

We must ask: Why did it take so long for this story to be told? I'd suggest that we need to revise our notion of heroism during the Holocaust, which has largely been limited to armed resistance. Any time a ghetto inmate risked his or her life for a cause that was larger than their own survival, she or he was a hero. I consider the Paper Brigade to be the equivalent of the Warsaw ghetto uprising in the annals of Jewish spiritual resistance.

These heroes were poets, educators, scholars, librarians, and artists who wanted their remaining life—and possible death—to have meaning. They preferred to die for smuggling books than for smuggling potatoes. They believed that while the Jewish community of Vilna would not survive, its spirit and essence, as contained in its great collections of books, manuscripts, and art, could be saved. They did it for future generations—for us.

While working on the book, I had a realization. This story is not only a great historical event, it's also a metaphor. The members of the Paper Brigade *preserved* Jewish treasures, those who survived the Holocaust *retrieved* them, and eventually *transferred* them from Soviet Vilnius to the safety of America and Israel. They preserved, retrieved, and transmitted. Today we are challenged to do the same. To preserve our heritage, to retrieve from oblivion those parts that are valuable and precious, and to transmit them to the next generation. When we do those things, we are following in the footsteps of the Paper Brigade.

Shabbat Hagadol  
Tzav 5778

שבת הגדול  
צו תשע"ח



## Four New Questions from the Four Children

**Professor Arnold M. Eisen, Chancellor, JTS**

Here's a challenge for the rising generations seated around the seder table this year: make sure your Four Questions address the ways in which things truly *are* different in 2018 from how they have been at Passovers in the past.

“Wise” children, for example—those who want to know the order of things down to the last detail—might ask this question: After inviting all who are needy to join the meal, and opening the door wide for Elijah, how will we make sure the “Dreamers” who so need our help are not cast out of America, and African refugees are not expelled from Israel? What's the plan for carrying out this clear imperative of Passover?

“Wicked” children might ask pointedly, as is their wont, “What is the meaning of all this to you?” In other words: “Are we just going through ritual motions, year after year, or are we prepared to act on the lessons of the holiday?” We castigate Pharaoh for inflicting death on Israelite children, and express sorrow for the Egyptian soldiers who drowned in the Red Sea during the Exodus. Can we fail to protect our students and schools from shooters who purchase semi-automatic rifles at will? “If you don't take the lessons of Passover seriously,” this questioner might declare, “neither will I.”

“Simple” children might just throw up their hands. “Really? You want me to recite the Ten Plagues sent to punish the Egyptians long ago—blood, lice, disease, and all the rest—but not say a word about far worse plagues afflicting the entire world right now as a result of climate change, with more devastation surely to come? I don't get it. Plagues are plagues. Don't hardened hearts go against the lesson of this holiday?”

And for those who don't know how to ask—because they are too young, too naïve, or too ignorant of the Passover story or the day's news—their elders at the seder might “open up to them,” as the Haggadah instructs, having learned in this year of #MeToo how important it is to hear voices of those who have been silent. Explain, with honesty and humility, that we do try our best to repay the gift of freedom. We *are* thankful for “what the Lord did for me when I went forth from Egypt.” We *do* want to leave the seder table inspired to translate ritual to action more effectively than we have in the past and put an end to oppression in all its forms. We want their help, we *need* their help, in making that happen.

I want all newcomers to Passover or to Judaism to know that the memory of Exodus from Egypt, formative for Jews and for so many others as well, appears in one form or another almost everywhere in Jewish life and liturgy. When Jews recite Kiddush on Sabbaths and holidays, we do so “as a remembrance of the Exodus from Egypt.” The very first of the Ten Commandments given to the Children of Israel at Sinai introduces the Commander as “the Lord your God who took you out of the land of Egypt, from the house of slaves.” Whenever and wherever individuals take steps, large or small, to “free those who are bound” and “raise up those you are bowed down,” in the words of the morning prayers—because they are poor, because they are women, because they belong to a racial or religious minority—the memory of Exodus is activated, as Torah commands and Jewish liturgy seeks to instill.

This Passover, I believe, the call to such memory-in-action resounds with particular force and clarity.

I treasure the fact that Abraham Joshua Heschel dared to declare in 1963 that the contest between Moses and Pharaoh begun in Egypt had still not ended, but was being carried on between those who struggled for civil rights in America and those who resisted the achievement of those rights. Oftentimes the translation from Biblical injunction to contemporary social and political issues is not simple or straightforward. But sometimes it is—particularly when fundamental matters of religion or morality are involved. When that is the case, Jews must act, in the name of our teacher Moses, to carry on the commitment to the Exodus.

That conviction, to me, stands at the heart of the Passover holiday and Judaism's repeated reminder that obligations flow from the fact of freedom. I hope theological quandaries or outright disbelief will not stop

anyone of any age from recognizing that each of us personally went forth from Egypt, as the tradition insists—whatever that “Egypt” was for us, and to whatever degree we have been liberated. Every one of us enjoys many gifts in our lives—therefore we all have gifts to share. We have questions to ask of the established order and challenges to pose. It is our responsibility to ask those questions and to pose those challenges, to the very best of our ability. Passover is meant to help with this work.

To younger participants at 2018 seders, I express the fervent hope that you will ask especially good questions this year that call older participants to account for the unfinished Exodus work to which Passover summons us.

The publication and distribution of the *JTS Holiday Commentary* are made possible by a generous grant from Rita Dee (z"l) and Harold Hassenfeld (z"l).

## Speaking of Text

A WEEKLY EXPLORATION OF THE JEWISH BOOKSHELF



### Heroes of Jewish Heritage

**Dr. David E. Fishman, Professor of Jewish History, JTS**

*The Book Smugglers: Partisans, Poets, and the Race to Save Jewish Treasures from the Nazis* by David E. Fishman (ForeEdge, 2017)

Several months ago, I gave a lecture in Lviv, Ukraine, on my new book to a young non-Jewish audience. There are very few Jews left in Lviv (formerly Lemberg), even fewer than in Vilnius (formerly Vilna), where my book's events take place. The audience listened attentively as I described the rescue of cultural treasures from the Nazis by a group of ghetto inmates nicknamed the Paper Brigade: a diary by Theodore Herzl, rabbinic manuscripts, Sholem Aleichem's letters, paintings and sculptures.

During the Q and A, a young Ukrainian educator asked: “I'm sure this story is universally known in the Jewish community, that it is taught in schools, commemorated by plaques and public ceremonies. So how does *your* treatment of the Paper Brigade differ from earlier studies?” I had to reply that this story is not very widely known among Jews, that this is the first full-length book on the subject. There are no plaques, no commemorations. And as I did, her jaw dropped.