 years later at the purported time of the Exodus.

Perhaps more radical is Ezekiel's statement (16:3) that the Israelites originated in Canaan itself and their ancestry is Emorite and Hittite, two of the nations that the Israelites are commanded to destroy. What are the implications of a story of origins that so intimately ties Israel's bloodline to its greatest enemies?

Maybe Israel's beginnings were nomadic and homeless, with no ties to any particular land. There are multiple allusions to God finding Israel in the desert rather than revealing himself to the Patriarchs in Canaan (e.g. Deuteronomy 32:10).

Exploring these alternatives to the paradigm of exile, enslavement and exodus provides a rich opportunity to understand what is at stake in our story of origin.

**Tzemah Yoreh is a scholar of Bible and a composer of poetic liturgy. Among his most popular books are *Love Song for Shabbat* and *Why Abraham Killed Isaac*. His greatest joy is surprising people as they discover sides of the Bible they never knew. His sessions on poetic prayer draw on the depths of Judaism's literary tradition, and inspire participants to express their own creativity and values. For more information on Tzemah Yoreh, see:**

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## Gil Troy

### This Passover, Leave an Empty Seat at the Seder Table

Sadly, I am updating something I wrote in 2003, when Palestinian terrorists were targeting Israelis – as they are today:

Once again, during this year's seders, we will celebrate our joyous holiday of liberation with heavy hearts. Even as we revel in our freedom as Jews in the modern world, some of our brothers and sisters in Israel are in pain. This year, as in previous years, we must rise to the challenge to reclaim our symbols, to remember our losses, to reaffirm our commitment to Israel, to the Jewish people, and to a true peace.

Since October, 2015, when the Palestinians turned toward violence yet again, too many have died, too many have been injured, on both sides. And too many seders will have empty chairs — missing husbands, fathers, brothers, sons; missing wives, mothers, sisters, daughters.

The seder's power comes from its ritualization of memory. It is a primal, sensual, literal, service. The seder plate – evoking the mortar used in building with charoset, and the tears shed by the slaves with salt water — helps us visualize the trauma of slavery.

The physical acts of reclining, of eating special foods, of standing to greet Elijah the prophet, help us feel the joy of Yetziat Mitzrayim, of leaving Egypt. And, in an affirmation of the importance of peoplehood, we mark this special moment not as individuals but as a community.

In that spirit, we cannot proceed with business as usual during these challenging times. We must improvise a new ritual that marks our present pain, that illustrates our vital connection with Israel and with Israelis today.

Let each of us, as we gather at our seders, intrude on our own celebrations by leaving one setting untouched, by having one empty chair at our table.

Let us take a moment to reflect on our losses. And as we do that, let us take the time to find out the name of one victim murdered since last Passover, or one victim murdered years earlier, one Jew who cannot celebrate this year's holiday, one family in mourning, one family with an empty seat at their table – and an aching hole in their hearts.

Let us call out the name of Koby Mandell, age 13, a young American immigrant brutally killed in May, 2001, whose father, Rabbi Seth Mandell, talks about the empty seat at his Shabbat table and shares the pain of watching other boys grow up, watching their voices deepen, their shoulders broaden, their gaits quicken, even as his son lies dead.

Let us call out the name of Hadar Goldin, a 23-year-old soldier killed by Hamas in August, 2014 but whose remains Hamas is holding in a cruel assault on Hadar's family – and civilized norms.

Let us call out the names of Rabbi Eitam and Naama Henkin, ambushed in October, 2015, slaughtered in the front seat of their car as their four children sat in the back.

Let us call out the name of Ezra Schwartz, an 18-year-old kid from Massachusetts, just trying to enjoy his yeshiva "gap" year and help out with tzedaka projects, distributing food to others, gunned down at a traffic stop.

Let us call out the name of Dafna Meir, a 38-year-old mother of six stabbed to death while painting the front door to her home – who died protecting her children who remained safely inside.

And let us call out the name of Erez Orbach, a 20-year-old American-Israeli who, despite having physical disabilities that exempted him from serving, fought his way into the army and earned a prized place in an officer's training course, only to be run over with three other cadets by a truck-driver-turned terrorist on Jerusalem's promenade, the beloved "tayelet," this past January.

As we call these names, let us commit to some action, to embrace the victims' families. Moreover, let us build a friendship with Israel and Israelis which is not just about politics, and not solely about mourning.

And, unlike our enemies, as we call out these names, let us not call for vengeance. Instead, as we mourn, let us hope; as we remember the many lives lost during this crazy and pointless century of war, let us pray ever more intensely for a just and lasting peace — and for an end to the global scourge of terrorism afflicting Jews and non-Jews alike.

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## Judy Klitsner

### Swamp Creatures at My Seder

As an authentically-Jewish educational experience, the seder emphasizes questioning as a means of actively engaging its participants. Our “ask questions first” philosophy is evident from the four questions of mah nishtana to the thirteen questions of echad mi yodea. I believe that these interrogative bookends help send a signal to participants that we are to continually question throughout the night’s proceedings, including questions about our redemption story that are not dictated by the haggadah’s official content. In recent years at my family seder, we have shifted from a strict, evenly-paced recital of the haggadah to a faster, more perfunctory reading, with long, in-depth digressions into particular verses or questions that capture the curiosity of participants.

This year, I hope to steer my family into a detour that will explore the following verse:

וּבְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל פָּרּוּ וַיִּשְׁרְצוּ וַיִּרְבּוּ וַיַּעֲצְמוּ בְּמֵאֵד בְּמֵאֵד וַתִּמְלֵא הָאֲרֶץ אֹתָם :

The Israelites were fertile and swarmed; they multiplied and increased very greatly, so that the land was filled with them (Exod. 1:7).

The haggadah’s presentation of this verse suggests that it is to be taken at face value; the verse’s hyperbolic style is intended to convey the extreme, and extremely blessed, proliferation of the Israelite people. But this reading does not account for the one anomalous term in the verse: va-yishretzu, they swarmed. Readers will easily identify the terms פִּרְוּ-וּ, they were fertile, רִבּוּ-וּ, they multiplied, and מִלְּאָה, they filled [the earth], as the verbs used to describe God’s blessing to humanity in Genesis 1. But my question is this: why does the Exodus narrative tack on the verb שִׁרְצוּ, to swarm, which was employed in the creation story of Genesis to refer not to human fecundity, but to the swarming of the swamp creatures (Genesis 1: 20-21)?

The best thing about raising questions is that our questions prompt us to seek answers that speak to our own sensibilities, intuitions and realities; questions help to create a powerful bond between the questioner and the text. In my effort to understand the discordant term va-yishretzu, I detect a familiar undercurrent of racism in the narrative. To my mind, the word va-yishretzu represents a second perspective in the verse, a shift from the objective account of the Israelite proliferation to the subjective prism of a wary Egyptian populace. In this rare glimpse into the Egyptian mindset, we uncover a gradual dehumanizing of the other. The Israelites, once valued guests of the Egyptians, are now seen as repulsive and threatening creatures that are much like insects and reptiles.

Read this way, the verse, which at first glance seemed to bear favorable news for the sojourning Israelites, is actually consistent with the negative tone of the surrounding verses, and paves the way for the racist rhetoric that follows. Once Pharaoh is assured that the Israelites are seen as less than human, as a mass of teeming vermin-like creatures, he is ready to begin his incitement speech. Exploiting the people’s sense of invasion by the wretched and vile foreigners, Pharaoh will claim that the Israelites are “too great and too numerous for us, rav ve-atzum mimenu; (Exod. 1:10) as a result, the Egyptians will come to “dread, קִרְוּ-וּ” the Israelites (1:12).

In support of the notion that the Bible offers subtle insight into the psychology of racism — and that dehumanization is a central component of that effort — I would turn to the story of Balak, king of Moab, who seeks the help of Balaam in cursing the Israelite people (Numbers 22). As if borrowing a page from Pharaoh’s xenophobic

speech, Balak claims that the Israelite nation is “atzum mimeni, too great for me” (Nu. 22:6). As in Egypt, the host nation “dreads, ק-ר-צ” the Israelites because they are “numerous, rav” (22:3). Significantly, in describing the expansion of the Israelites, Balak uses the phrase khisa et ein ha-aretz, has covered the earth from view” (22:5), a term that is associated with swarming insects that are so numerous that they obscure all visibility of one’s land (Exod. 10:5). It seems that in biblical times, invoking teeming insects and swamp creatures was a common technique used in racist oratory. Tragically, this propaganda tool proved to be so potent that it survived into modern times. A prime example from the not-so-distant past is Nazi propaganda films that interposed pictures of rapidly expanding Jewish population with depictions of swarming rodents.

In addition to reinforcing the enduring norms of racial incitement, I believe that Balak’s chosen terminology carries great irony, while at the same time shedding light on one of the central features of the Passover seder, the ten plagues. When Balak describes the Israelites as “covering the earth from view (khisa et ein ha-aretz)” he adopts the precise language used to describe the eighth plague, the locusts that obstructed the view of the land:

כִּי אִם מָאֵן אֶתְּהָ לְשַׁלַּח אֶת עַמִּי הַנְּנִי מִבְּיַד מִחֶר אֲרַבָּהּ בְּגִבְלֶיךָ : וְכִסְּהָ אֶת עֵינֵי הָאָרֶץ וְלֹא יוּכַל לִרְאוֹת אֶת הָאָרֶץ . . .

If you refuse to send forth my nation I will bring locusts in your borders tomorrow. And they will cover the earth from view, so that no one will be able to see the land... (Exod. 10:4-5)

Perhaps the text’s choice of terminology in presenting this plague is meant as a scathing rejoinder to the racist tendencies exhibited by both Pharaoh and Balak, and as such is part of an overall educational effort inherent in the plagues of Egypt. In describing the extreme multiplication of the locusts, the text sends a potent message to would-be tyrants and bigots throughout the ages: when loathsome insects procreate, it is indeed disgusting and destructive, and it is fair to describe them as a swarming mass that obstructs humanity’s view of its land. The locusts in Egypt (arbeh in Hebrew, which phonetically evokes the root ר-ב-ה), represent the kind of reproduction that should engender revulsion and dread. But when human beings — created with dignity, in God’s image — are fertile and multiply (ר-ב-ה), one’s land remains accessible and visible and blessings abound.

These are my thoughts, inspired by my questions. To all those who will participate in a seder this year, I wish you chag sameach and a fruitful, question-filled experience.

