

# **The ASBI Seder Companion**

*5780/2020*

## NIGHT ONE

### **Introduction** - Rabbi Wolkenfeld

The Passover Seder is an experience that is meant to bind one generation to another through the telling of the story of the exodus from Egypt from grandparents and parents to their children and grandchildren. But the Passover Seder is also an experience that is meant to bind the members of a community to one another, through the extra tzedakah disbursements to enable everyone to enjoy a festive holiday, and through cultivating the mitzvah of hachnasat orchim by opening our home to guests who in turn enhance our celebration by sharing their own questions, answers, stories, and perspectives with all of those gathered around the seder table.

ASBI is publishing this Seder Companion to replicate the wonderful outcome of diverse voices and diverse perspectives sharing with one another at the seder. Even as we are forced to spend Seder night apart, we can still feel the bonds of community by reading and contemplating the submissions that have been shared by your neighbors and friends. We hope that this supplement will enhance your seder. Reach out after yom tov to follow up with the authors of these submissions. And make plans to spend future Shabbat and holiday meals together just as soon as it is safe to do so.

### **Karpas** - Jacob Leven

A thought from the Maharil (15th century codifier of Ashkenazi custom): On most nights, we're bound by the strictures of customary etiquette, which would dictate proceeding from Kiddush to Motzi. Tonight, as an expression of freedom, we are free to deviate from the usual order, so we go from Kiddush to the vegetables instead.

### **Magid** - Camila Altman

Magid is the Mitzvah of relating the story of the Exodus from Egypt and is the central portion of the Seder. The words, Bibhilou Yatzanu MiMitzrayim (Aramaic for "in haste, we left Egypt") are written in the Rambam's Hagada. As a segway into the Magid section, there is a Moroccan custom to chant Bibhilo while the head of the family passes the Seder plate over the heads of those present. Growing up my father would go around passing the seder plate over our heads and then he would also hit us in the head with it because he could.

### **Ma Nishtanah** - Elana Pentelnic

While we are asking "What makes this night different from all other nights?" something that might be on our minds even more so is, "what makes this Seder different from all other seders?"

Try thinking about how this Seder is similar to all other seders. Ma Nishtanah in fact answers that. While you might not be with the same people you have in the past you all are still dipping twice, eating matzah, eating bitter herbs, and reclining. This year there are going to be a much larger number of sederim this year than last because so many people are doing them alone, but it is special to think of all the same mitzvot we are doing together.

**Avadim Hayinu / "We were slaves to Pharaoh" - Isabel B Singer**

What does it mean to be a slave? The acclaimed historian Orlando Patterson defines slavery as "social death." This means a slave has only one social relationship that society recognizes: his status as his master's property. A slave is a stranger and an outsider with no network of kin or friends.

Ironically, inherent to the institution slavery is its own destruction. The master forces the slave to assimilate into his society. As the slave becomes a part of the master's culture, he establishes relationships with other people, which undermines his enslavement.

Does this paradigm of slavery map onto our experience in mitzrayim? Why or why not?

**Maaseh B'Rebbe Eliezer/Story of the Five Rabbis - Alexa Micley**

Five rabbis are so engaged by the Exodus story that they have to be reminded to say their morning prayers. It is certainly not their first Seder, and yet they are still vigorously searching. As an English teacher, I teach many books year after year. Yet each time, I see a passage previously overlooked or a student raises an angle anew. The Haggadah has us tell the same story every year. However, each year we are different, our world is different, and thus the text is different. It's always the same story, but also one we have never read before.

**The Wise Son - Tali Winkler**

The questions and answers of the four sons are taken from the Torah. Sometime before tomorrow night's Seder, look up the biblical quotations of the sons' questions in their original contexts: Exodus 12:25-27, Exodus 13:8-9, Exodus 13:14-16, and Deuteronomy 6:20-25. How is each question introduced? Why would the rabbis have assigned that specific question to that specific child? What answer is given to each question by the biblical text? Does the haggadah give the same answers? If not, why might the rabbis have changed, switched, or left out the answers to the original questions?

