

# The JTS Seder Supplement

## Selected Thoughts on the Haggadah

### in light of the COVID-19 crisis

2020/5780



The Prato Haggadah, JTS Library

## Kadesh

We begin the seder this year utterly disoriented by the pandemic. Everything is different, and yet the first prompt in the order of the seder is still “Kadesh.” Sanctify! Usually understood simply as “make Kiddush,” I hear the command literally for the first time. How will I sanctify the seder this year, when I am home with my husband and no other family members, having lacked the desire to polish or kasher the silver for just the two of us, having chosen not to take out my special soup tureen or make my special Pesah mousse? And yet, I realize this seder will be sanctified like no other seder in which I have ever participated —and yours will too. Why? Because we will recite the “sheheheyanu” with special fervor tonight, deeply appreciative that we are alive. And because every aspect of this seder will require an extra measure of intentionality. It took extra effort to procure or improvise the items on the seder plate. Every word of the Haggadah will sound different to us this year as we describe the hardships of our ancestors in Egypt, relive the Exodus, praise God, and turn our hopes toward future redemption. We do so with an extra measure of gratitude for the simple seder that we have managed to assemble and with new-found appreciation for the many sederim past that we might have taken for granted. My gratitude will focus especially on my older daughter, an emergency room physician on the front lines of treating patients stricken by the Coronavirus. I will think of the fifth question that her 8-year-old son has already asked: “Imma, you always take care of sick people, and you hug us when you get home; how come this year, when you’re taking care of sick people, you can’t hug us when you come home?” May the new questions we pose tonight deepen our admiration for the power of age-old-yet-adaptable rituals to sustain us, for our ability to find meaning and hope even in challenging times, and for the many individuals around us who risk their lives to sustain us. Through this heightened awareness, our sederim will indeed be sanctified.

*Dr. Shuly Rubin Schwartz, Provost, Irving Lehrman Research Professor, and Sala and Walter Schlesinger Dean, The Gershon Kekst Graduate School of Jewish Studies, JTS*

## Urhatz/Rohtzah

According to Psalm 24:4, “clean hands” are a requirement for entry into God’s “holy place.” In Exodus 30:19-21, Israelite priests are admonished under threat of death to wash before undertaking their ritual duties. This washing is a matter of ritual purification, not hygiene, and it survives in our own ritual washing prior to partaking of a meal. This year, for most of us the ritual aspect has become inseparable from the hygienic: like the priests of old, we have been warned to wash frequently and meticulously lest we risk illness or even death. The CDC advisory “How To Protect Yourself” gives prominence to the words “clean your hands often.” According to Dr. Elaine Larson, one of the world’s leading experts on handwashing, clean hands save lives. This year (and beyond), let us be mindful and conscientious about two components of the seder that we may have observed perfunctorily in the past, namely *urhatz* and *rohtzah*. And just as God spared us from the wrath of the Destroyer on the eve of the Exodus, may God protect us now from this new plague that is upon us.

*Dr. Alan Cooper, Elaine Ravich Professor of Jewish Studies, JTS*

## Karpas

I have been taking daily walks since the beginning of this period of quarantine, often through Central Park. Every day the trees have grown more colorful, reminding me of the miraculous rebirth enacted each spring in nature. Karpas, from the Greek word meaning fresh raw vegetable, is the seder's reminder of rebirth and renewal. We dip a green vegetable salted water to recall the bitter tears of our ancestors enslaved in Egypt. This year karpas has an added meaning for me. The beauty of spring is mingled with the isolation forced upon us by the pandemic. But bitter tears and isolation will eventually end, and the spring rebirth will bring us new potential for growth and change. Blessed are you, God, ruler of the world, who creates the fruit of the earth.