**Judy Klitsner, a senior faculty member at Pardes in Jerusalem, has taught Bible and biblical exegesis for two decades. A popular international speaker whose lectures abound with original insights based on her close reading of text, Judy is the author of *Subversive Sequels in the Bible: How Biblical Stories Mine and Undermine Each Other*. For more information on Judy Klitsner, see:**

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## Laura Wharton

### Time to Let a People Go?

What is Passover? In my eyes, Passover is a celebration of freedom and national liberation, apparently the first in recorded history. As such, it has always been my favorite holiday. I have always been proud to be part of a people that glorifies freedom, both individual and national. As Isaac Bashevis Singer said, “Of course we must believe in free will. We have no choice.”

But today, to me, Passover is also a test. Fifty years after the awe-inspiring victory of the Six Day War, when we gather to read and talk about our release from Egypt, we should be asking ourselves whether the lofty messages of this wonderful holiday are meant only to glorify our own deliverance, or whether they should resound more widely. Do we tell and retell our story only in order to remember our past, or to learn from it as well? Are we to understand only a particularist version of our people’s history, or might it be that all people yearn to be and deserve to be free?

The tension between the particular and the universal is a complicated subject. When we talk of social justice, is it restricted to our own town or country? Are we also responsible for those beyond our borders? When we say that we must remember that we, too, were strangers in Egypt, does that not mean we must be fair and good to all strangers in our midst, identifying with the “other”? When Moses asks Pharaoh to let his people go, is he questioning only the justice of the Egyptian ruler’s subjugation of the people of Israel, or of any leader subjugating another people? There are no easy answers, but we must do our best to think through and work on these issues if we are to continue our tradition of ethics.

A custom has developed of extracting drops of wine from our glasses to signify our recognition of the suffering of the Egyptians sent to bring back and battle with the escaping Jews. But should we perhaps try to take that lesson one step further? Now a strong people with our own state, is it enough to recognize that others may want the same national liberation that we won, or should we see that the tables may have been turned, and we should also recognize that we might be denying freedom as others did to us?

Jews have wonderful traditions of social justice that not only benefit members of our own community directly, but create an atmosphere of law and justice by extending these principles to others. Leviticus 25 tells us that in the jubilee year, “You shall make the fiftieth year holy and proclaim liberty throughout the land to all of its inhabitants.”

Passover, the holiday of freedom, is an opportunity to examine and re-evaluate our own liberty and that of those around us. Today we should be able to internalize the lessons of Passover and recognize its message is not only of freedom for Jews but consider that of our neighbors, the Palestinians, as well. We can only be truly free when we recognize values not only for ourselves. We can only be truly free when we have freed not only our own bonds, but the bonds of others. This year, the jubilee year, we should see to that in earnest.

Wishing everyone a Passover of freedom, pride in our past, and introspection that will promise a better future.

**Dr. Laura Wharton, originally from the U.S., received a B.A. from Harvard University before immigrating to Israel. She served in the IDF, was a member of Kibbutz Kfar Blum, and completed a doctorate at the Hebrew University, where she now teaches. Laura is and has been very politically active, was on the Meretz party list for the Knesset and today is a member of Jerusalem’s City Councilor. For more information on Laura Wharton, see:**

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## Maureen Kendler

### Pharaonu Gavaryu, atpusti narod moi!

How many printed Haggadot have been produced in the last 500 years?

One hundred years ago, one bibliographer counted 909, knowing his list was far from complete. In 1959 a single library in New York housed 2,000 different haggadot. And just eleven years later, in 1970, an Israel scholar listed 2,713 published in 170 different locations.

This perpetual reinvention itself embodies a central idea in the text: “In every generation, each person must think of himself as if he had personally been released from slavery.”

Some haggadot are written as a showcase for scholars, or artists. But others are an interpretive response, a contemporary re-reading of the pain of slavery and longing for freedom.

Forty years ago, in 1973, Marc Podwal published the third and final edition of his beautifully illustrated “Let My People Go” haggadah about Soviet Jewry. To those Jews in the Moscow, Leningrad and Kiev communities, the Pesach story was, uncannily, their story. The secret Russian songs and poems sung throughout the year echoed the Pesach themes: “Pharaonu Gavaryu, atpusti narod moi!” (To you, Pharaoh, I say “Let My People Go”) and the phrase “Next year in Jerusalem” had for them a passionate, poignant urgency.

Between 1967 and 1989, Jewish activism in the USSR, and the international support it received from world Jewry, shaped a generation of Jewish human rights advocates. It gave birth to the term “refusenik” (those who applied for an exit visa application to Israel and who refused to cooperate with the Soviet authorities). Refuseniks and their supporters were continuing in the footsteps of Shifra and Pua, the midwives in Egypt who “refused” to cooperate with Pharaoh. The model of non-violent civil disobedience in the face of injustice, as the Rabbi Lord Sacks has said, originated with these women. The global campaign had a tremendous impact, imbuing a shared sense of Jewish peoplehood, and key events were often held at Pesach to make the link explicit; the New York Exodus March of Passover 1970 drew some 20,000 people.

Podwal’s inspiration for his haggadah originated in an extraordinary letter from 18 “religious Jewish families” from Georgia, sent to the Commission of Human Rights. Having received clear promises that they could leave the country (some had been waiting for years), they wrote:

“No one cares about our fate. But we are waiting, for we believe in God... We will wait months and years, we will wait all our lives if necessary, but we will not renounce faith or our hopes.

“We believe our prayers have reached God.

“We know: our appeals will reach people.

“For all we are asking-let us go to the land of our forefathers.”

Podwal’s response to this letter was an act of creative solidarity: To set out the traditional haggadah text against a backdrop of sharply satirical and accusatory illustrations depicting the cruel Soviet authorities and Jewish victims.

In the 1973 edition, he wrote in sadness that he wished his haggadah of protest would have been by then outdated and redundant. But that year the situation for Jews in the Soviet Union had seriously deteriorated. Jewish “Prisoners of Conscience” were treated with ever-increasing severity, and fees had to be paid to the government by anyone with qualifications wishing to emigrate. The price for a doctorate was \$23,750. Slavery indeed. That year, Podwal, like the Georgian families, only had hope to work with.

Some haggadot are celebrations of freedom itself, acknowledging the good fortune we enjoy to carry out our seder evenings as we please. In Jonathan Safran Foer’s haggadah published last year, Jeffrey Goldberg wrote about the idea of ‘Next Year in Jerusalem’ as “...the purest expression of the profound Jewish belief that the world will be one day a better place... when we reach it - and we will - we will live in a world in which the poor are fed, the sick healed; in which Jews are accepted as a free people and no one is persecuted or enslaved.”

A haggadah is all about layers of memory and history. It is humbling to know the happy ending of the Soviet Jews and later read Goldberg’s vision, summoned in relative tranquility. But Goldberg asserts that if one leaves the seder table the same way as we went in, then the seder has failed... “We will continue to gather around the Passover table, to remind ourselves and each other of the work we must do.”

Maybe that work will be for each of us to in some way “write” a new haggadah for whatever injustices face us, as Podwal did. Our commitment to fighting injustice can also be a beautiful and moving contribution to the thousands of haggadot accumulating all over the Jewish world, and maybe they will bring us next year to a rebuilt Jerusalem.

**Maureen is a Teaching Fellow at the London School of Jewish Studies where she teaches Modern Jewish Literature and Tanach - particularly “overlooked” women’s stories. She teaches at JW3, London’s JCC, where she also has contributed to the Jewish Comedy Festival and the GayW3 programme. Maureen writes for the Jewish press and regularly broadcasts on BBC Radio 2’s “Pause For Thought.” For more information on Maureen Kendler see:**

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## Tomer Persico

### A Certain Kind of Freedom

Passover is probably the most popular holiday among Jewish families. The reason is quite simple: a holiday which prizes liberty sits right within our modern western field of values. Indeed we all celebrate our freedom all the time: the freedom to do what we want, the freedom to be who we are, and of course the freedom to buy what we desire.

But if freedom is to do what we want, we must immediately ask what is, in fact, our will. Where does it come from? Who controls it? Is it free? The simple answers to these questions are that our will comes from inside us, that we control it, and that it is indeed free. But some contemplation will reveal that we all know otherwise: Many times what we want is no more than an adoption of an external desire (fashion, social influence), many times we do not control what we want (addiction, falling in love), and so many times our will is not free.

The Anglo-Jewish philosopher Isaiah Berlin suggested an elegant formulation for the problem we are facing. According to Berlin, there are two kinds of freedom: positive and negative. Negative Freedom is freedom from external constraint or coercion. As long as no one prevents us from doing what we want, we are free. Positive Freedom is our ability to act towards expressing or realizing our full self, to fulfill our potential, or, as another version goes, our destiny. You could say that Positive Freedom means action in accordance with our real will.

The word “real” in that last sentence is, of course, salient. Advocates of Positive Freedom believe that not every desire is genuine, and that often, even if not coerced in any way, we do not in fact act freely. That would be because we are not aligned with the truth. They would insist that removing all external restrictions over a person is not enough to make them free, and that true freedom is attained only through personal cultivation and development.

If we examine the story of Exodus from Egypt we will find that it fully embodies the ideal of Positive Freedom. The Israelites escape from a terrible situation of slavery, but they do not go into a state of boundless liberty. In fact, they immediately enter into a covenant with God in which they obligate themselves to many rules and restrictions. Note well: it is precisely the commitment to the divine law that is interpreted by tradition as freedom: “There is no free man except one who involves himself in Torah learning”, said the Sages; and Rabbi Judah Halevi wrote “The servants of time are the slaves of slaves. The servant of God – he alone is free”.

Passover celebrates the passage of the Children of Israel out of slavery to Pharaoh and into slavery to God. Slavery to God is considered freedom, because according to tradition, God is the source of all truth, and therefore true freedom is only possible in a life led not according to our will, but to His. The idea is that only thus a (Jewish) person can fulfill her- or himself, and manifest their destiny. For Halevi, the servants of time are enslaved to time’s trends, while the servants of God are enslaved to truth. Only they are truly free.

The idea of positive liberty entails a few serious risks. As we delude ourselves about the freedom of our will, so might we delude ourselves about the source of truth, or as to our destiny. In addition, it is possible that whoever believes they hold the key to true freedom would want to force others to realize it, obliging them, as it were, to be free. History has witnessed it happen, to catastrophic ends.