**The Wicked Son - Ranana Dine**

Throughout our history the wicked son has been depicted as various different types of figures including a soldier, a sportsman, a hunter, a fat Soviet Commissar, a teenage rebel, and a protesting hippie. These figures represent the kind of domestic disruption or rebelliousness that we all experience - none of these figures are far away from Jewish life; they represent the difficulties we all know. Use the "wicked" son this year to reflect on the pain and suffering we are encountering, and as a chance to bring that "wickedness" to the table, even during this celebration of our freedom.

**The Innocent Son - Binyamin Cohen**

Why is the answer to "what is this?" a description of God's strength? Because rooted at the heart of the Pesach story and the Pesach celebration is a foundational concept of Judaism: acknowledgement of God's strength is an acknowledgement of the service we owe the world that God created. Pesach is about freedom *to*, not freedom *from*. The question the innocent child is really asking is, "why are we doing all this?" The answer is that God is the Creator of the Universe.

### **The Son Who Doesn't Know How to Ask** - Binyamin Cohen

For the sake of this, you tell this child; for the sake of this celebration, today. And for the sake of your future celebration, and the sake of your children, and their children. The message the child who doesn't know how to ask needs to hear is that they are part of this. They don't know where to even start. Jewish life and Jewish continuity start with inclusion, with feeling like you have a seat at the table. The rest is commentary.

### **MiTchilah Ovdei Avodah Zara / "From The Beginning Our Ancestors were Idolators"** -

Adam Pershan

For a worshipper of idols, the world was chaotic by design. Classical mythology was full of feuding gods and powers. In these stories, humanity was either a casualty of circumstance or an afterthought. Our collective journey to monotheism, then, was also a journey toward historical meaning. Monotheism didn't just mean acknowledging only one God, but also believing that God could make and keep a promise to us and that we could have a purpose beyond the mundane.

### **Arami Oved Avi / "My Father Was a Wandering Aramean"** - Rabbi Wolkenfeld

Telling the story of the exodus from Egypt, the mitzvah of sippur yetziat mitzrayim, could have entailed reading the first half of the Book of Exodus in which the story is told in narrative form with great drama and with many significant and profound details. Instead, we are told to read four verses from the Book of Deuteronomy, taken from the ceremonial declaration of a farmer bringing his first fruits to Jerusalem. These verses tell the story of the Jewish people's sojourn in Egypt in the sparsest of detail possible and the Haggadah quotes midrashim to add contours and color to the story. Why is the mitzvah performed in this way? Telling the story through midrash ensures that this aspect of the seder is an experience of Torah study. Throughout the seder we ask questions and answer them. We quote midrashim to give context to the seder rituals and we quote midrashim to understand the story of the exodus itself. This reinforces Torah study, the intellectual engagement with texts and their interrogation, as the central dynamic of Jewish life.

### **Extra Makkot** - Binyamin Cohen

This wonderfully ridiculous passage is something my family loves to joke about as being another example of the Rabbis somewhat drunken revelry at the Pesach seder. I've always thought it was wonderful that learning Torah is the thing the Rabbis default to doing when drunk and up all night.

What the Rabbis are really picking up on in this section of the seder, and in *dayenu* that follows, is that it is important to take note of all the small miracles and good things that make up our lives. It is often so easy to overlook them, and by extrapolating on the plagues to this ridiculous extent, the Rabbis are telling us: look closer at the blessings in your life, and you'll see that there are so many more than you thought there were!

### **Dayenu** - Arielle Lewis

I want to share a picture of my seder at home because like so many, I am missing home tonight. Dayenu is a battle song. As we finish Maggid, family members remove nice ties and put on their coats in anticipation. As first words of the verse break out, there is an explosion of green onions. Each person grabs a couple of scallions and hits in remembrance of the Jews beaten by whips as slaves in Egypt. For many it is a continuation of last

year's playful dayenu struggle. Last year, in anticipation of his first Persian seder Jacob's father and uncles brought leeks, in an attempt to outgun the pros. Dayenu is a moment of excitement and freedom. As we sing way say "Dayenu" for each step of exodus, we take none of Hashem's actions for granted. But this year one thing we cannot take for granted is our ability to sing these words together - Dayenu!

