

Interfaith Seder

from darkness to light

There's a crack in everything. That's how the light gets in.

- Leonard Cohen



**The Interfaith Council
of Southwestern CT**

*The Place for Interfaith Action...
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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)

The Plague of Darkness

During all the other plagues, the average Egyptian could do nothing to end them. During a plague of darkness, however, could Egyptians not light candles? Perhaps the plague was not a physical darkness, a sandstorm, or a solar eclipse (eclipses last for a few minutes, never for three days); perhaps it was a spiritual or psychological darkness, a deep depression. (The word “melancholy” comes from a Greek root meaning “dark mood.”) Perhaps the Egyptians were depressed by the series of calamities that had struck them or by the realization of how much their own comfort depended on the enslavement of others. The person who cannot see his neighbor is incapable of spiritual growth, incapable of rising from where he is currently. In Jewish legal discussion defining how early one may recite of the morning prayers, “dawn” is defined as “when one can recognize the face of a friend.” When one can see other people and recognize them as friends, the darkness has begun to lift.

- Etz Hayim Torah Commentary

“Refugees didn’t just escape a place. They had to escape a thousand memories until they’d put enough time and distance between them and their misery to wake to a better day.”

- Nadia Hashimi, *When the Moon is Low*

The Jewish prisoners in the German concentration camp at Bergen Belsen did not have matzah for the observance of Pesach in 1944. Under the circumstances the sages at the camp permitted the eating of leavened bread for which occasion this benediction was composed:

Our Father in heaven, behold it is evident and known to thee that it is our desire to do thy will and to celebrate the festival of Pesach by eating matzah and by observing the prohibition of leavened food. But our heart is pained that the enslavement prevents us and we are in danger of our lives. Behold, we are prepared and ready to fulfill thy commandment; “And ye shall live by them and not die by them.” We pray to thee that thou mayest keep us alive and preserve us and redeem us speedily so that we may observe thy statutes and do thy will and serve thee with a perfect heart. Amen.

“People were created to be loved. Things were created to be used. The reason why the world is in chaos is because things are being loved and people are being used.”

- Unknown

“Why do we fast, but you do not see? Why humble ourselves, but you do not notice?” Look, you serve your own interest on your fast day, and oppress all your workers. Look, you fast only to quarrel and to fight and to strike with a wicked fist. Such fasting as you do today will not make your voice heard on high. Is such the fast that I choose, a day to humble oneself? Is it to bow down the head like a bulrush, and to lie in sackcloth and ashes? Will you call this a fast, a day acceptable to the Lord? Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover them, and not to hide yourself from your own kin.”

- Isaiah 58:3-7

Four Conversations

Darkness | what does Egypt look like?

1. How does your tradition understand oppression?

Judaism

Israel's enslavement in Egypt constitutes the archetype of oppression. The strong exploit the weak, denying them freedom with no recourse to justice. Oppression violates the fundamental human dignity that flows from our having been created in God's image. The oppressor turns a blind eye to the divine spark in each of us. As a result, God stands with the oppressed: "You shall not wrong a stranger or oppress him, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt. You shall not ill-treat any widow or orphan. If you do mistreat them, I will heed their outcry as soon as they cry out to Me, and My anger shall blaze forth..." (Exodus 22:20-23). When we struggle against oppression to build a just world, we join hands with God.

Christianity

Christianity, like Judaism, worships the God who takes notice of suffering. In his encounter with the mysterious "I am who I am" at the burning bush, Moses approaches the One who is attentive to the groaning of the enslaved Israelites (see Exodus 2:23-3:20). Similarly, the gospels depict Jesus as profoundly moved by suffering, whether physical impairment or spiritual desolation. They portray Jesus as healing, feeding the hungry, expelling demons and forgiving sins. "Those who are well," Jesus says, "have no need of a physician, but those who are sick; I have come to call not the righteous but sinners" (Gospel of Mark 2:17).

So the imperative to struggle against oppression of any kind is rooted in our experience of God. God desires the flourishing of creation; our call is to use our divinely given gifts to alleviate any suffering that impedes this flourishing. Ameliorating suffering may involve direct encounter with people who are impoverished, victims of violence, afflicted with illness or lacking human rights. It also entails seeking to change systems that deprive people of their full humanity or despoil creation.