Still, when we sit at the seder table we should to remember that this is the main idea of Passover: Not freedom in the form of random will, but rather in the form of duty. Even if God is no longer a source of truth for us, we would do well to examine whether this idea has value. In every generation, it might be said, we must ask ourselves if we are truly free.

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## Aryeh Green

### Combating Antisemitism Today with a New Exodus

One of the wonderful things about our tradition is the focus on our religious beliefs, principles, and practices. Yet as spiritually uplifting as our prayers and ceremonies are, let alone the detail-oriented observance of a festival like Passover, we lose something of the forest for the trees.

This year, with anti-Jewish online, verbal and physical attacks at an all-time high, Pesach is the perfect time to remind ourselves of the most basic response to antisemitism, whether expressed by Pharaoh in ancient Egypt and Haman in ancient Persia, or by college professors or politicians in America, Europe, and Persia.

A decade ago, I accompanied Natan Sharansky, then minister of Diaspora affairs for Israel, to over 60 campuses across the US and Europe; since then, I've spoken at hundreds more, and in communities around the world. We heard then, and hear today, the same voices we heard as a people in Egypt 3000 years ago, shouting many of the same canards: Jews are "different"; we are a "threat"; we are "immoral"; we "don't follow the rules".

And today, of course, it is Israel – the nation-state of the Jewish people – rather than individual Jews or Jewish groups, which is targeted for attack. Even when Jews on the street are yelled at, or JCCs across America are terrorized with bomb threats, Israel is often cited as the basis for the animosity. And even in less physically menacing assaults, supposed "criticism" of Israel is often simply a front for a basic animosity towards Jews and our state.

In Egypt, when the persecution of the Children of Israel as an ethnic minority became too great to bear, we not only escaped, with the help of God and led by Moses: From the cauldron of our slavery, we emerged as more than just a family or clan or tribe: we became a People. The first reference to us as an "Am", a people, or as a "Goi", a nation, was in Exodus. Our unity, our self-confidence, our identity as a nation, was solidified as we escaped from suffering and walked across the desert into freedom. And there, at Mt. Sinai, God took that newly-minted national cohesion and forged a covenant which gave meaning to our character as a people-with-a-mission.

The legitimacy of Jewish peoplehood is at the center of our seder night commemoration of the miracle of our deliverance. We are all commanded to internalize that **we** were there; that we took part in this liberation and thus are grateful for the redemption – not only for our forefathers/mothers but for ourselves. When we conclude the seder singing "Next Year in Jerusalem" we are not only looking for a return to our ancestral homeland, nor merely for an "aliya" to the spiritual heights of heavenly Jerusalem, though both are hoped for. We sing as a member of a global community with Jerusalem at its heart, as a member of the people and nation of Israel.

With the constant attacks, in academic and political circles (left and right), in church groups and trade unions, by the media and cultural elites, on the legitimacy of Israel's founding and our connection to the land where we are the indigenous people, we can look to Pesach's commemoration of our creation as an ancient civilization as the basis of our response.

Pesach affords an opportunity to review Sharansky's now-famous "3-D" approach to recognizing anti-Israel rhetoric. Sharansky introduced the "3-D" lens over a decade ago, and it has been adopted since then by the EU and the US State Department, among other governments and organizations, as an essential element in understanding modern antisemitism. Using it, we can distinguish between reasonable debate over Israeli policies (of which there is much, in Israel itself of course as well), and hostility reflecting the new antisemitism. It is relatively

straightforward: The three “Ds” are Demonization, Double Standards, and the De-legitimization which on its own, or as a result of the other two, is a central motif of today’s anti-Israel campaign.

“De-legitimization” of Israel is the most profound element of Sharansky’s “3-Ds”; and so “Re-legitimizing” Israel and Zionism should be our prime pro-active counter measure.

Vilification of Israeli leaders or the IDF, depicting them as Nazis or beasts (reminiscent of medieval and Der Sturmer tropes), is demonizing and dehumanizing. Holding Israel to a different standard than that used for other countries – whether in defensive military operations, human rights issues, or domestic social or legislative developments – is discriminatory, unreasonable, and illogical. And suggesting that of the 70+ new nation-states created in the post-colonial period and following WWII, the founding of Israel – the re-establishment of a sovereign nation of the Jews on their ancestral homeland (the people of Israel returning to the land of Israel, or the Jews to Judea, as it were) – is somehow not justified, is de-legitimization.

These were the themes of traditional religious, cultural, and intellectual antisemitism – much of which has been eradicated in the Christian world, though it still permeates Muslim and Arab societies. Applied to the Jew-among-the-nations, these are understood now to be the key features of the ‘new antisemitism.’

None of these definitions were intended to stifle reasonable debate over issues, nor need they. But they provide a clear-cut, easy-to-remember mechanism to apply in any discussion, whether with presidents and prime ministers, college professors or news anchors, to ascertain whether critiques of Israeli policy are just that, or are subtle reflections of an underlying hostility to the nation-state of the Jewish people.

And the most fundamental core of those discussions should be what our seder and Pesach celebrations remind us: We Jews – we Israelites – are members of a people, Am Yisrael, who have returned to our ancestral homeland by right, redressing the historical injustice perpetrated in our expulsion from our land (and its renaming by the Romans in their genocidal attempt at ethnic cleansing and ‘statocide’). It matters little what our religious or political squabbles may be: our peoplehood, as understood in our sources and as expressed by all streams of our religious thought, is the original and underlying element of our identity.

This was understood by the world – and by all Jews – a century ago, not least as expressed in the League of Nation’s recognition of the validity of the Jews’ desire to re-create their “national homeland” in our land. As Greeks living around the world affiliate with Greece, and Chinese who’ve never visited China viscerally understand their connection with the land of their ancestors, Jews sitting around our seder table, at whatever level of observance, can and must re-assert our bond with our ancient and modern homeland.

We need a psychological “Exodus” today, to renew our appreciation of our national identity. We became a nation as we escaped Egyptian bondage and walked through the desert toward our promised land. The People of Israel, escaping and combating persecution in every age including ours, have a tie to our Land of Israel, expressed in our modern miracle of our State of Israel. And re-asserting the legitimacy of that state’s founding and very existence is the first step in combating the demonization, discrimination and de-legitimization which is the new antisemitism.

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## Mike Wagenheim

### What to Tell the Clueless Seder Guests

I wasn't Jewishly involved until I made aliyah a year-and-a-half ago. Last year's seder was the first I had attended since my youth (and it happened to come on the first night of my honeymoon, but that's a story for another time).

Here are seven things I wish someone would have reminded me of before that first seder:

1. The afikomen is for kids. I'm not a kid anymore. It's a bitter pill to swallow.
2. Speaking of bitter, not every piece of food is meant to be downed with delight.
3. Thinking about the ten plagues doesn't do much for one's appetite. Pretty graphic stuff!
4. No one is going to tell you to sit up straight. Relax!
5. L'shanah haba'ah b'Yerushalayim ("Next year in Jerusalem") takes on a much different context when the eternal capital is just a short drive away!
6. When you ask who's sitting in what looks like an empty chair, and you're told, "Elijah," don't ask if he's related to your wife's friend. (He's probably not.)
7. You don't know you've had too much matzah until it's too late.

Pesach Sameach!

**Mike had never been to Israel. He knew no one there. Hadn't been to shul since his Bar Mitzvah. But, he felt a pull "home." So, he left a successful sportscasting career, packed four suitcases and changed his life. Fifteen months later, he's married to an Israeli and is now a father, Torah student and international TV news reporter. Mike is proof that with enough faith, anything is possible. For more information on Mike Wagenheim, see:**

[www.JewishSpeakersBureau.com/speakers/mike-wagenheim](http://www.JewishSpeakersBureau.com/speakers/mike-wagenheim)





## Laura Ben-David

### Reclaiming the Lost Jews

Each year on Passover Jewish family and friends gather around the table for the longest meal of the year. Otherwise known as the seder, the specific order of unusual foods and customs are accompanied by songs, stories and family traditions, all as part of the commemoration of the Exodus of our ancestors from Egypt, and our becoming a nation. We conclude with the prayer, 'Next year in Jerusalem.'

Most of us take this important part of our religion and culture for granted. After all, we have grown up with these traditions all our lives.

But there are many people throughout the globe for whom celebrating Passover is nearly as meaningful as it was for those who experienced the Exodus firsthand. For the many members of the various lost and hidden Jewish communities throughout the world, who have been part of the recent phenomenon to explore their heritage and return to their roots, there are few holidays as meaningful as Passover.

It is hard for us to imagine. But try, for a moment, to picture you are a family in Majorca, Spain. Your grandmother has always lit candles on Friday night in the basement. Your family has always had a strange aversion to pork, and other unusual customs. Out of growing curiosity, you research your family history and discover that your family are "Marranos" or Bnei Anousim - descendants of those who were forcefully converted during the Spanish Inquisition centuries ago. You and your family have embraced your newly discovered Jewish heritage and you are about to celebrate the seder - for the very first time. When you commemorate the story of the ancient Hebrews becoming a nation you will feel it profoundly moving because you have just become a part of it yourself.

Or pretend you are a young Bnei Menashe teen in India. You have been waiting since you were a young child for the chance to make aliyah and join your cousins and friends in Israel and finally live your lives as complete Jews. Finally, at long last, it is your turn to go. Your aliyah will bring you to Israel mere weeks before Passover. You will be truly experiencing 'the Exodus' like few ever have.

Or maybe you are a part of the ancient Kaifeng Jewish community. You know who you are because your parents have told you this for as long as you can remember. Due to dilution of knowledge over the years, your understanding of religious practice is limited. Because of government policy, there can be no communal seder this year. You are able to get Jewish resources in Chinese, and together with your family you make the best seder you can.

Or imagine you are a young Polish woman. You grew up a deeply religious Catholic. One day, while visiting your ailing grandmother, she brought you close to her to whisper her deepest secret to you so that it should not die with her. She holds your hand, looks you in the eye, and asks you to recall some of your more unusual family traditions like spinning little tops and the donuts you ate on Christmas, and the special deep cleaning that your family performed every spring. Puzzled at all the intrigue you wait for your grandmother to explain. She tells you that she lost her whole family when she was a young teen. You know this already, of course, but you never knew any details. She explains that they didn't die, rather they were all murdered. They were killed in the concentration camps. Because they were Jewish. She is Jewish. You are Jewish.