### **Rabban Gamliel's Three Essential Things** - Daniela Garzon

On Pesach two commands coincide: the first, to eat the festive meal; the second, to tell the story. Rabban Gamliel argues that the two are connected. The story explains the food; the food allows us to relive the story. The Torah says: "If your children ask you, What is this service you observe? you shall say, It is a Pesach offering to the LORD, for He passed over the houses of the children of Israel in Egypt while he struck down the Egyptians, but saved those in our homes" (Ex. 12:25-27). Thus, from the very outset eating, asking, and explaining were connected, and it is this connection on which Rabban Gamliel bases his view that all three elements of the Passover meal must be explained. [From the Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks Haggadah]

### **B'chol Dor v'Dor/In Every Generation** - Yadin Teitz

If one compares our text with that of the 9th-century Seder of Rav Amram Gaon, there is an interesting distinction. The passage starts out the same way, "In each and every generation...", but the source quoted as proof for this statement differs slightly. Our Haggadah quotes the full verse of Exodus 13:8, "And you shall explain to your son on that day: For the sake of this, did the Lord do [this] for me in my going out of Egypt." In contrast, Rav Amram's Haggadah only quotes the latter part of the verse ("For the sake of this..."). Certainly, logic would dictate quoting the full pasuk. But by purposefully leaving off the part about explaining to your child, perhaps a new emphasis is being placed on you, and your personal obligation of seeing yourself as if you left Egypt. While pedagogy is a major focus of other parts of the seder, the commandment here is on you.

### **Maror** - Solomon Lowenstein

Why is it that we subject ourselves to eat bitter maror on a night where we should feel like royalty? Doesn't this seem out of place for a festive meal?

The bitterness of the Jews in Egypt was the key to their redemption. They never felt comfortable being there. We too should never get too comfortable. We should continue to ask questions and take on risks to make each and every one of us better individuals.

### **Shfoch Chamatcha/ "Pour Your Wrath"** - Rabbanit Leah Sarna

Every year at this juncture in the Seder my family pauses to remember the beginning of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising, which took place on this night in 1943. We remember the Holocaust, the losses along with the heroics, we honor survivors, and we sing the slow, Modzitz Ani Maamin.

### **Elijah** - Ezra Landman-Feigelson

Normally we do not open our doors wide open at midnight because we do not know who might come in. The night of Pesach is considered to be a guarded night. During the Seder, we open our doors to welcome Eliyahu HaNavi and to show that Hashem is protecting us from the dangers outside our homes.

**Next Year in Jerusalem** - Daniel Chiat

In Rabbi Sacks's esteemed words, "Jerusalem became a metaphor for the collective destination of the Jewish people. A city is what we build together, individually through our homes, collectively through our public spaces." Despite our physical public spaces being temporarily shuttered, may we continue to build together, individually through our homes, collectively through our new virtual public spaces.

## NIGHT TWO

### **Introduction** - Daniela Garzon

This year many of us are going to have a unique Pesach experience due to the novel coronavirus. We can't travel to be with family, or even host our friends that live nearby because we too have been commanded to stay in our homes. However, this year also gives us the unique opportunity to experience a Pesach that is reminiscent of Pesach Mitzraim. During the first Pesach Bnei Yisrael was commanded to stay inside because of the plague of Macat Bechorot.

A big part of the seder is to experience the exodus from Egypt. Many families have different ways of bringing the feelings of those times into the seder, whether it be through plays or dioramas, etc. However, no matter what we do it is very hard to experience most aspects of yetziat mitzraim. I, for one, no matter how hard I try to imagine, cannot really relate to a swarm of frogs or such darkness that people are paralyzed or waters parting as I walk through a huge body of water. But this year there is one aspect of yetziat mitzraim that is very tangible: having to stay in our homes no matter what and celebrate Pesach with only the people in our household because of what is going on right outside. Even if every year my family leaves our front door unlocked to let Hashem protect us, I don't really think that anyone is going to break into our suburban home. This year, on the other hand, our unusual circumstances allow us to relate to an aspect of the original Exodus.