Islam

The Qur'an calls oppression *zulm* and the oppressor *zaalim*. Oppression comes in many forms—political, social, and economic. It can involve discrimination of many kinds: racial, gender, ethnic, or religious. The opposite of *zulm* is *`adl* (justice) in Islam. The Qur'an calls for eradication of *zulm* and restoration of *`adl* in all fields of life. Justice prolongs life by creating the conditions for prosperity, while oppression leads to destruction. The Qur'an refers to Pharaoh and his advisors' oppressors (8:54). It speaks of the Israelites enslaved in Egypt as *mustad`afeen* (the weak and the oppressed), and commends them for being patient throughout the ordeal. God blessed the Israelites with power and destroyed Pharaoh and his army (7:137).

2. What are the resources in your tradition for struggle against our inner pharaohs?

Judaism

You can think of the inner Pharaoh as a part of yourself that leads you to try to dominate others, to see yourself as master of the universe. The heart of the struggle to overcome this all-too-human proclivity lies in recognizing that God is God and you're not. Prayer and participation in a Jewish community go a long way to keep that essential truth in focus.

Many Jewish rituals serve to undermine our tendencies toward grandiosity. Matzah, the unleavened bread we eat at the Passover Seder, has often been said to symbolize simplicity and modesty. It is not puffed up. As one Hassidic master taught, matzah represents a point of purity to which we annually return to cleanse ourselves of the haughtiness that rises within us over the course of the year. On the Day of Atonement, observant Jews fast, refrain from bathing and wear a white robe that evokes a burial shroud. The day simulates death and sharpens the will to make amends. The liturgy includes repeated confessionals of the sins we have committed against others.

Christianity

Religion is not for the faint-hearted. It calls for honesty before God and acknowledgment for ways in which we ignore, rationalize and deny our call to flourish and contribute to the flourishing of all creation. Fortunately, religions offer abundant resources for struggling against our inner Pharaohs; personal and communal prayer and fasting are common ways in which adherents are invited to live more profoundly.

Worship of God lies at the heart of confronting our inner Pharaoh because in worshiping we acknowledge we are not God. Worship in Christianity includes confession of sin; we might think of sin as the "choice to remain in a wrecked relationship with God and with other human beings." But worship has myriad expressions: celebrations of Eucharist or Communion Services, recitation of the Liturgy of the Hours (e.g., via the *Book of Common Prayer*, the *Breviary*, or other modes of recitation of Psalms, readings and prayers), various meditation practices (e.g., Centering Prayer), *Lectio Divina* ("sustained immersion into a revelatory text") and devotions (e.g., Bible study; shared prayer; the Rosary, a Catholic practice using prayer beads that bears similarity to Muslim, Buddhist and Hindu practices). Over the centuries one of the most significant Christian practices for confronting our inner Pharaoh has been the pilgrimage, particularly to the Way of St. James (El Camino de Santiago) in Compostela, Spain. This pilgrimage was the subject of the 2011 film, "The Way," starring Martin Sheen and Emilio Estevez. Increasingly, the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius that originated with the 16th century founder of the Society of Jesus, or the Jesuits, have become more widely practiced within the spectrum of Christian traditions.

Islam

Our biggest inner Pharaohs in Islam are our arrogance and egoism. God asked Moses to go to Pharaoh: "...for, verily, he has transgressed all bounds of equity" (20:24). Condemning Pharaoh's and his chieftains' arrogance, the Qur'an says: "Unto Pharaoh and his great ones; but these behaved with arrogance, for they were people wont to glorify [only] themselves" (23:46). In another verse the Qur'an says: "Behold, Pharaoh exalted himself in the land and divided its people into castes. One group of them he deemed utterly low; he would slaughter their sons and spare [only] their women: for, behold, he was one of those who spread corruption [on earth]"(28:4).

The Qur'an calls for humility and asks people to reject arrogance in its all shapes: "And turn not thy cheek away from people in [false] pride, and walk not haughtily on earth: for, behold, God does not love anyone who, out of self-conceit, acts in a boastful manner" (31:18). The Qur'an asks its followers to worship God and fulfill their obligations to people humbly: "Worship God [alone], and do not ascribe divinity, in any way, to aught beside Him. And do good unto your parents, and near of kin, and unto orphans, and the needy, and the neighbor from among your own people, and the neighbor who is a stranger, and the friend by your side, and the wayfarer, and those whom you rightfully possess. Verily, God does not love any of those who, full of self-conceit, act in a boastful manner" (4:36). Praising those who are humble, the Qur'an says: "For, [true] servants of the Most Gracious are [only] they who walk gently on earth, and who, whenever the foolish address them, reply with [words of] peace" (25:63).