The shock is unbearable. You try to absorb the full ramifications of what she has told you. It takes weeks. You look for answers. You become more curious. You spend more time learning about your newfound heritage. Pass-over is coming. For the first time you do the deep spring cleaning with true meaning. You are looking forward to the seder as an ultimate expression of you coming into your own – as a Jew.

Wherever you may be in reality, as you go through your own seder, while you make the mental and spiritual transition from slaves to a free nation, from tribes to a united people, think about the many lost and hidden Jews throughout the world and the sacrifice they must make to fulfill what comes natural for so many. At your seder when you conclude with 'Leshana Haba'ah b'Yerushalayim' – 'Next year in Jerusalem' – put in some extra thoughts for the lost and hidden Jews throughout the world.

Next year may we ALL be in Jerusalem.

**Laura Ben-David found her passion working as Director of Marketing & New Media at Shavei Israel. From her 1st day, which found her photographing a group of Jews known as Bnei Menashe, Laura has chronicled their stories and that of other exotic 'lost' and 'hidden' Jews. Originally from NY, she made aliyah from Florida in 2002. Laura is the author of *Moving Up - An Aliyah Journal*, as well as numerous published articles. For more information on Laura Ben-David, see:**

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## Michael Feuer

### In Every Generation

In every generation a person is obligated to regard himself as if he had come out of Egypt, as it is said: “You shall tell your child on that day, it is because of this that the L-rd did for me when I left Egypt.”

Tonight we recount what once was, and derive meaning from its narrative. One might think that seder night is the night of Jewish history, and that Rabban Gamliel is asking us to connect to the events of the past. But this cannot be the case – because there is no word for history in the Hebrew language! The study of the past as something which once happened, and never will be again, is foreign to the Jewish people. Our relationship to the past is defined by the mishna’s call to see ourselves as having come out of Egypt; we are active participants in the past.

Seder night is not about recounting history, it is about telling a story. This is why the text which guides us is called the haggadah, the telling. But how do I tell a story of the past which incorporates my present self? How can we, today, see ourselves as if we had come out of Egypt? The answer lies in understanding memory. The Torah, and the entire cycle of Jewish life, revolve around memory. We remember the six days of creation, we remember the Exodus and Sinai, we remember Amalek. But how can I remember something which never happened to me?

The Hebrew word ‘zachor’ is not ‘remember’ in the sense of the opposite of forgetting. Otherwise we could not be commanded to remember events which we never experienced. Rather, it is an act of incorporating the past into our present selves. When we recall what was, we are literally ‘re-mem-bering’ events. Even if the events in question lie beyond our personal experience.

Why is it so important that every generation not only tell the story of the Exodus, but remember it as their own? It is because of the relationship between memory and identity. Memory may be about the past, but it is located in the present. No one remembers everything, and often two people who share the same experience remember it in vastly different ways. This is because memory is not a passive accessing of information about the past. It is an active construction of a narrative about the past, which grounds our present identity. If I ask you to tell me about your past, I will gain a tremendous insight into your present identity through what you say — and what you do not.

Does this dynamic of ‘the past through the lens of the present’ mean that our story of the past is necessarily a fiction? Pause now and think about a life event from at least five years ago, something which was so significant that when it happened you thought to yourself ‘after this, nothing will be the same.’ Now ask yourself - do you understand that event now the same way as you did when it happened?

Experience is grounded in the past, but understanding exists in the present. The past as an objective reality may fade, but in memory it offers insights which are ever new. Though the actual event of the Exodus may be so far in the past that I have no personal experience to which I can refer, I can re-member it. I can attach myself to what was by understanding it in light of what is, of who I am now. I can see myself coming out of Egypt, out of the confining literalism of historicity, into the broad spaces of memory.

But Rabban Gamliel is not satisfied with telling us to incorporate a story of the past into our present identity. He says that we have to tell it to our children. This is the real secret of memory, and the reason for the absence of history in the Hebrew language – our story is about the future, not the past.

The substance of memory is about the past, and its process is rooted in the present. But anyone who has engaged in a mindfulness practice knows how difficult it is to be present to the present. Take a moment now to look at the faces of those around you. Be present to their presence. Now ask yourself – how does my hope of what will be for those around me define how I tell the story tonight?

Identity emerges from the tension between the memory of what was and aspiration for what will be. Tonight we are not telling a story about what was, we are weaving our present selves into an ongoing narrative. And we must do it in a manner which inspires our children to see themselves as the protagonists in this eternal struggle for freedom. The goal of seder night, and of memory in general, is to tell a story of the past that can shape a present identity which is motivated to build the future of which we dream.

**As an author, Rav Mike taps into the holiness of the imagination in order to craft content which awakens a new relationship to the Divine. As a teacher, he strives to tell a story of our past in a way that can shape a present identity empowered to build the future of which we dream. As a speaker he combines these passions with a style that engages the audience in an exciting exploration. For more information on Michael Feuer, see:**

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## Rabbi Jonathan Porath

### Lifeshaping Experiences And Lessons On The Essential People In Our Own Lives Today

This past month my wife's father, my father-in-law of 42 years, passed away at age 91. He lived a very full and Jewish life, and left this world a better place. He was honored during his lifetime (including an Honorary Doctorate from his alma mater, Yeshiva University), and impacted the Jewish lives of literally thousands of students and colleagues. He never expected to have such an influence and, in fact, came from very modest circumstances.

When he was seven, his own father passed away. Little Victor had to become a 'man' at a much younger age than most. He vividly recalled his mother sending him, as a second grader, accompanied by his 4-year-old brother, to their small neighborhood shul in the Bronx, to say Kaddish for their father. The two little boys were 'adopted' by the older men as they recited the words "Yiskadal Veyiskadash" every morning and evening. That undoubtedly left him with a profound understanding that he would have to become an adult at a far younger age than most.

One particular experience from his youth shaped his life beyond all others. As he entered high school, America entered World War II. Victor felt in his deepest heart that this was a Jewish war; this was his war. At age 17 he was too young for the draft, and was technically exempt from military service with a 4-D (divinity student) exemption from the army (he had just enrolled in Yeshiva University as a freshman).

But no matter; he asked his mother for permission to volunteer, gave up his 'safe spot' in the yeshiva, and joined the US Army. He arrived in France towards the end of 1944, already having made his mark on the other Jewish boys around. Coming from a strong Jewish background, in addition to his military role as a combat interrogator (he spoke English, Hebrew, Yiddish, German, French and Hungarian), he also served as Chaplain's Assistant in his spare time, helping to organize religious services, being in contact with the non-Jewish chaplain in his unit (there weren't enough Jews for their own rabbi), and writing letters of consolation to the families of Jewish soldiers who were killed in action.

The winter of 1944 was particularly brutal and almost led to military catastrophe: In a last-ditch effort to win the war, the Germans attacked in the Ardennes region of Belgium at the end of December, in the famous Battle of the Bulge. After desperate fighting, the Allies got the upper hand, and began to move towards the German heartland. Victor, now battle tested at age 19, was attached to General George Patton's Third Army spearheading the attack. After some very tough fighting and taking many casualties, as the spring of 1945 began, they breached the enemy lines and started to move into Germany.

Pesach was very much on Victor's mind. Seder was coming up Wednesday evening, March 28. A week before, the non-Jewish army chaplain came to Victor with good news: "I just received a big package for you. Two hundred pounds of matzah arrived from England for the holiday! We'll see what we can do to arrange a seder service for Wednesday night."

But the week before Pesach they were constantly on the move. On the morning of the 28<sup>th</sup> they reached the western German town of Riementhal, only to be told that the Division had to keep on the move behind the withdrawing Germans. The next day, they were still on the roads. The chaplain reported that a break was scheduled for the following day, Friday, and that he had received approval for the Jewish soldiers to conduct a seder that Friday morning. He asked if it was too late to hold the seder. Victor assured him that, under the wartime conditions, it was fine.

And so they gathered that Pesach of 1945, outdoors in a German field. There were no tables or chairs. Some 50 GIs sat in a double circle around my then 19-year-old future father-in-law. There was no seder plate, nor any of the familiar seder symbols. The menu was a generous one-course-meal: The two hundred pounds of British matzah.

Wisely, Victor had brought a haggada with him from the US — the only one they had. As he began to read in Hebrew, translate, and sing many of the familiar tunes, the other boys sat around him, undoubtedly recalling their own previous seders with their families at home, not knowing what their fate would be in the fighting to come.

As the makeshift seder continued, there was a bit of a commotion as a bottle of local wine somehow appeared; although lacking rabbinic certification, it certainly added to the holiday feeling!

Looking back years later, my father-in-law remarked that the original seder was observed on the eve of the exodus of the Jews from Egypt and just before their great victory over Pharaoh and his armies. “In 1945, our seder took place in a later-day ‘Egypt’. We were a group of young Jewish men who came from another ‘Promised Land’—America. We were pursuing the armies of the latest, most malevolent ‘Pharaoh.’”

He concluded, rather sadly: “As Americans, we won, but as Jews, we could celebrate no victory, even though the evil Pharaoh perished in his Berlin bunker. In that German field, our modern-day Passover came too late.” (Six-million Jews had perished.)

Those war-time experiences never left him. When he passed away 72 years after that most memorable wartime seder, the only picture of himself hanging on the wall of his room was of a young, smiling, 17-year soldier, with his entire life ahead of him.

May his memory be for a blessing.

Dedicated to Victor B. Geller z'l, of blessed memory.

**Rabbi Porath comes from an old Jerusalem family; he served as a Hillel and congregational rabbi in the States before making aliyah in 1984. A longtime Wexner teacher, he specializes in conveying Jewish passion and in engaging his audiences to explore and deepen their Jewishness. He speaks from the heart and inspires; he comes by it naturally: He is the 18th generation of rabbis in his family. For more information on Rabbi Jonathan Porath, see:**

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## Linda Gradstein

### Women In The Forefront of Peace Movements

Two women, the famous midwives Shifra and Puah, are among the heroes of the Pass-over story. Despite intense pressure from Pharaoh, they refused his decree to kill the Hebrew babies. When Egyptian officials came to them with complaints, they lied, saying that the babies were born so quickly that it was all over by the time they got there.