### **Urchatz** - Eli Alster

While most of the Jewish world no longer washes their hands before eating foods dipped in liquid, despite Talmudic statements to the contrary (Pesachim 115a), urchatz is a seder staple. Why is this? If urchatz was about being more ritually scrupulous than normal as a way of honoring the seder, wouldn't this custom make more sense during the Yamim Noraim? The Netziv instead answers that on the seder night we attempt to act as if the Temple still stood, and to imitate the Pesach seder as it was at the time that the Pesach sacrifice was being offered.

### **Ha Lachma Anya** - Rabbanit Leah Sarna

Ha Lachma Anya declares, somewhat bewilderingly, that "this year we are slaves." We're all sorts of things right now, but slaves? Truth is, between 20 and 40 million human beings are still enslaved today, even in countries like the United States and Israel. Tonight, as we contemplate our own freedom, perhaps this is a brief moment to recognize that for as long as humankind continue to perpetuate these wrongs, we are slaves.

### **Yachatz & Hiding Afikomen** - Jacob Leven

An idea from Rav Soloveitchik: Breaking bread is the means of sharing. We break the matza to show our achdut (fraternity). (If you have multiple sets of matza at your seder, you can express this idea of sharing by exchanging afikomens.)

### **Ma Nishtana / Four Questions** - Ben Hyman

An English Jew, a prominent novelist and intellectual, is informed he's to be knighted. He is told by the queen's staff that when he stands before her, he is to recite a certain Latin expression just before the knighting.

On the day of the ceremony, the man is very nervous. When he approaches the queen, he forgets the Latin phrase. Precious seconds tick by. The only non-English words that he knows pour out of him: ""Ma nish-ta-na ha-laila ha-zeh mi-kol ha-leilot?"" The queen, confused, turns to her protocol officer and asks, ""Why is this knight different from all other knights?""

(Adapted from "Jewish Humor," by Rabbi Joseph Telushkin)

### **Avadim Hayinu** - Elana Pentelnic

Avadim Hayinu is a special song for my family. Since I was 7 my family has built a tent out of sheets and two by fours and couches in our living room. During this song we make our own exodus into the living room to sing songs and continue maggid reclining on couches and pillows.

### **Maaseh b'Rabbi Eliezer / Story of the Five Rabbis** - Rabbanit Leah Sarna

This is a story of a micro-seder, five adults gathered without their families or their students. So much of this section of the Haggadah focuses on education of children-- and these Rabbis are themselves educators-- and yet the children are absent. Imagine Rabbi Elazar ben Azariah reciting the Mah Nishtana! Perhaps we can imagine ourselves into their shoes-- and hope that someday soon the sun will rise, and students will come bearing news that it is time to return to shul again.

### **Rabbi Elazar ben Azariah** - Binyamin Cohen

Something I find especially poignant this year is the discussion of "all of the days of your life." Being isolated and feeling alone for this very weird Pesach may feel really bad right now, but it's important to remember that it is not for "all the days of our life."

### **The Wicked Son** - Tali Winkler

The four sons are often split into two pairs of two, in order to contrast them. Which pairings have you heard before? Which pairings do you think make the most sense? What types of categories are you using? For example, the wise and the wicked sons are often portrayed as opposites. But wise seems to be an intellectual characteristic, while wicked seems like a moral one. How many ways can you pair the four sons, and what can you learn from each of those pairings?

### **The Innocent Son** - Binyamin Cohen

Why did God take us out of Egypt with a strong *hand*? Why does the text emphasize the hand, the arm, when it describes how God took us out of Egypt? Because it is telling us that God is holding our hands, embracing us; that, essentially, God is striving to be close to us. This Pesach, we are far apart from many people who we'd like to hold. The innocent son, feeling lost, says "what is this" something we are feeling about the world around us right now. It can be comforting to remember that God is still holding us, hugging us through our darkest times.

### **The Son Who Doesn't Know How to Ask** - Binyamin Cohen

Even this child has an advantage that some people don't: they are already at a Seder! There really is another child, a fifth child: the one who isn't even at the table. It will be hard this year to remember the people not at



the table, especially when so many of our Seder tables are so very different from the Seder tables we wish we were at. But it can also be helpful, in these stressful times, to remember that at least we are having a Seder, and, because you're reading this, you have a community that loves you and is doing its best to take care of you.

