

“Until we are all free, we are none of us free.” – Emma Lazarus

A Freedom Seder-Iftar in Hebron

1) On April 4th, 1969 - one year after the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. - hundreds of people from a variety of backgrounds gathered in a church in Washington DC to celebrate the Jewish tradition of Passover in the first ‘Freedom Seder’, which wove the ancient Jewish story of liberation from bondage with contemporary struggles for civil rights and against the war raging in Vietnam. ‘Seder’ means ‘order’ or ‘agenda’. Tonight we make our agenda clear: Tonight, fifty-five years after the first settlers began the process of dispossession of Palestinian land and homes under occupation in Hebron, we stand together here and now to reaffirm the **commitment to liberation in every generation and for all peoples.**

3) Fasting is one of the pillars of Islam and pillars, attractive as they may be from time to time, are meant to accommodate structures: we build upon them. Thus we are to learn discipline, patience, forbearance and sacrifice during this month. ‘When someone seeks to pick an argument with you, say: “I am fasting,”’ said the Prophet. While we fast in order to attain the pleasure of Allah, how we conduct ourselves during this month is pretty much about other people and how we relate to them. Piety requires moments of quiet reflection and withdrawal, but is not essentially about these; it is about testing one’s faith in the real world, in the world of personal hurts and hopes, of laughter and tears and, as we South Africans know only too well, on the

2) Every year the youngest person present at the seder asks the ‘**The Four Questions**’, which each ask in different ways “why is this night different from all other nights?”

Tonight is different from all other nights, for four reasons.

- On all other nights we eat bread, tonight we eat this unleavened ‘matzah’ instead. Why? To remember oppression in the world and all forms of injustice, along with the stories and possibility of liberation (our duty for every generation, to remember).
- On all other nights we eat all kinds of vegetables, tonight we eat the bitter herb ‘maror’. Why? We refuse to look away from the bitterness of the occupation and we commit ourselves to ending this injustice.
- Tonight we dip parsley in salt water. Why? To mourn the dead and dispossessed here in Hebron, the lives that have been taken or destroyed as this injustice persists.
*This land absorbs the skins of martyrs.
This land promises wheat and stars.
Worship it!
We are its salt and its water.
We are its wound, but a wound that fights.*
-Mahmoud Darwish, “Diary of a Palestinian Wound”
- Most nights we don’t sit at ease at dinner and recline. Tonight, we rest for a moment, in celebration that we are here together, and acknowledgment of the world we hope to create.



4). ‘And God seeks the pursued’ - Rabbi Huna said in the name of Rav Yosef: God always seeks (i.e. seeks to be with) the pursued (oppressed). When the righteous man pursues another righteous man, God seeks the pursued. When the wicked pursue the righteous man, God seeks the pursued. When the wicked pursue another wicked man, God seeks the pursued. Even When the righteous man pursue the wicked, God seeks the pursued. In any case - God seeks the pursued.

(Va'ikra Raba - 27:5)



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“You can’t separate peace from freedom because no one can be at peace unless he has his freedom.”— Malcolm X

5) *For me taqwa, and connecting to my soul provide me with a different stance and way out of this matrix of violence. For me, the value of a human being is not conditional on anything at all, it is innate. To become aware of my own soul is to become aware of others, then. To become aware of my own self is to become aware of my duty to others. What do I mean? Well, when food and water and the body are stripped away and I am able to reconnect to the part of me that exists and will continue to exist beyond all of this – I find it possible to want to think beyond our bodies. If, at a fundamental level we are all souls, then rather than this making me “colour-blind” or lending itself to a nice wishy-washy interpretation of humanity outside of history as “all the same and therefore equal”, it leads me to a more devastating notion which is that the humanity of every one of us is bound up with the humanity of the others.*

-Suhaiymah Manzoor-Khan

7) The Book of Exodus begins by telling us that the people of Israel became numerous in the land of Egypt and a new Pharaoh came to power, warned the Egyptians of the Israelites’ growing numbers, and enslaved the Israelites, eventually instituting a genocidal policy of killing every Hebrew baby boy. We are reminded that oppressors everywhere and in every generation attempt to drum up fear of demographic threats, but we will not be fooled into fear. We are reminded that this rhetoric is inseparable from policies of ethnic cleansing and genocide.