These women had a deeply ingrained antipathy to violence. As midwives whose job was to help bring life into the world, they were simply unable to kill babies, even though refusing Pharaoh's decree could lead to their own deaths.

Today, thousands of years later, it is women who are in the forefront of Israeli and Palestinian peace movements.

A new movement called Women Wage Peace, attracted thousands of Israeli and Palestinian women to a joint prayer at Kasr al-Yahud, a site on the Jordan River that is holy to Judaism, Christianity and Islam. Later in Jerusalem, thousands of women gathered outside Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's house for a political rally that included singing and dancing.

As a journalist covering the Israeli-Palestinian conflict for 30 years, I have interviewed thousands of Israelis and Palestinians, often at vulnerable moments in their lives. I continue to find it a moving and humbling experience.

I find that I often have an immediate connection with women. As a Western woman, I am able to interview men throughout the region: The usual rules that apply to women in conservative areas of the Middle East do not apply to me. But unlike my male colleagues, I can also slip into the kitchen afterwards, and chat with the women.

I remember a rainy afternoon in the Gaza Strip several years ago. I had come to a home in the Beach Refugee camp to interview one of the refugee camp's leaders. His wife, Fatima, served us tea with mint, and retired to the kitchen. After the interview, I went to find her to say goodbye.

The house, made of concrete was cold. The living room, where we had been sitting, was also the bedroom, and mattresses were piled up in the corner. The kitchen was basic – just a hotplate and a refrigerator. Sitting in the corner was Amal, a young girl, about eight or nine, doing her homework.

Amal's dark eyes sparkled when she smiled. She spoke a few words of English and was happy to try them out with me. Fatima told me that her daughter was at the top of her class in school, and that she wants to be a doctor. But, Fatima said, the education level in Gaza is very low, with 40 children per class, often sharing textbooks. Many schools in the refugee camps also have two shifts because of severe overcrowding.

There are almost no after-school activities in Gaza. Boys roam the streets, kicking a soccer ball while girls are expected to go home and take care of their younger siblings. Many of the youth in Gaza have never been outside the densely-populated Strip.

I thought of my own daughter, who at eight also wanted to be a doctor. As soon as my daughter expressed interest, we enrolled her in special after-school science classes, ordered a half-dozen children's books on medicine, and bought three games dealing with anatomy.

If she chooses, my daughter can study anywhere in the world. Amal has little chance of leaving Gaza, unless she

needs medical treatment in Israel. Her family does not have enough money for basic living expenses, let alone books and games to encourage Amal's interest.

It is not only the Palestinians who are suffering from the current situation. Tamir Pardo, a former head of the Mossad, this week said that the Israeli occupation and the conflict with the Palestinians are the only existential threat to Israel right now — not Iran, not Hezbollah, and not Syria.

Women Wage Peace calls on the Israeli and Palestinian leaders to restart peace negotiations immediately. There are currently seven million Jews, and five million Palestinians, living in the area between the Mediterranean and the Jordan River. Neither side is going to disappear. A majority of Israelis and Palestinians still believe that a two-state solution, meaning an independent Palestinian state in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, is the best solution. They worry that if the current situation continues, the only solution will be a “one-state” solution, meaning a bi-national state in the entire area, that would not have a Jewish character.

Despite all of the negativity, I do not believe it is too late for an Israeli-Palestinian peace deal. There are dozens of creative solutions for all of the outstanding issues. What's needed is leadership on both sides, perhaps pushed by the millions of women, to offer to resume peace negotiations.

**Linda Gradstein is an award-winning journalist who spent 20 years as the Jerusalem correspondent for NPR. She is currently the Mideast Bureau Chief of The Media Line, an American news agency specializing in coverage of the Middle East. She speaks Hebrew and Arabic fluently and her most important productions are her four children, age 13-20. For more information on Linda Gradstein, see:**

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## Yiscah Smith

### From Enslavement to Freedom

*The difference between a slave and a free person is not just one of social standing. It is possible to find an educated slave whose spirit is full of freedom, and conversely, a free person whose spirit is servile.*

*What is characteristic of freedom is the exalted spirit whereby a person or a people is able to be faithful to its inner essence, to the image of God in its midst. This fidelity allows one to feel that one's life is purposeful and worthwhile.*

*The spirit of servility is quite the opposite. The content of one's life does not connect to (or illuminate) one's soul but rather to the conception of beauty and good of the "other" who rules over one, whether that rule be official or moral. What dominates one's life is that which the "other" who rules over one (again whether in law or by convention) finds to be beautiful and good.*

—Rav Abraham Yitzchak HaCohen Kook, Haggadah shel Pesach im Perushei Olat Ra'ayah, Volume 2, pp. 244-245

This teaching from Rav Kook provided me with the framework to understand my own spiritual journey from moving out of a life characterized by inauthentic living to a life committed to authentic living. As with all of us, I possessed (and still do) my inner demons.

I was born with gender identity dysphoria, and as a baby boomer, I entered the world at a time where the words transgender, gender identity dysphoria and gender transition were not yet commonplace. I lived most of my life prior to the existence of the personal computer and accessibility to virtual online communities. For me, achieving a life of authenticity felt impossible. As Rav Kook so poignantly articulates, the content of my life for many years did not connect to my soul, but "rather to the conception of beauty and good of the 'other' who ruled" over me. The "other" in this case was the culture I was brought up in.

Indeed the "spirit of servility" defined much of my life. I was paralyzed by fear, shame and low self-esteem for most of my life. I felt unable to honor my inner truth about my own essential identity. Oh, how I yearned to somehow catapult past my personal demons, the forces within me constantly attempting to strangle, suffocate and wring the life out of me. The demon of gender identity dysphoria that plagued me until I was 50 years old attempted to sabotage and destroy my passionate desire to live a spiritual life within the Jewish tradition that clearly conflicted with it.

Finding a place within myself and for myself, within traditional Jewish community, seemed painfully difficult, if not impossible. My soul urged me to live a spiritual life in the Jewish tradition, but I struggled daily to be honest with myself, with God and with others. I dreamt what it would be like to be free — imagining what it would be like to wake up one morning, and live one entire day in personal testimony to my own inner unique truth. But I compromised my inner integrity in order to be accepted, to be respected, to be included and to be counted as a member in the club — and to be loved.

Outwardly, I succeeded, but inwardly I knew that I failed miserably in my attempt to experience my soul, the source of self-worth, by instead living other people's expectations of me, where I seldom expressed my own essential being and core. Oh, how I yearned to be loved and respected for who I truly was, and not for what I appeared to be.

And then the day came that I knew I could no longer continue this charade of a life. On my 50th birthday I woke up to the loneliest, most disconnected and painful day of my life. I had no more energy to continue breathing air into someone else's body while I myself was becoming lifeless. I wondered how I could go on one more day, living a life that belonged to someone else, a life that was tragically not my own.

That day I made the monumental decision to begin my gender transition journey. Yet making this decision was not so difficult. It had to be made. It saved my life! In a flash my dark lonely life became illuminated with the awareness that the time had arrived to begin living the truth.

**Now** I simply cried out, "God, please help me." And He did.

To me, authentic living meant no longer living in fear, with the shame and guilt that accompanied my life of infidelity to myself, and enslavement to others' expectations of how I should live my life.

My journey became as much a spiritual and healing journey as it was a journey of gender transition. I began to feel quiet, harmony and gratitude. More importantly though, I began to feel "a part of the world" rather than "apart from the world." Authentic living granted me the freedom to honor my "exalted spirit" whereby I became "faithful to my inner essence, to the image of God in my midst." This fidelity allows me to "feel that my life has a purpose and is worthwhile".

**Yiscah is a Jewish educator & author who addresses the spiritual dimension of authentic living. She employs her own story of the joys and struggles with her own spirituality, gender identity and commitment to authentic living. As one who transitioned from a Chabad man to an observant woman, she presents topics in an accessible and vivid style, from both a personal and a text-based perspective. For more information on Yiscah Smith, see:**

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## Rabbi Dr. David Frankel

### From the Plague of Fish to the Plague of Blood

Everyone knows that the first of the ten plagues sent to afflict the Egyptians was the plague of blood. The story in Exodus 7:4 — 24 expresses this clearly, as do the references to the plague in Psalms 78:44 and 105:29. And yet, there is some subtle but convincing evidence that suggests that in the earliest form of the story, the water of the Nile did not turn to blood. This is a secondary motif that was added to the story at a relatively early period in the development of the biblical text. We may refer to this plague, in its original form, as the plague of fish, rather than the plague of blood.

According to the story in Exodus 7, Moses was commanded to make the following statement to Pharaoh at the Nile,

*Thus says the Lord, 'With this you will know that I am the Lord; behold I will smite the water in the Nile with the staff that is in my hand, and it will turn to blood, and the fish in the Nile will die, and the Nile will stink, and the Egyptians will be unable to drink water from the Nile' (verses 17 — 18)*

The sequence of events in these verses (and in the carrying out of the command in verses 20b — 21a) is as follows:

1. Moses strikes the Nile
2. the water turns to blood
3. the fish die
4. the Nile stinks
5. the Egyptians can't drink water from the Nile.

At first glance, this sequence is perfectly logical. The blood causes the fish to suffocate and die, and this causes the Nile to stink. Nonetheless, there are certain oddities. First of all, element 5 seems out of place. The reason that the Egyptians cannot drink from the Nile is because the water has turned to blood. Thus, one would have expected element 5 to appear directly after element 2. What is more, the entire emphasis on the dead fish that made the Nile exude a nasty stench seems rather trivial and beside the point. True, nasty smells are an unpleasant nuisance. But this hardship pales in significance compared with the real difficulty facing the Egyptians – the Egyptians have no water supply! Why then bother emphasizing the stench?

These difficulties point to the possibility that element 5 is nonetheless precisely in the right place. The reason that the Egyptians could not drink is not because the water turned to blood. This element was not originally written in the text. Rather, when Moses struck the Nile the fish of the Nile died. This then caused a terrible stench which made it difficult or impossible to enter the close vicinity of the Nile. It also contaminated the water. This is why the Egyptians couldn't drink from the Nile! Note that verse 18 states that the Egyptians could not drink water from the Nile. The implication is that the Nile was full of water, but that this water could not be accessed or imbibed. This is also implied by the formulation of verse 24: "All the Egyptians dug round about the Nile for

water to drink, for they could not drink of the water of the Nile.” Again, the implication is that the Nile was full of water, not blood. The problem was that the Egyptians could not drink it.