Worship, fasting, and remembering God are the best methods of staying humble. When Muslims put their forehead on earth in prostration, they commit themselves to humbleness and to staying away from arrogance. Prostration reminds the believers that we come from earth and very soon will return to the earth and will be accountable to all for our actions before God.

Four Conversations

Light | what does redemption look like?

3. Given the magnitude of human suffering, how is it possible to believe in an all just, all powerful God? How can *faith* light up the darkness?

Judaism

The Haggadah repeatedly speaks of God's redeeming Israel with a "strong hand." Yet this very passage refers to another "hand," one that chronically threatens an innocent people's destruction "But the Holy One saves us from their hand." But alas, God does not always "save us from their hand." Why? Joseph Soloveitchik (1903-1992), the great Modern Orthodox scholar, compared the situation to a tapestry of which we can only view the reverse side. We cannot see the totality of the design that reveals the "divine plan." This view evokes the image of God depicted by Isaiah: "I make peace and I make evil" (45:7). In his modern classic, *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*, Harold Kushner rejects this and says, for example, that we should not view a plane crash as an act of God. Such things "happen at random, and randomness is another name for chaos, in those corners of the universe where God's creative light has not yet penetrated." Isaiah again: "We hope for light, and lo! there is darkness" (59:9).

Christianity

The writer of the Letter to the Colossians, most likely a disciple of the Apostle Paul, spoke of Jesus as "the image of the invisible God" (1:15). Jesus acts in ways that heal and that manifest the divine reign of mercy and justice. In him people experience redemption. Yet he does not ameliorate every suffering person or heal all the world's ills—and he, too, suffers an ignominious death at the hands of imperial Rome. Death, however, is not the last word. In the claim that God has raised Jesus from the dead, Christians voice their belief that redemption extends beyond the realm of death.

We are meant, like those Hebrews in Egypt who groaned in slavery, to cry out for redemption. Even as we speak of Christ as our redeemer, we know that redemption is incomplete. Our world is captive to powerful forces of evil; each of us is vulnerable to this evil. In writing to the community at Rome, Paul says that "the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now; and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies" (Romans 8:23).

Islam

God is all peace (Salaam) and wants people to live in peace with justice. God forbids people to commit oppression, corruption, and mischief on earth. God does not make people to suffer, but people suffer because of their own actions. The Qur'an says: "[Since they have become oblivious of God], corruption has appeared on land and in the sea as an outcome of what men's hands have wrought: and so He will let them taste [the evil of] some of their doings, so that they might return [to the right path]" (30:41).

God is all powerful in Islam, but God has given free will to people and makes them responsible for their actions. Qur'anic stories of destruction are rooted in grave misdeeds by those people. For example, the destruction of Pharaoh and his armies came about from their own violent action against the Israelites. The same thing happens in the story of the people of Thamud and 'Aad, who unfortunately followed the path of injustice and oppression and invited their self-destruction (7:73-79).

The problem that we face behind many of these stories is the notion of God as a rescuer and destroyer. It is God who unleashed a tornado on the wicked people and showered them with stones. It is God who caused the earth to swallow the evil ones. But then the Qur'an says that it was not God who wronged them but they wronged themselves. (29:40)

There are two approaches to understanding this dichotomy. One is that the destruction stories in the Qur'an have limited application. The destruction came upon those communities in the presence of their prophets. More specifically, the communities or the communities' leaders persecuted and denied their prophets, and compelled them to pray against them. These prayers were similar to Noah's: "O my Sustainer! Leave not on earth any of those who deny the truth" (Q.,71:26). Second, when Muhammad (peace be upon him) and his followers were persecuted, tortured and even driven out of their homes, the angels of destruction came on several occasions to allow them to destroy the Meccans and the people of Ta'if. However, Muhammad refused to do so and prayed for their safety. It is said that Muhammad prayed to God to stop destroying communities because of their sins, and God heard his prayers.

What about modern-day disasters, such as Sandy, Katrina, earthquakes and other calamities? Many Muslim scholars would say these are natural and environmental disasters, not supernatural ones. We are trustees of the Earth and should take care of it and protect it. These natural calamities teach us to preserve the environment and to humble ourselves before God and His creation by helping and standing together with those who have suffered. However there are some Muslims who would say that such disasters are caused by the sins of people.

