

Interfaith Seder with open arms

Judging others makes us blind, whereas love is illuminating. By judging others we blind ourselves to our own evil and to the grace which others are just as entitled to as we are.

- Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*



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Passover Seder

The Passover festival commemorates the ancient story of God's delivering the Israelites from slavery in Egypt. In the era of the Second Temple in Jerusalem, 538 B.C.E.-70 C.E., the festival was celebrated with a pilgrimage to the city and a Passover sacrifice in the Temple on the afternoon before the festival began. After dark, the celebrants ate the roasted sacrifice with matzah and bitter herbs. The destruction of the Temple by the Romans in 70 C.E. brought these sacrificial rites to an end.

In place of the Passover sacrifice, telling the story of the Exodus received increasingly greater emphasis. Today, besides eating foods that evoke the experience of bondage and liberation, we continue to recount the story at an evening celebration known as a Passover Seder. Seder means "order," and as you will see, a Seder encompasses a set of rituals, conversations, prayers, readings, and songs that take place before and after a festive meal. As a guide through the Seder, we use a text known as a Haggadah - literally, "the telling."

The Steps of a Seder

1. Kadesh (sanctification of the day)
2. Urchatz (handwashing with no blessing)
3. Karpas (eating the green vegetable)
4. Yachatz (breaking the matzah)
5. Maggid (telling the story)
6. Rachtzah (handwashing with a blessing)
7. Motzi (blessing before eating matzah)
8. Matzah (eating the matzah)
9. Maror (eating the bitter herb)
10. Korech (Hillel's sandwich)
11. Shulchan Orech (eating the meal)
12. Tzafun (eating the afikomen)
13. Barech (blessing after eating)
14. Hallel (songs of praise)
15. Nirtzah (conclusion)

Source: exodusconversations.org

Four Conversations

1. What is the meaning of home at a time when 65 million people are refugees and when the average American moves 11.4 times in his/her lifetime?

There are now an estimated 258 million people living in a country other than their country of birth – an increase of 49% since 2000.

An unprecedented 65.6 million people around the world have been forced from home. Among them are nearly 22.5 million refugees, over half of whom are under the age of 18.

There are also 10 million stateless people who have been denied a nationality and access to basic rights such as education, healthcare, employment, and freedom of movement.

The UN reports that nearly 20 people are forcibly displaced every minute.

2. The Five Books of Moses instruct us to love three different things: God; your neighbor; and the stranger. But the command to love the stranger is repeated 36 different times. Why this added emphasis on the stranger?
3. Why is it even more important now than ever that our society become radically inclusive? How can we do that?
4. What are we to make of the following rabbinic commentary on what happened during the night of the Exodus?

The Last Night in Egypt: Knocking in the Night

When Moses said: "I will smite all the firstborn" (Ex. 12:12), some of the Egyptians were afraid and some not; those who were afraid brought their firstborn to an Israelite and said: "Do please allow him to pass with you this night." When midnight struck, God smote all the firstborn; as for those who took asylum in the houses of the Israelites, God passed between the Israelites and the Egyptians, depriving the latter of life while leaving the Israelites alive.

The preceding midrash (rabbinic story) describes what happened on the night of the last plague, the slaying of the Egyptian first born. Egyptian mothers have taken their first-born children to the homes of Israelites and beg the Israelites to take their children in so they will escape death. What would you have done? What should they have done? Keep in mind that a) these were their oppressors for 400 years, b) God's plan was to smite them, so they were defying God if they took them in and c) historically, the midrash came from the 10th century (Exodus Rabbah 18:2), a time of considerable persecution. The Israelites tried to save the Egyptians but could not alter God's plan. Even though it was doomed to failure, they had the courage to try. One wonders whether that was also part of God's plan all along.

Jewish Perspective

Recited Before the Recounting of the Ten Plagues

(Using the little finger, remove a drop of wine and touch it to a saucer or napkin for each plague)

As we prepare to spill wine from our cup at the mention of each plague, we recall the sentence of the Bible, "Rejoice not when your enemy falls". Our Rabbis taught that when the children of Israel sang songs of praise to God as the Egyptians drowned in the sea, the angels on high wished to join in these songs and were stopped by God who said, "These are my creatures who are drowning in the sea! For this you would sing songs of praise?" Thus we too lessen our joy at Passover time at the mention of these plagues, for there can be no rejoicing at the death or suffering of human beings, even our enemies. And so we diminish this cup of joy, for our redemption had to come through the destruction of others.