Rather than give way to this rhetoric and the violence it engenders, we instead honor the tradition of the midwives Shifra and Puah, who stood in defiance of the Pharaoh’s command to kill the Hebrew babies, even at great risk. When regimes are built upon structures of violence, racism, and subjugation, it is our duty to follow in their footsteps— to resist the oppressor, to stand with the oppressed.

6) The traditional telling of this story includes a teaching about four children and how they interact with the responsibility of this event and its implications. Tonight we ask what story and responsibility we’re accountable to tell to our children. What are our four models of resistance, who are the characters in liberation?

We see the ‘oppressed child’, born into bondage and every choice and every dream is an uphill battle. They lead the march to freedom and the struggle for dignity, though some of these children aren’t present here because they are in prison.

We see the ‘oppressor child’, born into perpetuating systems of violence, someone who believes that their well-being is dependent upon others’ oppression.

We see the ‘ally child’ who sees the pain of the oppressed, and asks what power they can give up to be in solidarity with others.

The fourth is the one who we pretend simply doesn’t know enough to ask, but the truth is that this child sees and chooses to look away. We choose not to give up on them, we call them into our movement for justice.

8) With the groundwork for resistance laid by Shifra and Puah, Moses, who is alive because of their bravery and those who followed their example, gathers his family and partners: his brother who speaks on his behalf, and his sister who sings the Israelites to freedom. They work together to stand up to power and build their collective identity in those steps toward liberation. Even Moshe, operating as God’s messenger, could not do the work alone. Today, we continue to form bonds and build power through resistance. Tonight we celebrate our commitment to topple apartheid and to march to freedom together



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9) Traditionally we recite the ten makkot, typically translated as “plagues,” that God brought down upon Egypt to liberate the Israelites, and dip out a drop of wine for each. One explanation for this practice is that we’re mourning the lives lost and the suffering caused by these makkot; but crucially, we still acknowledge their necessity.

“In the Pesach/Passover story, we are on the side of the plagues, which are necessary to break the stubborn will of evil tyrants and their defenders. The plagues are a reminder that liberation does not come bloodlessly. We are not smug or flip about the plagues — they are horrific and ugly — and we reduce our celebration a bit in recognition of that. But if we’re looking to understand today’s struggles in light of the Pesach story, we should not see racism, capitalism, misogyny, etc. as contemporary manifestations of the plagues, but as contemporary manifestations of Phara’oh.... To the extent that we’re uncomfortable wishing violence upon the power structure in the Mitzrayim in which we live, I invite us to consider the ways in which we have been co-opted by or willingly embraced this power structure, happily receiving some chimerical benefits and looking away from the masses of people, other sentient beings, the water, and other life forms whose survival is denied and threatened by the regime that rewards us.

...

The Mishna teaches us, and the Haggadah has us declare, “In each and every generation, a person is obligated to see themselves as if they had left Egypt. (Mishna Pesachim 10:5). Liberation is not a fairy tale and there is no liberation without real conflict. The Haggadah speaks to us who have comfort and privilege and demands that we go deep into disentangling ourselves from it, really understanding the costs of freedom, the Divinely charged violence sometimes necessary to meet regimes of unfathomable violence and brutality, such as the one in which we live. Are we ready to renounce those who buy us off on the cheap and embrace the overwhelming bounty of true freedom?”

-Aryeh Bernstein, “Progressive Jews: We Are On the Side of the Plagues”

Liberation is a messy process; the haggadah reminds us that the road to freedom is not a simple one, and that oppressive regimes don’t topple on their own. But it insists that no level of turmoil justifies complacency and inaction in the face of brutal oppression. It is our obligation, rather, to fight for a world where no one’s safety comes at the cost of another’s suffering.