*Cantor Nancy Abramson, Director, H.L. Miller Cantorial School, JTS*

## Yahatz

Early in the seder we are instructed to break the middle matzah of the required three. This requirement is not mentioned in the Talmud but appears for the first time in the seder of Rav Amram Gaon, the earliest parts of which date from the 9th century CE. Where the “three matzot” to which he refers come from is a matter not altogether clear. On Shabbat and all other festivals only two loaves are required (see the story of the manna in Exodus 16:29), and Maimonides required only two matzot for the seder (Laws of Hametz and Matzah 8:6). It seems likely that *yahatz* originates from the Talmudic interpretation of the matzah as “poor man’s bread” (Pesahim 115b-116a): just as a poor person might have only a single loaf, or pieces of a loaf, so, too, should we suffice at the Seder with only pieces. However, since other authorities maintained that two whole loaves were required at the seder, just as on Shabbat, the custom developed to keep both practices: one matzah is broken while two whole matzot remain.

By the later Middle Ages it became customary to break in half the middle matzah (although which of the three matzot should be broken was itself a source of dispute) and set it aside until the end of the meal. What became of the other half of the broken middle matzah? According to most rites it was simply returned to the covered bundle with the other two matzot and consumed at the beginning of the festive meal. But there is evidence that some Jews kept it in their house as a talisman of blessing, even hanging it over the unfinished wall spot that kept alive the memory of the destroyed Temple. Christians who saw this “hanging matzah” often mistook it for a Jewish desecration of the Host, a false charge that unfortunately led to pogroms.

This year, the broken matzah takes on a special significance. As a society we feel so very broken; and as individuals we may be struggling to feel a sense of wholeness, emotionally and spiritually, even as we make every effort to keep ourselves and our loved ones physically healthy. As we break the middle matzah this year, may we keep in mind the broken souls and bodies of all those who suffer. And I would suggest that we not simply eat half of this broken matzah at mid-seder, but rather keep it in our homes and postpone eating it until the end of the holiday, thus being mindful that, however broken we might feel, others are even more broken than we are. May that broken matzah lead us to do acts of *tzedakah* and *gemilut hasadim*, loving kindness that may alleviate suffering and help to rebuild a broken, shattered world.

*Rabbi Dr. Robert Harris, Professor of Bible and Ancient Semitic Languages, JTS*

## Ha Lahma Anya

As we recite Ha Lahma Anya—“this is the bread of affliction”—and invite those who are in need to join us at our seder meals, we lift the seder plate (or the matzah, according to some traditions). The lifting of the plate is the vestige of a custom, originating in the Talmud, to grab the small individual table from which the food was served in front of each seder participant in order to provoke the question: “What are you doing? I haven’t eaten yet!” Provoking questions (notice that this lifting of the plate is

followed immediately by Mah Nishtanah) was considered so important that odd actions were performed to elicit them. But the words that accompany this lifting of the plate, Ha Lahma Anya, give the custom a whole new spirit. In medieval Haggadah manuscripts and early printed haggadot, the Ha Lahma Anya page is decorated and graphically emphasized in a way that makes it clear that *this* was considered the actual beginning of the Haggadah; everything that came before it was “mere” ritual. Why so? Because, I would suggest, there is no seder without inviting others, even in times of want (of which Jews experienced plenty through the ages). May we, even in this year of separation, find a way for others to “join” us, however remotely, at our tables. This year we are here. Next year may we celebrate in our own promised lands, however we conceive them.

*Dr. David Kraemer, Joseph J. and Dora Abbell Librarian and Professor of Talmud and Rabbinics, JTS*

## Mah Nishtanah

“This is the way the world changes, as Dickens understood when he opened his most political novel with ‘It was the best of times, it was the worst of times.’ It usually is.... What’s most important here is to feel the profundity of the changes, to feel how far we have come... We inhabit, in ordinary daylight, a future that was unimaginably dark a few decades ago, when people found the end of the world easier to envision than the impending changes in everyday roles, thoughts, practices that not even the wildest science fiction anticipated. Perhaps we should not have adjusted to it so easily. It would be better if we were astonished every day.” —Rebecca Solnit, *Hope in the Dark: Untold Histories, Wild Possibilities* (Haymarket Books, Chicago, 2016), pp. 36-37.

