

# Seder Resource—The Four Questions of Social Justice

### Introduction

Every year in this season, the Jewish community recalls and relives our master story of the Exodus from Egypt. We return to this tale year after year, each time rediscovering its radical assertions that oppression can and must end, and that humanity and the world can be redeemed. The Exodus story contains the Jewish vision of how a just world might look.

Yet the Exodus narrative is far more than a story, or the basis for a family dinner in the spring. Rather, the Exodus reflects a powerful ambition for a political order, and it can, and has been, an influential force for shaping the world. To read the story of the Exodus in this way is to understand that the Jewish textual tradition is not now, nor was it ever, concerned *exclusively* with ritual observance or devotional prayer. Judaism has a vision of earthly justice that demands liberation from oppression, a covenantal community and an unending aspiration for a tomorrow that is better and more just than today. To engage with Judaism at that level is to engage with its fundamental building blocks.

### How to use This Resource

*The Four Questions of Social Justice* is based on *From Liberation to Freedom*, a Passover resource jointly produced by American Jewish World Service and AVODAH: the Jewish Service Corps. These four important questions, which also serve as the basis for *From Liberation to Freedom*, ask *seder* participants to reflect on themes of Jewish life and social justice that are raised by the Exodus story. The questions are inspired by Michael Walzer's *Exodus and Revolution*, which provides a descriptive analysis of the historical uses of the Exodus as a model for social change. Based on Walzer's analysis these questions ask how the Exodus narrative can serve as a paradigm and a prescriptive tool for inspiring social responsibility and Jewish global citizenship in our time. These questions may be used to generate an evolving conversation that progresses as the *seder* unfolds, or as stand-alone discussion topics.

Each question is presented along with the following components:

- Suggested *Time in the Seder* to introduce the question
- *Texts* to read out loud as a group or for study in *chavruta* (paired learning) or small groups
- *Discussion Questions* to support *seder* participants in thinking critically about the sources

The four questions are:

- Why do free people avoid responsibility?
- Do we achieve justice through reform or revolution?
- What does our covenant with God entail?
- How do we sustain commitment for the long haul?



### Question 1: Why do free people avoid responsibility?

Time in Seder: **וּרְחַץ** / *Urchatz* (Handwashing)

At this point in the *seder*, we wash our hands. In the context of social justice, Egypt can represent the desire to escape responsibility for our actions. It is literally washing our hands of responsibility and allowing the powerful oppressor to bear responsibility for our own inaction. When do we choose to take responsibility and when do we hide behind a powerful “Egypt,” to avoid it?

#### Texts

##### 1. Exodus 16:3

The Israelites said (to Moses and Aaron): If only we had died by the hand of Adonai in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the fleshpots, when we ate our fill of bread! For you have brought us out into this wilderness to starve this whole congregation to death.

##### שמות פרק טז:ג

נִי אָמְרוּ אֲלֵהֶם בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל מִי יִתֵּן מוֹתֵנוּ בְּיַד ה' אֱלֹהֵינוּ  
בְּאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם בְּשִׁבְתֵּנוּ עַל סִיר הַבָּשָׂר בְּאֶכְלֵנוּ לֶחֶם  
לֶשֶׁבַע כִּי הוֹצֵאתָם אֶתְנוּ אֶל הַמִּדְבָּר הַזֶּה לְהָמִית  
אֶת כָּל הַקָּהָל הַזֶּה בְּרָעָב:

##### 2. Erich Fromm, *Escape From Freedom*, p. 5

Is there not also, perhaps, besides an innate desire for freedom, an instinctive wish for submission? If there is not, how can we account for the attraction which submission to a leader has for so many today? Is submission always to an overt authority, or is there also submission to internalized authorities, such as duty or conscience, to inner compulsions or to anonymous authorities like public opinion? Is there a hidden satisfaction in submitting, and what is its essence?