Accordingly, verses 17 — 18, in their original form simply read:

*Thus says the Lord, ‘With this you will know that I am the Lord; behold I will smite the water in the Nile with the staff that is in my hand, and the fish in the Nile will die, and the Nile will stink (or: become spoiled or contaminated), and the Egyptians will be unable to drink water from the Nile.’*

The fish did not die from suffocation. They died because Moses struck the Nile with his staff.

Following this reconstruction of the text, the first three plagues fit together much better. The plague of “blood” does not go well with “frogs” and “lice.” Much more coherent is the new unit that emerges: “fish,” “frogs,” and “lice.”

Of course, this analysis raises the question: Why would a later scribe convert the plague of fish to the new plague of blood? The answer to this question will have to wait for next year’s seder.

**Rabbi Dr. David Frankel did his doctorate at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. His publications include *The Murmuring Stories of the Priestly School, The Land of Canaan and the Destiny of Israel*, and many scholarly articles. He teaches Hebrew Bible to Israeli M.A. and Rabbinical students at the Schechter Institute in Jerusalem, where he lives with his wife and five children. For more information, see:**

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## Sharon Weiss-Greenberg

### Can Women Lean In? Should We?

According to the National Jewish Population Survey, the most celebrated Jewish holiday in America is not Chanukah, but Passover. While many might assume that the winter holiday season would prompt more Jews to pull out their menorahs, somehow matzah beats sufganiyot for the most highly consumed Jewish food.

The question is why. Why is eating bitter, salty, dry cardboard-like food so popular? No matter one's observance level, the preparation required for a Passover seder is quite onerous. What is so compelling about Passover?

Passover is the holiday when we all engage in experiential education. When we do not just tell a story, we bring props that touch all of our senses. We smell the strong odor of charoset. We taste the bitter tears of our ancestors. We listen to each other's insights. We feel the texture of the matzah and the charoset. We see the seder plate which combines the various elements of the evening. We tell the story to ourselves and to the next generation.

All of the behaviors that we perform are intentional and meant to be meaningful. But I would like to focus on one of the many smaller behaviors that are performed during the seder.

We are supposed to lean while drinking our glasses of wine that have been poured by someone else. We do this because it represents freedom, the universal value that is believed to be the reason for the large percentage of the population observing Passover.

As we relay to our children at the seder, the Jewish people suffered as slaves under Egyptian rule for 210 years. The years were so taxing and cruel, that God determined not to allow us to continue to be enslaved for the projected 400 years. The seder is meant for us to channel their experiences of depravity followed by elated freedom. When one is not on guard and feeling as if they are truly empowered and in control, their sitting position is that of leaning.

One might take it for granted that the celebration of leaning applies to all Jews, i.e. men, women, and children. But as we see in Pesachim 108a, it is not so simple.

אשה אצל בעלה לא בעיא הסיבה,  
ואם אשה חשובה היא צריכה הסיבה

“A woman sitting with her husband is not required to lean,  
but if she is an important woman, she is required to lean.”

This halakha continues as is through the Shulchan Aruch. It seems that the freedom of Jewish women, for most Jewish women, is subjective. Women are not forbidden from leaning, but they are not required to as men are. While most hold that all women lean in today's world, I would like to explore why one might question that freedom, and what constitutes a woman who is chashuva, important. Ravyah holds that in today's world, sitting is yesterday's leaning, and that you can fulfill your leaning obligation through sitting. According to Rabbi Shlomo Auerbach, standing is unacceptable and women are not fulfilling their obligation if they are standing and not sitting.

Although today's norm includes women sitting and leaning, clearly the distinction between ordinary women and women of importance is preserved for a millenia of rabbinic literature. Rabbenu Mano'ach asserts that the important woman is referencing the single woman, who is able to be independent. Most believe she is distinguished for one of two reasons, that of scholarship or financial means. While a woman could have both, either could warrant a woman as chashuva, as important. How might a woman have been a scholar during the times of the Talmud? Most likely, these women were wives or daughters of prominent rabbis and they were able to learn simply by growing up in a house of rich conversations and texts. The other reason why one might be considered important is having financial independence. Some would qualify a woman as important if she has servants and other help serving her.

Whatever the qualifier for marking a woman as important, I find the first part of the talmudic excerpt, which allows the woman to make her own decision, compelling. When it comes to the movement of Orthodox feminism and expanding the role of women in ritual, it is about providing choices. That is true freedom.

As an Orthodox feminist, on the one hand we are subject to and embrace ol malchut shamayim, our acceptance of the Divine kingship. On the other hand, just as men have certain tools to be uplifted spiritually and serve God, we want to have possibilities beyond the kitchen. I find it interesting that for most women in talmudic times, they could determine whether or not they felt free. Whether or not they had agency. Whether or not they were empowered. We had the option to lean in or perhaps make a statement by standing or sitting up straight.

While I used to be disturbed that women were not equally obligated to lean, I am now thinking about what true freedom means and how this particular text provides choice. I still regularly struggle about my role in Orthodox Judaism, but I will be leaning come this year's seder. For that I am grateful.

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## **Lionel Friedfeld and Philippe Metoudi**

### **Israel and China: From Silk Road To Innovation Highway**

“If you want to know where you are going, you must know where you have come from.” Pronounced every year by

Jewish people all over the world during the festival of Passover, which commemorates the liberation of the Jews from slavery in ancient Egypt, this statement explains the importance of history as a compass to understanding the present and the future. This compass also guides the profound relationship that binds Israel with the countries of Asia.

Israel is often mistakenly believed to be located in the Middle East. In fact it is situated geographically in the Asian continent – precisely in Western Asia on the southeastern shore of the Mediterranean Sea. A core part of Asia with a strategic location, it has long enjoyed a preferential relationship with Asian countries. As the Jewish people were forced into exile (with the fall of the Kingdom of Israel and Judah, and following the destruction of the temples of Jerusalem in 586 BCE by Babylonian King Nebuchadnezzar and in 70 CE by Roman Emperor Titus), they emigrated mainly to Babylon (Mesopotamia, present-day Iraq) but also to the Mediterranean basin, Central Asia and the countries of the Indus Valley. There, they continued their activities as traders, buying and selling merchandise between countries.

The creation of the Silk Road during China’s Han Dynasty (206 BCE-220 CE) had a tremendous impact on international trade and communication between eastern and western countries. During this golden age, various merchandise, including silk, spices, jewelry, and perfumes, was exchanged on the Silk Road. Having begun to settle alongside this mercantile set of roads, Jewish traders were at the forefront of such activity. Later, the expansion of the European Colonial Empire from the sixteenth to the twentieth century with Spain (in the Philippines), Portugal (in Japan, Indian ports and Macau), the Netherlands (in Indonesia), Great Britain (in India, Hong Kong–China, Singapore and Burma) and France (in Indochina), led to the rapid growth of international trade. This expansive colonization, more than any other factor, accelerated the dispersion of Jewish communities throughout Asia.

The growing Jewish population across Asia integrated well with its local hosts, establishing large, successful business groups and forming a key component of local cultural and political life. The Kadoorie family of Hong Kong, for example, came originally from Baghdad. They established themselves in India in the mid-eighteenth century, and later in Hong Kong. The Peninsula Hotels Group and CLP Group they founded remain among Asia’s largest luxury hotel and electric power generation conglomerates. Individual members of the community, such as David Marshall, who in 1955 became Singapore’s first Chief Minister, have made their mark in the political sphere. The Jewish population has also made significant contributions to Asia’s infrastructure development through philanthropic charities. The Sassoon family of India, also of Iraqi descent, notably financed two of Bombay’s historical landmarks, the Sassoon Docks, built in 1875, and the David Sassoon Library, also constructed in the mid-1800s.

With the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948, the rich common history of the Jewish and indigenous populations in Asia laid the foundation for friendship and cooperation between Israel and many of its fellow

Asian countries. The relationship has evolved from the strong ties of the past, symbolized by the Silk Road, to the current strategic partnerships in technology, which we call the Innovation Highway.

### **Jewish Population of Kaifeng... already celebrating Passover:**

Matteo Ricci (1552-1610), an Italian Jesuit priest based in Beijing, was the first to reveal to Europeans the presence of a settled Jewish population in China, when he first encountered a Kaifeng Jew. The city of Kaifeng, located in mid-eastern China, now part of Henan Province, was home to one of the earliest and largest Jewish populations in the country. Official records attest to a Jewish presence as early as the Tang Dynasty (618-907 CE), and their numbers grew under the Song (960 CE-1127 CE) and Ming (1368-1644 CE) dynasties.

As the capital of the Northern Song Dynasty, Kaifeng was at that time considered a major trade center along the Silk Road. In the seventh century, the city was connected to the Grand Canal, a vast waterway which formed the backbone of China's internal communications and transport system, which enabled trade and commerce to flourish further. The Jewish population prospered and built a synagogue in 1163. Records of the community were found on three stone slabs, or steles, dated 1489, 1512 and 1663. The inscription on these steles revealed several important facts, including that the Jewish population came to China from India during the Han Dynasty; that seventy Jewish families were given Chinese surnames; that the Jews commemorated the building and rebuilding of the Kaifeng synagogue; that they had an audience with a Song Dynasty Emperor; and that Jewish soldiers in the Chinese Army were said to be "boundlessly loyal to the country".

Kaifeng reached its economic and political golden age during the eleventh century. The city then entered a decline, brought on by severe floods, due to its proximity to the Yellow River. The population declined further, when the Jin-Song wars led Emperor Gaozong to flee south and establish a new capital in the eastern city of Hangzhou. Much of the loyal Kaifeng Jewish community followed the Emperor south.

The Jews who remained in Kaifeng managed to survive and maintain some of their Jewish traditions over the centuries, despite their isolation from other Jewish communities. Priests, scholars, businessmen, and tourists visited what remained of the Kaifeng Jewish community during the eighteenth, nineteenth and twentieth century. With the destruction of the last Kaifeng synagogue in 1860 from floods and fire, however, the community disappeared, leaving only a handful of remaining Kaifeng Jews as living witnesses to its rich history.

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## Eetta Prince-Gibson

### Elijah in Lesvos

Each year at Pesach, we obligate ourselves to remember our people's escape from slavery to freedom, from oppression to autonomy. As we read the hagaddah, we commit ourselves to bring this obligation forward, to our own time. As we retell the ancient story about the Israelites' passion for justice and liberty, we are individually and collectively commanded to imagine that each of personally came out of Egypt.