Most Muslims are straightforward in their belief about God. They believe that God can make things happen with a simple command. Believers are thankful to God in all conditions, whether happiness or suffering. Muslims believe that everything comes from God and there is Khair (blessing-goodness) in what happens to them. A person says Al Hamdu Lillah (praise be to God) whether he/she hears a message of sorrow or happiness. Disasters and calamities teach Muslims how to be responsible—repenting, reaching out and working together to repair the wounds of humanity.

4. When we have gone from darkness to light, what will that world of light look like?
How can we sustain *hope* in an unredeemed world?

“It’s better to light a candle than to curse the darkness.”

- Eleanor Roosevelt

Standing on the parted shores of history
We still believe what we were taught
Before ever we stood at Sinai’s foot;
That wherever we go, it is eternally Egypt
That there is a better place, a promised land;
That the winding way to that promise
Passes through the wilderness.
That there is no way to get from here to there
Except by joining hands, marching together.

- Michael Walzer, *Exodus and Revolution*

The New Colossus

Not like the brazen giant of Greek fame,
With conquering limbs astride from land to land;
Here at our sea-washed, sunset gates shall stand
A mighty woman with a torch, whose flame
Is the imprisoned lightning, and her name
Mother of Exiles. From her beacon-hand
Glows world-wide welcome; her mild eyes command
The air-bridged harbor that twin cities frame.
“Keep, ancient lands, your storied pomp!” cries she
With silent lips. “Give me your tired, your poor,
Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,
The wretched refuse of your teeming shore.
Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost to me,
I lift my lamp beside the golden door!”

- Emma Lazarus

The Death of Evil Upon the Seashore

The death of the Egyptians upon the seashore is a glaring symbol of the ultimate doom of evil in its struggle with good. There is something in the very nature of the universe which is on the side of Israel in its struggle with every Egypt. There is something in the very nature of the universe which ultimately comes to the aid of goodness in its perennial struggle with evil.

- Reverend Martin Luther King

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.

- Dalai Lama

“Out of suffering have emerged the strongest souls; the most massive characters are seared with scars.”

- Khalil Gibran

One Song

What is praised is one, so the praise is one too,
many jugs being poured into a huge basin.
All religions, all this singing, one song.
The differences are just illusion and vanity.
Sunlight looks a little different
on this wall than it does on that wall
and a lot different on this other one,
but it is still one light.
We have borrowed these clothes,
these time-and-space personalities,
from a light, and when we praise,
we are pouring them back in.

- Rumi

“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.”

- John 1:1-5

“The most beautiful people we have known are those who have known defeat, known suffering, known struggle, known loss, and have found their way out of those depths.”

- Elisabeth Kubler-Ross

The Afikoman Pledge

Tonight we read together:
Lo! This is the bread of poverty that our ancestors ate.
Let all who are hungry come and eat!
Let all who are in need share in the hope of Passover!
This year we all are slaves,
Next year may we all be free.

Tonight, to redeem the Afikoman:
We renew our commitment to help all who are hungry round the world,
So that next year we may all be free.

“Our human compassion binds us the one to the other - not in pity or patronizingly, but as human beings who have learnt how to turn our common suffering into hope for the future.”

- Nelson Mandela

“I see the world being slowly transformed into a wilderness; I hear the approaching thunder that, one day, will destroy us too. I feel the suffering of millions. And yet, when I look up at the sky, I somehow feel that everything will change for the better, that this cruelty too shall end, that peace and tranquility will return once more.”

- Anne Frank

“What do we, who today no longer have any fear or awe of the darkness or night, know about the great joy that our forebears and the early Christians felt every morning at the return of the light? If we were to learn again something of the praise and adoration that is due the triune God early in the morning, then we would also begin to sense something of the joy that comes when night is past and those who dwell with one another come together early in the morning to praise their God and hear the Word and pray together. We would learn again of God the Father and Creator who has preserved our life through the dark night and awakened us to a new day; God the Son and Savior of the World, who vanquished death and hell for us, and dwells in our midst as Victor; God the Holy Spirit who pours the bright light of God’s Word into our hearts early in the morning, driving away all darkness and sin and teaching us to pray the right way. Morning does not belong to the individual; it belongs to all..”

- From *Life Together*, published in 1934 by Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Lutheran pastor, theologian, anti-Nazi dissident, who was executed in a concentration camp in April of 1945, two weeks before the camp was liberated

Salaam

Od Yavo Shalom Alenu (x3)

Ve-al Kulam

Salaam Alenu V'Al Kol ha-Olam Salaam, Salaam (x2)

Peace will come upon us and on everyone

L'Shana Ha'ba'ah B'Yrushalayim!

Next Year in Jerusalem... at Peace!