#### Discussion Questions

1. What did the Israelites claim to miss about Egypt? What other longings might have been below the surface?
2. Fromm suggests that in addition to desiring to be free, it is human nature to desire someone or something to which we can submit—and therefore avoid taking responsibility for our actions. Share a personal story that illustrates, or refutes, Fromm’s idea about submission.
3. When you choose whether or not to pursue justice, do you make this choice out of a sense of freedom or obligation? How does that change your understanding of pursuing justice?

## Question 2: Do we achieve justice through reform or revolution?

### Time in Seder: יַחַצֵּץ / *Yachatz* (Breaking the *Matzah*)

One tradition suggests that in breaking the middle *matzah*, we acknowledge that the world is broken and is in need of repair. However, while many people recognize the brokenness of the world, there is great disagreement about how to repair it. Will we achieve change and justice through reform or revolution?

#### Texts

##### 1. Exodus 32:26-28

Moses stood up in the gate of the camp and said, "Whoever is for Adonai, come here!" And all the Levites rallied to him. He said to them, "Thus says Adonai, the God of Israel, 'Each of you put sword on thigh, go back and forth from gate to gate throughout the camp, and slay brother, neighbor and kin.'" The Levites did as Moses had bidden; and some three thousand of the people fell that day.

#### שמות לב:כו-כח

וַיַּעֲמֵד מֹשֶׁה בְּשַׁעַר הַמַּחֲנֶה וַיֹּאמֶר מִי לַיהוָה אֵלָי וַיִּאֲסָפוּ אֵלָיו כָּל בְּנֵי לֵוִי: וַיֹּאמֶר לָהֶם כֹּה אָמַר ה' אֵלֵי הוּא יִשְׂרָאֵל שִׁימוּ אִישׁ חֶרְבּוֹ עַל יָרְכוֹ וְעָבְרוּ וַיָּשׁוּבוּ מִשַּׁעַר לְשַׁעַר בְּמַחֲנֶה וְהָרְגוּ אִישׁ אֶת אָחִיו וְאִישׁ אֶת רֵעֵהוּ וְאִישׁ אֶת קָרְבּוֹ: וַיַּעֲשׂוּ בְנֵי לֵוִי כַדְבָר מֹשֶׁה וַיִּפֹּל מִן הָעָם בַּיּוֹם הַהוּא כְּשָׁלֹשׁ אֲלָפֵי אִישׁ:

##### 2. Exodus 18:20

And enjoin upon them the laws and the teachings, and make known to them the way they are to go and the practices they are to follow.

#### שמות יח:כ

וְהִזְהַרְתָּה אֹתָם אֶת הַחֻקִּים וְאֶת הַתּוֹרָה וְהוֹדַעְתָּ לָהֶם אֶת הַדֶּרֶךְ יֵלְכוּ בָּהּ וְאֶת הַמַּעֲשֵׂה אֲשֶׁר יַעֲשׂוּן:

##### 3. Rabbi Yosef Yosel Hurwitz, *Madreigat Ha-Adam*, "Darkei ha-Teshuvah"

If someone has a *treif* (non-kosher) kitchen and wants to repent and make it *kosher*, he might say, "How can I repent all at once and break all my dishes? It will cost a great deal of money! I'll do it gradually. I'll break one dish, and replace it with a *kosher* one; later I'll replace a second dish, later a third...until it is completed." Such a person would be considered a fool. For as soon as the [first] *kosher* dish mixes with the rest, it is all *treif*. If he wants to repent he must break all the dishes at once.

#### Discussion Questions

1. In Texts 1 and 2, Moses guides the Israelites through their transition from slavery to freedom in two different ways. In Text 1, he pursues revolution, rallying troops to kill those who worshipped the Golden Calf. In Text 2, he pursues reform, using his skills as an educator to convince the Israelites to follow God. Which approach do you think was more successful? Was there a benefit to using a combination of these methods?
2. According to Rabbi Hurwitz, one can only truly pursue a new way of life by smashing the old system or by totally separating from it. What can we learn about pursuing social change from Rabbi Hurwitz?
3. Are you more of a reformer or a revolutionary? Share a personal story that reflects this orientation.
4. On Passover, we are mindful of the liberation we have experienced and the one we need to create. Which methods do you think the world most needs today to bring about justice?