Our people were brought to Sinai, where we accepted the covenant and were commanded to fulfill a sacred mission – to remember the stranger, the poor, and the orphan. And I, a Jewish journalist preparing for an assignment to write about Syrian refugees in Greece, realized that I must accept the commandment to remember other peoples as they flee war, brutality, genocide, hatred, and famine, those who have no God to split the deep, frigid waters of the ocean and no Moses to lead the way to safety.

Throughout the seder, we will drink four cups of wine, corresponding to the four expressions of redemption that God used as we were brought out from Egypt and born as a nation (Exodus 6:6-8).

The first cup refers to God's promise to "take us out." This is a reminder of the physical redemption from harsh labor. As we drink the second cup, we hear God's assurance that he will "save us" from slavery. The third cup represents our "redemption" from the sea and from the fear of recapture, so that we can surge forward. The fourth cup refers to God's promise to "take us as a nation" and to bring us to Sinai.

There is a fifth cup, too. This cup honors God's promise to bring us "to the land which I promised to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, and I will give it to you as an inheritance" and the later promise to bring us to "this place, this land, a land flowing with milk and honey," (Deuteronomy 26:9)

We have the land, the State of Israel, but we are not yet at "this place." We have the physicality of the land, but we are not yet in the place of justice, compassion, kindness and inclusivity. We have sovereignty, but our place does not welcome the poor, provide work for the migrant, or shelter the refugee.

We must not drink from this cup.

Instead, we symbolically leave the cup full but untouched, waiting for Elijah, the fiery, angry prophet who fought for the oppressed and interceded for the powerless, and who will bring the Messiah.

We open the door for Elijah to come in. As a child, I loved this part of the seder; I imagined that Elijah would bring good, kind people to be our guests at our table. As we recited the 'shfoch hamatcha', "Pour out your wrath on the nations that did not know you," I would pretend that Elijah was bringing my grandmother, for whom I am named, and my grandfather, uncles and aunts whom I never knew, because they were murdered in the Holocaust. And they would smile at me and ease the loss, and our family would be whole again.

But now, as I prepare for my assignment in Greece, I feel the cold night wind that wisps in as we open the door. Elijah, who never feared speaking truth to power, will be angry, accusing us as he accused King Ahab: "Have you murdered and taken possession?" he will thunder.

Have we, the satiated peoples of the West, grown so wealthy that we have forgotten that our wealth has come at the expense of global climate change that has displaced millions? Have we become so used to low-cost brands that we don't care about the enslaved workers who make our clothes? Are we so focused on our personal relationships that we pay no attention to sex trafficking? Do we cross the seas in ocean liners and airplanes, so comfortable that we no longer think of the refugees from Syria and other war-torn impoverished countries who crowd onto unseaworthy boats, crossing dangerous waters in a desperate attempt to reach safety and freedom?

We begin the seder recitation with Ha Lachma Anya – an invitation to all who are hungry to come to eat, to all who suffer to find comfort. It is a reminder that no matter how full, there should always be room at our table because a table, as my mother-in-law has taught me, is as small or as big as our heart.

And so, as Elijah leaves us, may we find room in our hearts and at our tables to welcome the refugees throughout the world who are freeing oppression today, just as we did so many generations ago.

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## Yisrael Campbell

### Honey, We Gotta Go

It wasn't until I had kids that I realized that 40 years in the desert was as fast as they could go.

The knock came at about 3 am. At first I thought it was a particularly wild throw from our maniacal newspaper deliveryman - who, the more you complained about how much noise he made delivering the paper, the more noise he made.

It was Howard Saperstein knocking on our door. "Word just came from Moses we are leaving."

"When?" I asked, astonished that this information had to be imparted in the dead of night.

"Now. As soon as possible."

"What?" But he was gone rushing down the steps. I could hear our downstairs neighbor Yonah Yonah saying to his wife Yocheved, "We can't take the TV."

'I need a coffee', I thought, and started to the kitchen. 'Probably I should wake Avital up she'll want as much time as possible before the exodus. But at least I should boil the water.'

I walked into the darkness of our bedroom.

"Avital, wake up. The Exodus is starting."

"What?" she answered, rolling over.

"Yeah, Howie from shul was just here." I said. "Apparently people are already moving. You want coffee? I'm getting the kids up. We said three things each right?" I said, moving unusually briskly through the living room.

"Everyone up! The Exodus has started. Time to get going. Remember, I said you could bring three things, and no electronics."

"I'm bringing iPad" my son Tuvia screamed, seemingly from a dead sleep.

"No! I call the iPad!" screamed his brother Raphael as he ran to the bathroom. Our littlest announced he was bringing everything he owns just in one bag.

"Yona Dov we have to bring stuff we can carry," I reminded him.

I tried to get everyone to the kitchen for breakfast. "I'm not hungry and I'm showering," screamed my daughter, Avigail. Her mother answered, "You have to eat, we are going on an Exodus." Yona Dov came into the living room with three things to take. Two small teddy bears and a laundry basket full of toy nerf guns. "What? It's one basket!" he claimed, spilling all the guns on the floor.

We sorted out what the kids were taking, though I had to remind them several times that there were no outlets in the desert. Personally, I chose to bring a book - Lenny Bruce's "How To Talk Dirty And Influence People" which I

figured could come in handy during a mass migration of kvetching Jews. Avital similarly thought to bring Tylenol.

As usual, we got out of the house much later than I wanted. As our minivan pulled out and got in line, I realized that we weren't just towards the back of the crowd. We were last. Also as usual, I blamed myself. If I hadn't given in and let them watch "Harry Potter" on appleTV one last time ("But abba, there's no Harry Potter in the desert! Please!"), maybe we wouldn't be at the back of the Exodus and only getting Moses' inspirational words handed back to us from the Finkelsteins, whose triplet stroller really was taking up a lot of space.

We left with good intentions from above; we couldn't take it any more with this Pharaoh and his so-called rules. But wanting to go fast doesn't translate into going fast. Time might have been of the essence, but believe me, my bread will rise and go stale in the time it took me to get everyone out of the house.

We weren't gonna be 40 years in the desert, we were going to be 40 years in the driveway.

**Yisrael Campbell is just your average Irish, Italian, Catholic, Reform, Conservative, Unorthodox, Orthodox Jew, who was born to be funny. (The Jewish part came later.) A spiritual journey stretching across four decades, two continents, and three circumcisions. From the wildly successful off-Broadway play. Yisrael is hilarious. For more information on Yisrael Campbell, see:**

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## Raphael Zarum

### Responding to Slavery: From Ancient Egypt to Today

It is difficult to truly imagine the hardships our ancestors experienced in ancient Egypt. The vast majority of the population were peasants and slaves. We know from historians of the period that thousands were forcefully conscripted as labourers in state projects such as military expeditions, mining and quarrying, servicing vast religious temples, and working on endless construction schemes for the Pharaoh.

The Torah actually calls Egypt, 'Beit Avadim,' "the House of Slavery" (Exodus 13:3). This phrase occurs 13 times in the Bible and only ever refers to Egypt. This reflects the fact that slavery was an essential aspect of the nation's social and political structure. For centuries, the country literally ran on slaves and was a major centre for slave trading.

For these lowest of classes, life was cheap and short. A 4000 year-old treatise on working conditions in Ancient Egypt captures this: "I will tell you about the fishermen: his job is the worst for wearing him down! He has to work in the river, consorting with crocodiles..." (The Teachings of Khety). What would it matter to a slave owner if a few of his men were killed while gathering in the fishing nets? They could readily replace them.

Our Rabbis did not want us to ever forget this terrible human tragedy and so the Hagaddah teaches us, that of the entire Exodus story, the one thing you must quote even to the 'Simple Son' is: "With a mighty hand God brought us out of Egypt, from the House of Slavery." (Exodus 13:14)

The Torah employs a unique terminology for this particular kind of servitude: 'bewarech' (Exodus 1:13-14). Rashi, the 11th century commentator, explains this to mean, "harsh labour that crushes the body and breaks it". So I translate bewarech as 'crushing cruelty'. Later at Mt Sinai, bewarech became the primary limitation in managing a servant. Three times we are told, "do not subjugate him with crushing cruelty" (Leviticus 25:43,46,53).

Maimonides, the great 12th century scholar and philosopher, gave a practical definition of bewarech, "This is work that has no time-limit or work that is unnecessary, but is assigned only so that the servant will not remain idle. Based on this our Sages taught that a boss should not say, 'Hoe under the vines until I return,' because they have not set any time-limit. Rather the boss should say, 'Hoe until this specific time or as far as this specific place.' ...Even telling them to warm a cup of hot water when the boss does not need it, is forbidden..." (Mishneh Torah, Laws of Servants 1:6).

Controversially, this rule only applies to a Jewish servant. With a non-Jewish servant, even though no kind of physical harm is to be tolerated whatsoever (Exodus 21:21-26), bewarech is technically allowed. Though there were justifications for this in the biblical era, Maimonides made it clear that a boss should now not act in this way: "Although this is the law, the trait of piety and the way of wisdom should lead a person to be merciful and to pursue justice so that they never make their servant carry a hefty burden, nor cause them distress... In fact, the sages of the past would provide food for their servants before eating themselves... We should also never humiliate a servant by our actions or words... Shouting or venting anger is also wrong. Instead, you should speak calmly and listen to their requests." (Mishneh Torah, Laws of Servants 9:8). We must, concludes Maimonides, seek to emulate God whose, "mercies are upon all His works" (Psalms 145:9).

We see then that vital lessons from our slavery in Egypt have been enshrined in Jewish Law, in order to promote a more just and caring society. It dictates that we have no right to mistreat anyone working today: Hotel and restaurant staff, shop employees, cleaners, transport workers, traffic wardens; in fact anyone you encounter who

is performing a service for you should be treated with dignity and respect. Only in this way are we living the message of the Exodus.

There is another important lesson to be learnt from the hardships our ancestors endured: They had no respite from their labour. Deuteronomy (5:15) teaches us to observe the Shabbat in order to right this historic wrong. In the words of Chief Rabbi Hertz, “The Israelites in Egypt slaved day after day without rest. By ceasing from toil one day in seven we distinguish our work from the drudgery of the slave.” (Kiddush, Hertz Siddur).