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks - Covenant and Conversation - Exodus pp 185-6

Whichever way we look at it, there is something striking about this almost endlessly iterated concern for the stranger - together with the historical reminder that "you yourselves were slaves in Egypt". It is as if in this series of laws we are nearing the core of the mystery of Jewish existence itself. What is the Torah implying?

Concern for social justice was not unique to Israel. What we sense, however, throughout the early Biblical narrative, is the lack of basic rights to which outsiders could appeal. Not by accident is the fate of Sodom and the cities of the plain sealed when they attempt to assault Lot's two visitors. Nor can we fail to feel the risk to which Abraham and Isaac believe that they are exposed when they are forced to leave home and take refuge in Egypt or the Land of the Philistines. In each of the three episodes, (Genesis chapters 12, 20, 26) they are convinced that their lives are at stake; that they may be murdered so that their wives can be taken into the royal harem.

Jacob's daughter is raped and abducted when she wanders into the territory of Shehem. There are repeated implications in the course of the Joseph story that in Egypt the Israelites are regarded as pariahs . . . One verse in particular - when the brothers visit Joseph a second time - indicates the distaste with which they were regarded:

They served him (Joseph) by himself, the brothers by themselves, and the Egyptians who were with him by themselves, because the Egyptians could not eat with the Hebrews for that is detestable to Egyptians (Genesis 43:32)

So it was in the ancient world. Hatred of the foreigner is the oldest of passions, going back to tribalism and the prehistory of civilization . . .

This fact lies at the very heart of the Jewish experience; It is no coincidence that Judaism was born in two journeys away from the two greatest civilizations of the ancient world. Abraham's from Mesopotamia, Moses and the Israelites' from Pharaonic Egypt. The Torah is the world's great protest against empires and imperialism. There are many dimensions to this protest. One dimension is the protest against the attempt to justify social hierarchy and the absolute powers of rulers in the name of

religion. Another is the subordination of the masses to the state - epitomized by the vast building projects first of Babel, then of Egypt, and the enslavement they entailed. A third is the brutality of nations in the course of war (the subject of Amos' oracles against the nations). Undoubtedly though, the most serious offence - for the prophets as well as the Mosaic books - was the use of power against the powerless: the widow, the orphan and above all, the stranger.

To be a Jew is to be a stranger. It is hard to avoid the conclusion that is why Abraham was commanded to leave his land, home and father's house; why, long before Joseph was born, Abraham was already told that his descendants would be strangers in a land not their own; why Moses had to suffer personal exile before assuming the leadership of the people; why the Israelites underwent persecution before inheriting their own land; and why the Torah is so insistent that this experience - the retelling of the story on Passover, along with the never-forgotten taste of the bread of affliction and the bitter herbs of slavery - should become a permanent part of their collective memory . . .

The Torah asks why should you not hate the stranger? Because you once stood where he stands now. You know the heart of the stranger because you were once a stranger in the land of Egypt. If you are human, so is he. If he is less than human, so are you. You must fight the hatred in your heart as I once fought the greatest ruler and the strongest empire in the ancient world on your behalf. I made you into the world's archetypal strangers so that you would fight for the rights of strangers - for your own and those of others, wherever they are, whoever they are, whatever they are, and whatever the colour of their skin or the nature of their culture, because though they are not in your image, says God, they are nonetheless in Mind. There is only one reply strong enough to answer the question Why should I not hate the stranger? Because the stranger is me.

HA-LACHMA Self Liberation (Lesli Koppelman Ross)

In Hebrew, Egypt is called Mitzrayim. According to the text on Jewish mysticism, the Zohar, the name is derived from m'tzarim, meaning "narrow straits" (mi, "from," tzar, "narrow" or "tight"). When God took us out of Mitzrayim, He extricated us from the place of constricted opportunities, tight control, and narrow-mindedness, where movement was severely limited.

