



“Fight for the Health of Your Community”

Seder Readings for Passover 5780

Rabbi Brant Rosen

Kadesh קדש

From the narrow place I called out to God, who answered me with wide open spaces. (Psalm 118:5)

Before we raise the cup to another Passover, we must acknowledge that this night is very different from all other nights. In this extraordinary moment of global pandemic, we are literally dwelling in the “narrow place” of social separation. Thus, we come to the very first question of the evening: how on earth do we fulfill the mitzvah to observe the Passover seder? Where do we even begin?

Let’s begin here: now more than ever, we must affirm Passover’s teaching that liberation is not only possible, but inevitable. We know from nature that spring will invariably follow winter. We know from history that the oppressed do not remain oppressed forever. So too, we know in our hearts and minds that one day we will eventually make it through this narrow place of pandemic and emerge into “wide open spaces.”

But as we also learn from our Passover story: this emergence never happens easily. It cannot happen without real struggle and hard work. We know that there will be casualties. We know, tragically, that the number of casualties is rising dramatically even as we gather together tonight. And while we know there is a new world waiting for us, we don’t yet know how many of us will make it there – or what that world will actually look like when we arrive.

For now, however, we do know this: like the Israelites of our story, we will not make it through without each other. So too, if the current pandemic has taught us anything, it is the lesson that was learned so painfully by the Israelites in our story: that we are all in this together. That my liberation is irrevocably bound up with yours. And that in the midst of the narrow place, there is no other way but forward.

So, as we lift the cup to another Passover, let this be our blessing:

Blessed is the One who shows us how to stand together.

Blessed is the One who inspires us to show up for one another.

Blessed is the One who leads us all toward the wide-open spaces of a new day.

Urchatz ורחץ

As with many spiritual traditions, Judaism considers the washing of hands to be a sacred act. The Torah is full of references to the priests washing their hands during ritual sacrifices. According to Jewish law, one is obliged to wash hands with a blessing before eating.

Of course, these rituals were developed centuries before modern medicine prescribed handwashing for protection against germs and infection. In this current moment of global pandemic we might say that handwashing is sacred on another level, since it’s one of the most basic things we can do to ensure the well-being of the community.

In the spirit of *pikuach nefesh* – the precept that saving lives supersedes all other commandments – we will now wash our hands before continuing with our seder.

Karpas כרפס

Keep looking out your window,
even as the earth hardens into stone,
even as the salt stings your eyes,
even if it looks like nothing will ever grow again.

Just keep a sharp lookout
for that flash of green in the distance.
You won't want to be looking away
when the message arrives at last:

Spring is coming.
It's time dry your tears.
The season of our liberation is at hand.

Yachatz יחץ

When disasters such as pandemics occur, it can feel as if the world has been suddenly, brutally shattered. In truth, however, it is generally those with privilege and power who tend to react this way. Those who are oppressed or disenfranchised don't need a disaster to remind them that the world has *long* been profoundly broken. Still, history has repeatedly demonstrated that when these fissures and cracks are ignored, they will inevitably spread to affect those who previously considered themselves invulnerable.

As we break this matzah in two, let's openly acknowledge a brokenness too long ignored. Yes, it is painful to realize that the world was never as whole as some might like to believe. But those who struggle against injustice will attest that despair is a luxury we cannot afford. Even amidst the hard truths revealed by this pandemic, we must pledge to one another: nothing is *ever* broken beyond repair.

May this time of brokenness lead to a deeper solidarity between *all* who are ready to fight for a better world.

Magid מגיד (Four More Questions)

Question 1: How have we have changed our own behaviors to ensure our health and the health of our neighbors?

Question 2: Who are most vulnerable to the pandemic? How can we effectively support and advocate for them?

Question 3: What are the most critical demands we must make of our local and national leaders at this moment?

Question 4: What kind of a world must we build once the pandemic is behind us?

Magid מגיד (10 Plagues of the Pandemic)

In addition to causing a massive health crisis, the spread of the COVID-19 virus has magnified injustices that have long plagued our communities. And so, in addition to the traditional 10 Plagues, we will now add 10 more that have been tragically exacerbated by the current pandemic.

Even as we say them, however, we must acknowledge that these injustices are deeply interrelated. In the end, they are part of a much larger system of oppression that, like Pharaoh, must one day fall:

1. Poverty
2. Homelessness
3. Unemployment
4. Xenophobia
5. Elder abuse
6. Mass incarceration
7. Immigrant detention
8. Militarized borders
9. State violence
10. No access to health care

Rachtzah רחצה

Blessed is the One
who entrusts us with the health and well being
of those who abide within our homes,
those who sit at our tables,
our families, friends, neighbors and communities,
those we know and those we will never meet.

Blessed is the One
who makes us holy through sacred action,
commanding us to wash our hands
that we may live well
on the land we share together.

Motzi Matzah מוציא מצה

We're traditionally taught that we eat matzah on Passover to remember that the Israelites didn't have time to let their bread dough rise when they left Egypt. When you think about it, however, there's nothing "hasty" about making matzah. Baking unleavened bread is, in fact, a process that demands great care and attention.

According to Jewish tradition, matzah dough must be baked no more than 18 minutes after the exposure of cut grain to moisture. If left to sit longer, airborne yeast bacteria will interact with the sugar molecules in the flour mixture and multiply by the billions. The yeast microorganisms will then release carbon dioxide gas that causes the dough to ferment.