## Question 3: What does our covenant with God entail?

Time in Seder: **מגיד** / *Magid* (Telling the Story of the Exodus)

Early in the *Magid* section, before we continue with the four children, we take a moment to thank God for giving us the Torah. By accepting the Torah, what obligations do we take upon ourselves?

### Texts

#### 1. Exodus 19:3-8

And Moses went up to God. Adonai called to him from the mountain, saying, “Thus shall you say to the house of Jacob and declare to the children of Israel: ‘You have seen what I did to the Egyptians, how I bore you on eagles’ wings and brought you to Me. Now then, if you will obey Me faithfully and keep My covenant, you shall be My treasured possession among all the peoples. Indeed, all the earth is Mine, but you shall be to Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.’ These are the words that you shall speak to the children of Israel.” Moses came and summoned the elders of the people and put before them all that Adonai had commanded him. All the people answered as one, saying, “All that Adonai has spoken we will do!” And Moses brought back the people’s words to Adonai.

#### שמות יט:ג-ח

וּמִשָּׁה עָלָה אֶל הָאֵל הַיּוֹם וַיִּקְרָא אֵלָיו ה' מִן הַהָר לֵאמֹר כֹּה תֹאמַר לְבֵית יִעֲקֹב וְתִגִּיד לְבְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל: אַתֶּם רְאִיתֶם אֲשֶׁר עָשִׂיתִי לְמִצְרַיִם וְאֲשָׂא אֶתְכֶם עַל כַּנְּפֵי נְשָׁרִים וְאָבֵא אֶתְכֶם אֵלָי: וְעַתָּה אִם שָׁמוּעַ תִּשְׁמָעוּ בְּקוֹלִי וּשְׁמַרְתֶּם אֶת בְּרִיתִי וְהִייתֶם לִי סִגְלָה מִכָּל הָעַמִּים כִּי לִי כָל הָאָרֶץ: וְאַתֶּם תִּהְיוּ לִי מַמְלַכְתָּ כֹּהֲנִים וְגוֹי קְדוֹשׁ אֵלֶּה הַדְּבָרִים אֲשֶׁר תְּדַבֵּר אֶל בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל: וַיִּבְּאוּ מִשָּׁה וַיִּקְרָא לְזִקְנֵי הָעָם וַיִּשָּׂם לִפְנֵיהֶם אֶת כָּל הַדְּבָרִים הָאֵלֶּה אֲשֶׁר צִוָּהוּ ה': וַיַּעֲנוּ כָּל הָעָם יַחְדָּו וַיֹּאמְרוּ כֹּל אֲשֶׁר דִּבֶּר ה' נַעֲשֶׂה וְנִשְׁמָע מִשָּׁה אֶת דְּבַרֵי הָעָם אֵל ה':

#### 2. “Duty to Assist” law from the Quebec Charter of Human Rights and Freedoms (Part I, Chapter 1:2)

Every human being whose life is in peril has a right to assistance... Every person must come to the aid of anyone whose life is in peril, either personally or calling for aid, by giving him the necessary and immediate physical assistance, unless it involves danger to himself or a third person, or he has another valid reason.

#### 3. Seinfeld: The Finale, Part II

Chiles: It is a travesty of justice that these four people have been incarcerated ... You know what these four people were? They were innocent bystanders. Now, you just think about that term. Innocent. Bystanders. Because that's exactly what they were. We know they were bystanders, nobody's disputing that. So how can a bystander be guilty? No such thing.

### Discussion Questions

1. In Text 1, the Israelites enter into a covenant with God. What are the parameters of this covenant? Is the Israelites' commitment passive or active?
2. Texts 2 and 3 are two perspectives on the extent to which people are obligated to one another. Where on the spectrum are you? What factors have influenced your thinking on this issue?
3. Whom do you feel obligated to help and how much help do you feel obligated to give?