Each of us lives in his or her own mitzrayim, the external or physical narrow straits of financial or health constraints or, perhaps, personal tragedy; universally, the psychological burdens to which we subject ourselves. Like the duality in virtually all of Pesach's symbols, they work in two ways: they turn us into both slaves and oppressors, of ourselves and others. Passover leads us to question the values and attitudes we hold and which hold us to those roles

We are the Generations (*The Shalom Center*)

We are the generations/That stand between the fires.
Behind us is the flame and smoke/That rose from Auschwitz and from Hiroshima,
From the burning of our Towers/In jet fuel lit by rage,
From the torching of our forests for the sake of fast hamburger;
Before us is the nightmare of a Flood of Fire:
The scorching of our planet/From a flood of greenhouse gases,
Or the blazing of our cities/In thermonuclear fire/
Or the glare of gunfire/Exploding in our children.
It is our task to make from fire/Not an all-consuming blaze
But the light in which we see each other;
Each of us different, /All of us made in the image of God.
We light this fire to see more clearly
That the earth, the human race, /are not for burning.
We light this fire to see more clearly/The rainbow in our many-colored faces.
Blessed are you, Adonai our God, Breathing Spirit of the Universe, who gives us light that we may
become a light for peace and freedom and healing for all peoples and our planet.
Blessed are you, Breathing Spirit of the Universe, who has breathed life into us, lifted us up, and
carried us to reach this moment.

Leaving Egypt with Haste (*Rabbi Nachman of Bratzlav*)

One needs to leave Mitzrayim with great haste. This is the essence of the quote from Torah, "For they left Mitzrayim and couldn't tarry, and also they didn't make provisions [for the journey]." (Exodus 12:39) This truth is recapitulated in each person and in each era. In each person and in each time, there can be found a residue [of Mitzrayim], the cravings and woes of this world, and this is the essence of the exile in Mitzrayim. This is the essence of Pesach. At the moment of the Exodus from Mitzrayim, a great light from on high was revealed, as is known; and at that time, promptly, Israel went out in great haste and they couldn't tarry. For even if they had remained there even one more instant, they would have remained a remnant there, as is known.

Christian Perspective

The Parable of the Good Samaritan

Luke 10:25-37 New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)

²⁵Just then a lawyer stood up to test Jesus. “Teacher,” he said, “what must I do to inherit eternal life?” ²⁶He said to him, “What is written in the law? What do you read there?” ²⁷He answered, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself.” ²⁸And he said to him, “You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live.”

²⁹But wanting to justify himself, he asked Jesus, “And who is my neighbor?” ³⁰Jesus replied, “A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell into the hands of robbers, who stripped him, beat him, and went away, leaving him half dead. ³¹Now by chance a priest was going down that road; and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side. ³²So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. ³³But a Samaritan while traveling came near him; and when he saw him, he was moved with pity. ³⁴He went to him and bandaged his wounds, having poured oil and wine on them. Then he put him on his own animal, brought him to an inn, and took care of him. ³⁵The next day he took out two denarii, gave them to the innkeeper, and said, ‘Take care of him; and when I come back, I will repay you whatever more you spend.’ ³⁶Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?” ³⁷He said, “The one who showed him mercy.” Jesus said to him, “Go and do likewise.”

Matthew 25:31-45

³¹When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on the throne of his glory. ³²All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, ³³and he will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left. ³⁴Then the king will say to those at his right hand, “Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; ³⁵for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, ³⁶I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.” ³⁷Then the righteous will answer him, “Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? ³⁸And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? ³⁹And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?” ⁴⁰And the king will answer them, “Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family,* you did it to me.” ⁴¹Then he will say to those at his left hand, “You that are accursed, depart from me into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels; ⁴²for I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, ⁴³I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not give me clothing, sick and in prison and you did not visit me.” ⁴⁴Then they also will answer, “Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not take care of you?” ⁴⁵Then he will answer them, “Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.”

Prayer in action is love, and love in action is service. Try to give unconditionally whatever a person needs in the moment. The point is to do something, however small, and show you care through your actions by giving your time ... We are all God's children so it is important to share His gifts. Do not worry about why problems exist in the world - just respond to people's needs ... We feel what we are doing is just a drop in the ocean, but that ocean would be less without that drop."