To Our Land (10)

To our land,
and it is the one near the word
of god,
a ceiling of clouds
To our land,
and it is the one far from the
adjectives of nouns,
the map of absence
To our land,
and it is the one tiny as a
sesame seed,
a heavenly horizon ... and a
hidden chasm
To our land,
and it is the one poor as a
grouse’s wings,
holy books ... and an identity
wound
To our land,
and it is the one surrounded
with torn hills,
the ambush of a new past
To our land, and it is a prize of
war,
the freedom to die from
longing and burning
and our land, in its bloodied
night,
is a jewel that glimmers for the
far upon the far
and illuminates what’s outside
it ...
As for us, inside,
we suffocate more!

*From **The Butterfly’s Burden** by
Mahmoud Darwish
Translated by Fady Joudah*

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Maror (11)

A bitter cud.
Biting into the bitter, that bites back.
Of all the gross tastes, sweet and salty,
sour, we seek it the least.
We spit it out. But not tonight.

Tonight we must taste our bitterness.
Bite into our failure, suck its essence.
We were slaves in Egypt, the Haggadah
reminds us, and we still are,
but who enslaves us to what?

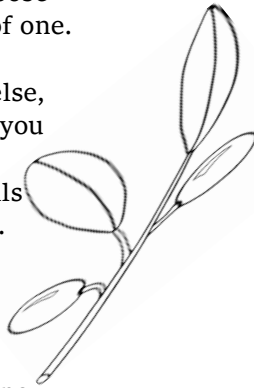
The bone we chew is our own.
Only I can tell myself where
I am caught, trapped, held
fast, bored but comfortable
in the box I know so well.

This is the moment for naming
that box, for feeling the walls,
for studying the dimensions
of the prison I must choose
to leave in my exodus of one.

I can join with no one else,
I cannot walk out with you

Until I measure my walls
Then break them down.
Darkness into light.

Fear and silence into
Cursing. The known
Abandoned for something
New and frightening. Bitter
Is the first taste of freedom.



From *The Art of Blessing the Day* by Marge
Piercy

12) Sometimes we imagine that it just takes an inspirational leader or a single moment of clarity for hundreds, thousands, or millions to act toward justice and liberation. In fact, it takes the willingness to take a risk. It requires us, no matter who we are, to step forward without knowing what will take place next, to act even when there's no clear existing path to follow. In the story of the Exodus a person called Nachshon stepped into the water before the sea had parted. It is said that it was this step forward that parted the sea and created a path to freedom. As Paulo Freire and Myles Horton said, we make the road by walking. Freedom is not something we wait for; it's something we build.

13) Near the end of the seder's storytelling section, preceding a section of prayerful song, we recite "Dayenu"--a song consisting of 15 verses, each of which insists that if Hashem had only carried out one element of our redemption, it would've been enough. People often struggle with the plain meaning of this song. How could it possibly have been enough to be brought out of Egypt but stranded at the sea? How could it have been enough to not reach true freedom?

Attempting to answer this question, one rabbi suggests that this *dayenu* is not meant to imply it would have been sufficient, period--but rather, as we prepare to enter Hallel, the section of praise, *dayenu* is implicitly followed by an addendum. If God had only done _____, it would have been enough *for us to praise Them*.

This teaching feels relevant not only to what actions merit praise, but what actions merit doing. The fight against occupation, apartheid, and colonialism is a daunting one; it can often feel like chipping away at a mountain. It's easy to become hopeless when you feel like no individual action is able to sufficiently challenge these systems of oppression.

But the explanation above responds: your action will not be enough, and it will still be worthwhile. Tonight's gathering will not in and of itself free Palestine, but by deepening our bonds of co-resistance, naming the violent systems of apartheid and ongoing dispossession and committing ourselves anew to overturning them, we compose one stanza in this larger story of liberation. None of us alone, and no one action, is sufficient to topple systems of oppression; but each action is one vital step toward a liberated future.

As we began with questions, so too we'll end with a question: what are the next steps you will take? What can each of us here do to make that future a reality?



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