The institution of a day of rest is essential for a society not to be swallowed up by an unrelenting obligation to work. In 1994, when an increase in Sunday trading hours was proposed by the British Government, the former Chief Rabbi Lord Jakobovits spoke forthrightly against it in the House of Commons, “The loss of the Sabbath will deprive Britain of the last visible vestige of national spirituality and sanctification... at least on Sundays, even the streets proclaim that man doesn’t live by bread alone; that the material quest for profit can be interrupted and that there is more to human happiness than the pursuit of wealth and of power over others. By closing our shops and work places we proclaim the equality of all men. The rich do not earn more than the poor. For once we do not measure all values in life by their material price.”

Remember that the establishment of Sunday (not Saturday) as the day of rest was a Christian invention, at the council of Nicea in 325 CE, when Emperor Constantine was establishing the Roman Catholic Church. Others argue that the adoption of Sunday as God’s day dates back to the New Testament. Either way, the displacement of Saturday was a conscious rejection of the Jewish Tradition. This makes the statement of Lord Jakobovits all the more astonishing. He clearly felt that the value of preserving a day of rest in British society eclipsed the painful memory of Christian supersessionism.

At the time, Stephen Goodwin reported in The Independent newspaper that, “The attentive atmosphere was broken by shouts from the public gallery - ‘But it takes a Jew to tell you!’ A man was escorted out and peers shuffled uncomfortably as Lord Jakobovits resumed his plea for observing the Sabbath.”

Ancient Egypt was a hierarchical society, and our ancestors were at the very bottom. Every year on seder night we recall the many decades of suffering they experienced. This unforgettable memory enshrined the moral and decent treatment of employees, whatever their background or status, into the Jewish Tradition. The UN Declaration of Human Rights, which incorporates worker’s rights, was only adopted in 1948. And yet, for millennia, Jews across the globe, through their observance of Shabbat every week, and Pesach every year, have constantly reminded themselves and the world, that every person on this planet was created, “in God’s image” (Genesis 1:27), and should be viewed in this (divine) light.

Sadly, human slavery and people trafficking have yet to be eradicated from our world. Constant vigilance is needed to ensure that workers in impoverished societies are not neglected or abused. Millions are still subject to Egyptian-like bondage. The Exodus will only be fully complete when this injustice is overturned. The Jewish principles we live by are a protest against a human society in need of urgent change.

As you gather round your seder table remember this. Taste it in the matzah you eat and the bitter herbs you chew on. Make the experience as real and viscerally stimulating as possible. And then discuss with your guests the burning question at the heart of these powerful rituals: How shall we live this?

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## Fern Reiss

### Karpas: Keeping Everyone From Starving at the Seder

Traditional seders can go on for (too many) hours, with the festive meal not being served until very late at night. One solution: Eat lots of karpas.

Karpas, Jastrow says, is an ‘umbelliferous’ plant (one with stalks branching out from a common stem), like parsley or celery. We dip karpas at the seder to remind ourselves of the dipping of Joseph’s coat, which led to the eventual servitude of Jews in Egypt. (Also, the gematria, or numerology, of karpas hints at the number of Israelites in bondage in Egypt.)

Since later in the seder we eat maror (bitter herbs) without a blessing, the blessing we say for karpas (‘ha’adama’, vegetable) needs to ‘cover’ both items. So we should be able to eat any vegetable. But what, halachically, is a vegetable?

- If a food comes from a normal perennial tree (Brachot 40a), then the blessing is ‘ha’etz’ (the blessing for fruit), making it ineligible for karpas. But, if it’s a short tree — 3 tfachim (about 9”) from the ground — we consider it a bush, and the blessing is ‘ha’adama’ (vegetable), which nets us both **wild blueberries** and **cranberries**.
- Bananas — even though they grow on enormous trees — need to regenerate before producing again; the trunk dies each year, and a new trunk is generated, giving off new bananas. So **bananas**, oddly, are ‘vegetables.’ **Pineapples** and **strawberries**, for a similar reason, are also vegetables, as is **papaya** (which has properties of both fruit and vegetable).
- Brachot 40a says berries are fruit, but the Yerushalmi says thorns (such as on **raspberries**) make them ‘ha’adama’.
- According to the Orthodox Union (OU) website, vegetables (all eligible for karpas) include: **artichoke, asparagus, beans, beets, broccoli, brussel sprouts, cabbage, carrots, cauliflower, celery, chickpeas/humus, cinnamon, cole slaw, corn, cucumber, pickles, edamame, eggplant, ginger, green beans, hearts of palm, lentils, lettuce, parsnip, peas, peanuts, potato, radish, spinach, sprouts, squash, sweet potato, tomato, turnip, tzimmes, yam, and zucchini**. (Note: Though these are all eligible to be karpas, some are kitniyot, and thus ineligible for Ashkenazim (Jews of Eastern-European descent) on Pesach. That’s a subject for next year :\*) .

Odd exceptions and peculiarities:

- Avocado, olives, & nuts (except peanuts) are sadly ‘ha’etz’, fruits, and thus ineligible.
- Raw garlic and raw onion are both ‘shehakol’, but if they are fried in oil (says the Mishna Bruria 205:7) they are oddly ‘ha’adama’.
- Hydroponically-grown vegetables: ‘Shehakol’! (You should have been able to guess that one: Some say it’s inappropriate to say ‘ha’adama’ on items not grown from the earth. (Chaya Adam 51:17)
- Mushrooms - ‘shehakol’. “Although they spring from the earth, their sustenance is not derived from the earth.” (Berachot 40b; the OU agrees) This may be a misunderstanding, but we lose mushrooms anyway. Recall that Talmudic sages also claim that lice can be swatted on Shabbat because they don’t reproduce...

- **Potato chips:** V'zot Habracha says 'shehakol' (because they're processed), but most poskim say 'ha'adama' (since the end product is recognizeably potato, a vegetable.)
- **Quinoa**, if kept whole, is 'ha'adama', vegetable.
- Vegetables normally eaten cooked (not raw) are 'ha'adama' (but receive 'shehakol' when raw — unroasted peanuts, raw onions, etc.) So you can't serve raw onion for karpas. That's a relief.
- Fascinatingly, brachot are **location-specific**. Since eating raw zucchini or raw string beans is ok in the US, these raw vegetables take 'ha'adama'. Since eating raw zucchini and string beans is not as accepted in Israel, these raw vegetables would be 'shehakol'. (The only psak I could find on this suggests that while an American tourist in Israel could still follow the US minhag and make 'ha'adama', an oleh would have to adopt Israeli minhag and say 'shehakol'. (It's ok — we American Israelis pretty clearly get kitniyot under this same rationale :\*) .
- Finely-chopped vegetables retain their bracha (Shulchan Aruch, OC 205:4). However blended vegetables may lose their identity; Rambam says no, Rashi says yes; consensus is with Rashi favoring 'shehakol'. (The only relevance this may have is if you want to do a 'ha'adama' on avocado [even though ideally it would be a 'ha'etz'] and make guacamole, but it's a little dubious anyway.) Items still recognizable as vegetables even after mashing, eg, bananas, potato, eggplant, etc. are all 'ha'adama'.
- **Popcorn!!!!** Popcorn (but only if you're eating kitniyot) halachically retains its 'ha'adama' status even after popping! (Because the kernel remains intact despite its changed physical appearance.)
- Peanut butter (if you eat kitniyot): Unclear whether 'shehakol' or 'ha'adama'. (But why would you want peanut butter on your seder table anyway? Feh!)
- **Potato kugel** — if made from shredded potatoes (ie., still recognizeable as potato), everyone agrees this is 'ha'adama'! Wooohooo! B'shana ha'ba' potato kugel.
- And for the final irony — parsley, the 'karpas' that most of us Americans grew up eating, is, according to the OU, 'shehakol', not 'ha'adama'! (Other poskim say, since parsley is used to enhance other foods, it does not require its own bracha at all.) Either way, it's probably not the best choice for karpas, since almost no one would suggest saying 'ha'adama' on it.

One additional note about karpas specifically (as opposed to 'ha'adama' in general): Since the halacha of karpas is meant to specifically use something whose bracha is the same as the bracha required for your eating of the maror later on, you may need to rethink your maror (bitter herb) selection: If you use romaine lettuce for your maror, the bracha is 'ha'adama', so all of the above 'ha'adama' vegetables are ok.

However, if you're using only horseradish, for example, which some argue is not normal to eat raw, on its own, and therefore requires a 'shehakol', then your karpas, likewise, would have to merit a 'shehakol'. (Cancel the potatoes.)

Hat-tip to the berachot site for clarifying some of my muddled memories of these issues, and to the OU for their comprehensive list of vegetables. I am not a halachic scholar, just an interested eater; caveat emptor. And enjoy your parsley!

**Fern Reiss is the founder of the Jewish Speakers Bureau, PublishingGame.com, and Expertizing.com. She is the author of seven books, including the "Publishing Game" series, and is a graduate of Harvard University and Pardes. She and her family live in Boston and Jerusalem.**

# The Jewish Speakers Bureau

(Speakers in **bold** contributed to this Haggadah Companion)

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🕊️ <b>Beth Steinberg</b>	🕊️ <b>Michael Feuer</b>	🕊️ <b>Susan Silverman</b>
🕊️ Daniel Polisar	🕊️ <b>Michael Freund</b>	🕊️ <b>Tomer Persico</b>
🕊️ <b>David Frankel</b>	🕊️ <b>Mike Reiss</b>	🕊️ Tova Hartman
🕊️ <b>Eetta Prince-Gibson</b>	🕊️ <b>Mike Wagenheim</b>	🕊️ <b>Tzemah Yoreh</b>
🕊️ Elhanan Miller	🕊️ <b>Miri Shalem</b>	🕊️ Yaakov Katz
🕊️ Gershom Gorenberg	🕊️ Noga Kainan	🕊️ <b>Yiscah Smith</b>
🕊️ <b>Gershon Baskin</b>	🕊️ Penina Taylor	🕊️ <b>Yisrael Campbell</b>
🕊️ <b>Gil Troy</b>	🕊️ <b>Philippe Metoudi</b>	🕊️ Yoaz Hendel
🕊️ Jessica Steinberg	🕊️ Rachel Braun Scherl	🕊️ Yosef Abramowitz
🕊️ <b>Jonathan Porath</b>	🕊️ Rahel Berkovits	

For more information on any of our speakers, please visit our website:

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