- Mother Teresa

Diversity and the Common Good: Civil Society, Religion, and Catholic Sisters in a Small City *Meg Wilkes Karraker*

Hospitality toward "the stranger," the newcomer, and the immigrant is deeply embedded in many religious teachings. The three Abrahamic faiths (Judaism, Christianity, and Islam) all have moral imperatives to welcome the stranger. For example, the Qur'an admonishes all to act with charity toward those who are hungry, poor, and in need, including the stranger. (See for example, the Cow 2:215 in the Qur'an.) Two of the five pillars of faith for Muslims, *sawn* (fasting) and *zakat* (giving alms), are inextricably linked to solidarity with the poor and disadvantaged. *Sawn* and *zakat* are intended to contribute to the "just circulation and distribution of wealth in society" and to establishing social conditions for basic human dignity described in the Qur'an (Jones 2008:139). The Torah and Old Testament include both negative and positive commandments regarding the stranger. From Exodus (22:21): "You shall not wrong or oppress a resident alien, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt." From Deuteronomy (10:19): "You shall also love the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt." In the New Testament, in the book of Matthew (25:35) Jesus teaches his disciples: "for I was hungry and you gave me food. I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me."

If we are to have peace on earth, our loyalties must become ecumenical rather than sectional. Our loyalties must transcend our race, our tribe, our class, and our nation; and this means we must develop a world perspective.

- Martin Luther King, Jr. "A Christmas Sermon on Peace," given at Ebenezer Baptist Church, Atlanta, Georgia, December 24, 1967

As Kingfishers Catch Fire

by Gerard Manley Hopkins

As kingfishers catch fire, dragonflies draw flame;
As tumbled over rim in roundy wells
Stones ring; like each tucked string tells, each hung bell's
Bow swung finds tongue to fling out broad its name;
Each mortal thing does one thing and the same:
Deals out that being indoors each one dwells;
Selves – goes itself; myself it speaks and spells,
Crying *Whát I dó is me: for that I came.*

I say móre: the just man justices;
Keeps grace: *thát* keeps all his goings graces;
Acts in God's eye what in God's eye he is –
Christ – for Christ plays in ten thousand places,
Lovely in limbs, and lovely in eyes not his
To the Father through the features of men's faces.

"We must learn to regard people less in the light of what they do or omit to do, and more in the light of what they suffer."

- Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*

If this is going to be a Christian nation that doesn't help the poor, either we have to pretend that Jesus was just as selfish as we are, or we've got to acknowledge that He commanded us to love the poor and serve the needy without condition and then admit that we just don't want to do it."

- Stephen Colbert

Islam Perspective

Qur'an

Chapter 4, Verse 97

Behold, those whom the angels encounter at death, while they are still sinning against themselves, are asked [by the angels]:

In what condition were you?

They will answer:

We were too vulnerable on earth

The angels will say:

Was not God's earth wide so that you could migrate therein?

Qur'an

Chapter 7, Verse 11

Say: Go all over the earth, and behold what happened in the end to those who gave the lie to the truth

Historically

1. The early Muslims migrated to Abyssinia (Ethiopia today) in accordance with the Prophet's advice, and achieved refugees status in a country ruled by a Christian king having the reputation of being just.
2. The Islamic calendar does not start with the birth of the Prophet. It starts with his emigration from Mecca to Medina in the Arabian peninsula, emphasizing the importance Islam gives to emigration from a community plagued by injustice and oppression to a community known to uphold justice and the rule of law, only when it becomes impossible to continue fighting injustice and oppression.

Immigration Anthem

Sharon Olds

I bring you a tired song of my poor
femur-knob, aching before
the hip-op. I huddled this morning under
the covers—the leg weighs twice as much as the
other leg by now, I swing its
masses of fluid along like an enclosed
falls. My mother told me that her people
had come here from across the sea,
yearning to sing to their God of crags
and thistles, to breathe free, men and
women who made war naked, painted
blue, attached by their landlords who saw them
as wretched refuse—garbage, teeming
with vermin. They had pushed off from that shore and
floated homeless on the ocean, through calm
and tempest—sometimes in sight of a fountain
tossed up out of the brow of one
whose house the water was—until
they came to these islands and low hills
which lift up from a land where we have
set a lamp with a golden torch
on top, to remind us, here at the door:
entering through it was a promise to leave it
open behind us.

Other Perspectives

Family (*Dalai Lama*)

Whenever I meet even a 'foreigner',
I have always the same feeling:
'I am meeting another member of the human family.,
This attitude has deepened
My affection and respect for all beings.
May this natural wish be
My small contribution to world peace.
I pray for a more friendly,
More caring, and more understanding
Human family on this planet.
To all who dislike suffering,
Who cherish lasting happiness -
This is my heartfelt appeal.