## Question 4: How do we sustain commitment for the long haul?

### Time in Seder: נִרְצָה / *Nirtzah* (Conclusion of the *Seder*)

We end the *seder* with the words “Next year in Jerusalem,” hoping that next year, redemption will come, the world will become just and we will all celebrate Passover together in the Land of Israel. Despite this, we are fairly certain that we will still be sitting around a *sedertable* next year in a world still unredeemed. How, then, do we keep striving to create a better world, without becoming discouraged?

### Texts

#### 1. Deuteronomy 34:7-8

Moses was a hundred and twenty years old when he died; his eyes were undimmed and his vigor unabated. And the Israelites bewailed Moses in the steppes of Moab for thirty days.

#### דברים לד:ז-ח

וּמִשָּׁה בֶּן מֵאָה וְעֶשְׂרִים שָׁנָה בָּמֹתָו לֹא כָהָתָה  
עֵינָיו וְלֹא אָנֹס לֶחֶה: וַיִּבְכּוּ בְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל אֶת מֹשֶׁה  
בְּעֶרְבַת מוֹאָב שָׁלֹשִׁים יוֹם וַיִּתְּמוּ יָמֵי בְּכִי אֶקְלֵ  
מִשָּׁה:

#### 2. Hosea 4:1-2

Hear the word of Adonai, O people of Israel! For Adonai has a case against the inhabitants of this land, because there is no honesty and no goodness and no obedience to God in the land. [False] swearing, dishonesty, and murder, and theft and adultery are rife; crime follows upon crime!

#### הושע ד:א-ב

שָׁמְעוּ דְבַר ה' בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל כִּי רִיב לֵה' עִם יוֹשְׁבֵי  
הָאָרֶץ כִּי אֵין אֱמֶת וְאֵין חֶסֶד וְאֵין דַּעַת אֶל־הַיָּם  
בְּאָרֶץ: אֶל־הַ נִכְחַשׁ וְרָצַח וְגָנַב וְנָאֵף פָּרְצוּ  
וְדָמִים בְּדָמִים נִגְעוּ:

#### 3. Nicholas Kristof, “Save the Darfur Puppy,” *The New York Times*, May 10, 2007

Finally, we’re beginning to understand what it would take to galvanize President Bush, other leaders and the American public to respond to the genocide in Sudan: a suffering puppy with big eyes and floppy ears.

That’s the implication of a series of studies by psychologists trying to understand why people – good, conscientious people – aren’t moved by genocide or famines. Time and again, we’ve seen that the human conscience just isn’t pricked by mass suffering, while an individual child (or puppy) in distress causes our hearts to flutter.

#### 4. Michael Walzer, *Exodus and Revolution*, p. 149

So pharaonic oppression, deliverance, Sinai, and Canaan are still with us, powerful memories shaping our perceptions of the political world. The “door of hope” is still open; things are not what they might be— even when what they might be isn’t totally different from what they are. This is a central theme in Western thought, always present though elaborated in many different ways. We still believe, or many of us do, what the Exodus first taught, or what is has commonly been taken to teach, about the meaning and possibility of politics and about its proper form:

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- first, that wherever you live, it is probably Egypt;
- second, that there is a better place, a world more attractive, a promised land;
- and third, that “the way to the land is through the wilderness.” There is no way to get from here to there except by joining together and marching.

### Discussion Questions

1. In Text 1 we read about Moses’s death before the Israelites reached the Promised Land; his fate was to die just before they entered. What meaning, if any, do you derive from the death of the greatest leader of the liberation movement just as they are about to reach their goal? Similarly, what, if any, significance do you derive from the fact that the Five Books of the Torah ends without the Israelites reaching the Promised Land?
2. Text 2 shows the Israelites backsliding. They have reached the Promised Land and yet they have not achieved a just society. Does your conception of liberation work include backsliding and readjustment? How do you keep yourself going in such circumstances?
3. In Text 3 Kristof talks about compassion fatigue. How can we overcome compassion fatigue and other obstacles that stand in the way of our ability to sustain the day-to-day work of justice?
4. According to Walzer in Text 4, the only way to liberate the world and ourselves is by joining together and marching. Who are the people with whom you already march? With whom would it be strategic for you to march in order to hasten a socially just world?