As we consider this complex process, the connections to our current moment are obvious. During a time of pandemic, we must follow very specific protocols to lessen the chances of contracting and spreading viral infection. We're required to take care in our personal behaviors because we know they will have a direct impact on the greater good. Perhaps this is yet another reason for eating matzah on Passover: it reminds us of the sacred discipline required of each and every one of us to ensure our mutual well-being.

As we eat matzah this year, let it inspire us to commit and recommit to one another. For in the end, there will be no collective liberation if we fail to take responsibility for our own.

Maror מרור

Before we partake of maror, we acknowledge the bitter irony of the current moment: while we preach the importance of social distancing, we continue to crowd people into prisons, detention centers and refugee camps in record numbers, putting them – and the world at large – at risk. Indeed, there are already increasing reports that the coronavirus is spreading from incarcerated populations to the world outside.

Are we ready, at long last, to heed the hard lesson taught to us by the pandemic: that walls, fences and militarized borders will not ultimately keep us safe? Are we ready to embrace a new vision of collective security: one that does not depend upon the involuntary imprisonment of human beings? As we taste the maror now, these bitter questions challenge us more deeply than ever before.

Korech כורך

When the 2nd Temple stood, Rabbi Hillel used to make a sandwich by wrapping maror in matzah to honor the Torah's commandment, "They shall eat it with unleavened bread and bitter herbs" (Numbers 9:11). As we honor Hillel now, let's take a moment to discuss his most famous teaching, made powerfully relevant by this moment of pandemic:

If I am not for myself, who will be for me? But if I am only for myself, what am I? And if not now, when?

Shulchan Orech שלחן עורך

Honoring the mitzvah of *pikuach nefesh* (saving life is paramount), we share the festive meal in the shelter of our separate homes.

Tzafun צפון

Tzafun literally means "hidden" or "out of reach." At a traditional seder, the afikomen is hidden, found, and finally shared as the final morsel of food eaten at the meal. We know, of course, that we will not be able to share the afikomen this year. In a sense, it must remain hidden until we are collectively liberated from this moment of pandemic. In place of Tzafun, we now offer this prayer, looking forward to the day when all will find their place at the table once again:

*There is nothing hidden from you,
nothing concealed before your eyes.
So, may it be your will, Eternal One,
God of our ancestors,
that this time next year,
all who are hungry may come and eat;
that all who seek liberation
may partake of the Passover meal.*

(adapted from the High Holiday liturgy and the Passover Haggadah)

Opening the Door for Elijah

Before we open the door, we say:

And when your children ask you what
was Passover like that year,
you will tell them:

Yes, we shared our meal at separate tables,
in separate homes, behind closed doors
and yes, at times it almost felt like we
were the Israelites huddling in the night
behind their painted doorposts,
hoping, praying that the Angel of Death
would pass them by.

Except it wasn't like that at all:
there were no Israelites, no Egyptians
no capricious punishing God;
just all of us telling the story together,
the way we did every year
even if we knew nothing
would ever be the same again.

Then when the time came,
we opened our doors wide
and called out from table to table:
Let all who are broken gather
each another's scattered, shattered pieces,
let all who seek liberation
find a place at the table
let all who hunger for a new world
come and eat.

Hallel הלל

Even as they tell us to find safety
in separation, I feel your presence
and my soul soars beyond
these four walls.

And so with spirit ascending,
I'm sending out this song:

Pray for the peace of your community.
Pray for those you love
and for those you'll never know.
Pray for those who are working overtime
to keep us healthy and safe,
for those who are fighting every hour,
every second, to keep us alive.

For the sake of my family and friends,
for the sake of all who dwell on earth:
I wish you peace.
I will stand with you.
I will fight for you.
Even if I cannot see you,
Even though I cannot hold you.
Your well-being is forever bound
up with my own.

(based on Psalm 122)

Nirtzah נרצה

As in years before, we'll soon proclaim, "Next year in Jerusalem!" But do we actually mean this? Do we really, truly believe that we will live to reach the Promised Land? Do we honestly expect to see the world we've been struggling for and dreaming of for so long? And if not, might these words be something more than merely the obligatory aspiration we recite at the end of every seder?

It's worth considering that we may have already entered the Promised Land in ways we never stopped to realize: when we show up for our fellow strugglers, when we celebrate our victories along the way, when our efforts are infused with our highest values of justice and equity and sacrifice. Maybe, just maybe, these are the moments we find ourselves dwelling in the world we've been fighting for all along. We're experiencing the world we want to see because we've been creating it for one another.

Struggle is hard work, but if we view it exclusively as a means to an end, it will be only that. However, if we view struggle as an inherently sacred act, we may yet see the face of God in our comrades and those who have gone before us. We may come to understand that the world-to-come is not just a far-off dream. We may yet find we are living in the Promised Land in ways we have never truly understood before.

In this moment of pandemic, when the stakes of the Exodus story resonate more powerfully than ever before, let us vow to make these words real in the days and months ahead. From our narrow place to the wide-open spaces, let these words be our promise to one another:

לשנה הבאה בירושלים!

Le'shanah haba'ah bi'rushalayim!

Next Year in Jerusalem!