We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time.
- T.S. Eliot

And We Love Life

Mahmoud Darwish (translated from the Arabic by Fady Joudah)

And we love life if we find a way to it.
We dance in between martyrs and raise a minaret for violet or palm trees.
We love life if we find a way to it.
And we steal from the silkworm a thread to build a sky and fence in this departure.
We open the garden gate for the jasmine to go out as a beautiful day on the streets.
We love life if we find a way to it.
And we plant, where we settle, some fast growing plants, and harvest the dead.
We play the flute like the color of the faraway, sketch over the dirt corridor a neigh.
We write our names one stone at a time, O lightning make the night a bit clearer.
We love life if we find a way to it . . .

Different religious traditions can engage in dialogue with one another in a true spirit of ecumenism. Dialogue can be fruitful and enriching if both sides are truly open. . . Peace will be a beautiful flower blooming on this field of practice.

- Thich Nhat Hanh, *Living Buddha, Living Christ* (Riverhead Books: 1995), 196

Helpful Definitions

Refugee

A refugee is a person who has been forced to flee their home country due to persecution because of their race, religion, nationality, political opinion or membership in a particular social group (e.g., members of the LGBTQ community). The persecution a refugee experiences may include harassment, threats, abduction or torture. A refugee is often afforded some sort of legal protection, either by their host country's government, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) or both. In the United States, refugees are hand-selected by the U.S. government and are screened in advance. They are subject to background checks and security screenings by multiple U.S. agencies. Only after everything is approved are they brought to the U.S. to reside permanently. The maximum number of refugees resettled in the U.S. in a given year, which is referred to as the ceiling for refugee admissions, is determined by the annual Presidential Determination. For more than a decade, the annual ceiling was set at 70,000, which includes both Syrian refugees and refugees from all other countries. Former President Obama's administration raised the ceiling to 85,000 for 2016 and to 110,000 for 2017. The Executive Order issued by the Trump administration on March 6, 2017 dropped this number to 50,000. In October 2018, the Trump administration announced that the Presidential Determination for fiscal year 2018 would be 45,000 - the lowest number ever set by any president since the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program was created in 1980.

Asylum seeker

An asylum seeker is a person who has fled persecution in their home country and is seeking safe haven in a different country, but has not yet received any legal recognition or status. In several countries, including the U.S., asylum seekers are sometimes detained while waiting for their case to be heard.

Internally displaced person

An internally displaced person, or IDP, is a person who fled their home but has not crossed an international border to find sanctuary. Even if they fled for reasons similar to those driving refugees (armed conflict, generalized violence, human rights violations), IDPs legally remain under the protection of their own government - even though that government might be the cause of their flight.

Migrant

A migrant is a person who chooses to move from their home for any variety of reasons, but not necessarily because of a direct threat of persecution or death. Migrant is an umbrella category that can include refugees but can also include people moving to improve their lives by finding work or education, those seeking family reunion and others.

Source: hias.org

More information and resources available at interfaithcouncil.org and hias.org/passover2018

Special thanks to Building One Community for
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Rabbi Joshua Hammerman has served as spiritual leader of Temple Beth El in Stamford since 1992. He is a former president of the Interfaith Council and the author of the award-winning blog On One Foot. Among his many other accomplishments, he currently serves on the Rabbinic Leadership Council, a select group of rabbis chosen by Chancellor Arnold Eisen of the Jewish Theological Seminary (JTS).

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Reverend Mark Lingle serves as Rector at St. Francis Episcopal Church in Stamford. He is the Executive Director of the Interfaith Council of Southwestern Connecticut and is actively involved in interreligious activities in Stamford. Lingle, who serves on the board of Building One Community, has written that "a willingness to engage with and learn from other traditions expands and deepens the practice of our own tradition."

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Dr. Kareem Adeeb, Imam and Founder of the American Institute for Islamic and Arabic Studies, is the current President of the Board of the Interfaith Council of Southwestern Connecticut. An engineer by profession, he is also a scholar who has lectured on religious tolerance for twenty-five years. Since 2009, he has delivered a sermon every Friday at the United Nations in New York City.