### **MiTchilah / "From The Beginning Our Ancestors Were Idolators"** - Adam Pershan

The Torah gives us surprisingly little information about Avraham's early life. We have a small section at the end of parshat Noach, and then the famous call of "lech lecha." This lack of detail may well indicate the conclusiveness and significance of Avraham's religious rebirth: his earlier life doesn't matter to us, but then why include it here in Maggid? Perhaps it conveys, in the words of my teacher Rabbi Menachem Leibtag, that Avraham wasn't chosen because he was better, but rather he was chosen to become better.

### **Vayotzieynu Hashem MiMitzrayim / "And the Lord Took Us Out of Egypt"** - Rabbanit Sarna

My grandfather, Professor Nahum M. Sarna a"h, used to say at this part of the seder every year: "If the convert had asked me to summarize the whole Torah while standing on one foot, I would have told him this line: *Not through an angel and not through a seraph and not through a messenger, but the Holy One, blessed be He, Himself.*" If you had to summarize the whole Torah while standing on one foot, what would you say?

### **Extra Makkot** - Ezra Getzler

These lines of the Haggadah are the culmination of Maggid, the fifth section of the Seder. The number five appears repeatedly:

-1) the strong hand, 2) the outstretched forearm, 3) great awe, 4) signs, and 5) wonders;

-pairs of plagues (10=2x5);

-the five fingers of the hand of the Almighty;

-1) the fierceness of his anger, 2) his wrath, 3) fury, 4) trouble, and 5) sending of messengers of evil.

-Rabbi Akiva explains that there were 50 plagues in Egypt (10 times the five expressions of the Almighty's anger), and 250 plagues at the Red Sea (50 times the fingers of the Almighty's hand).

What lesson do I draw from this? If Pharaoh had shown empathy for the downtrodden worker, the Israelite slave, before the manifestation of a single sign of G-d's anger, his nation would have been spared much suffering. If he had shown clemency after five plagues, or ten, or fifty, the Egyptians would still have been spared further suffering. But it was only after his people suffered through 250 plagues that he finally was moved to liberate the poorest people in his country, our forefathers.

### **Dayenu** - Tali Winkler

This song lists the wonders God did and says after each step that had God only done that, it would have sufficed. But is that true? If God had taken us out of Egypt but not given us Manna, would that really have been enough? Wouldn't we have starved to death in the desert? This is an important lesson about gratitude. If God had taken us out of Egypt but not given us Manna, we would still have to thank God. Just because things are not perfect, or are works-in-progress, we still have an obligation to acknowledge the good that is currently in our lives and express gratitude, even while working towards future goals.

### **B'chol Dor v'Dor/In Every Generation** - Jacob Leven

An idea from the Sfas Emes (The Gerrer Rebbe from 1870 to 1905): To see oneself as having literally left Egypt is hard. But if we think of "Egypt" more broadly as representing the concept of bondage, literal and figurative, then we can each look at obstacles that we have personally overcome and say that we have literally left those "Egypt". Moreover, the Sfas Emes sees redemption as a continuous process. He uses the term *geulah nimsbechet* (continuous redemption). Just as Hashem redeemed us from our past Egypts, so will He redeem us from our present and future Egypts.

### **Motzi Matzah** - Alexa Micley

Why do we put the broken middle matzah between two whole matzahs? At our family Seders, my father likes to remind us, "What do Jews do with someone broken? We hug, we embrace, we encase in wholeness."

### **Sefirat HaOmer** - Rabbanit Leah Sarna

A meme has been going around that says, "for those of you that have lost track, today is Blursday, the fortyteenths of Maprilay" -- aptly capturing the blurring of time that occurs as we shelter in place at home. But, beginning tonight, we start to count. And a better kind of count than, "how long have I been doing this for again?!" -- instead a count up to our receiving the Torah at Sinai. A count that the Kabbalists have interpreted into a daily exploration of the multiple facets of the Almighty. Hopefully as we count the days and weeks of Sefira it will help us to remember that even in a haywire world, our time is still significant, worth measuring and ultimately limited. What are you counting up to, this Sefirah? How will you use this time to draw closer?