Though Rebecca Solnit was writing about the many positive changes that began, largely unnoticed, in the Cold War summer of 1962, her call to be astonished by change cuts to the heart of *Mah Nishtanah*, and indeed the essence of the seder. How different is this night! Originally, the four questions were intended to be simply examples of the kinds of questions we might be asking, with the goal of noticing change and experiencing awe. *Mah nishtanah* challenges us to counter our natural tendency to notice only large transformations, missing the small, incremental steps that got us there. And it asks us to consciously adopt a stance of curiosity and wonder, rather than one of only fear or anxiety, about even the most radical, frightening changes (after all, what could be scarier than the overturning of the entire societal order that the Exodus story recounts!). So much is different about our sederim and our lives this year, it can be hard to see beyond loss. Yet we sit at our seder tables to welcome in hope as well, remembering that uncertainty doesn’t mean our worst fears are coming to pass— it means that change is in the air, and we don’t know what will happen. *Mah nishtanah!* What changes might be happening right now for the good? How has the landscape subtly shifted, beneath our notice, creating the groundwork for a constructive future? In Solnit’s language, what seeds of hope are being born, “an emergence out of an emergency”?

*Rabbi Jan Uhrbach, Director, Block-Kolker Center for Spiritual Arts, JTS*

## Avadim Hayinu

I once visited a Jewishly observant inmate in a Federal penitentiary shortly after Passover. “It must be difficult to celebrate the festival of freedom in prison,” I suggested. But he disagreed: “When I was outside and addicted, I was a prisoner. I realize now that I can be free in prison, and imprisoned outside.” He wasn’t minimizing the suffering of imprisonment, but he made a conscious decision not to let external circumstances dominate his internal beliefs. This year, as most Jews are forced to seclude themselves at home, to refrain from hosting or being hosted, to avoid synagogue and other public gatherings, it will be challenging to consider ourselves free. And yet we must learn to differentiate between physical and spiritual freedom. Ironically, in our seclusion we have the opportunity to delve deeper into our sacred texts and traditions, to find internal strengths, and to prepare to live more freely and fully as members of the covenant between God and Israel.

From the very outset, the seder complicates our notions of freedom and enslavement. “Now we are slaves,” we say, as we sit down to a meal that includes symbols of enslavement such as matzah and maror. In normal years this sentiment feels farfetched as we gather in large groups for a lavish meal. In this sad and frightening year of COVID-19, we may feel a bit closer to the slave experience. We are hiding behind closed doors, like our ancestors did as the angel of death spread plague throughout the land. The challenge here is to remember that even in isolation we can access freedom of the spirit. And even in times of fear we can prepare to emerge and rebuild with strength and joy. Let us dedicate this Passover to preparing ourselves spiritually to emerge when it is safe to do so, ready to rebuild our communities, following the courageous and wise example of our ancestors.

*Rabbi Daniel Nevins, Pearl Resnick Dean of The Rabbinical School and the Division of Religious Leadership, JTS*

## The Five Rabbis in B’nei B’rak

The sederim of my childhood went late into the night, often lasting until two o’clock in the morning. Our long discussions were motivated by the final sentence of the *Avadim Hayinu* paragraph—“the more one tells of the exodus from Egypt, this is praiseworthy!”—and the subsequent story of the ancient rabbis, sitting around *their* seder table all night, sealed the deal. But a key reason we were able to emulate the rabbis’ model was because of the large group of people around our table: three generations of family members and close friends raising diverse views, evoking diverse responses, such that the conversation couldn’t help but deepen, weave recurring themes together, and inevitably enrich our understanding of what slavery and freedom meant for us in each new year. Sedarim of a dozen or more people seem like a distant memory now, in this time of

isolation. And this year, I notice for the first time that the idyllic seder scene of B'nei B'rak is bracketed by two other core texts of the Haggadah—*Mah Nishtanah* and the Four Children—that each focus on children and their centrality in the seder experience and indeed in the main purpose of Passover: to tell the story of the exodus to each new generation. What of all the sedarim with no children this year – no one reciting the four questions in a sweet, youthful voice; no one scampering about in search of the afikoman? So many of us will be bereft of the tableau of faces that have become an inextricable part of our sedarim. Is a seder without children still a seder? Is a seder with only a few adults still a seder? Is a seder celebrated by one person alone still a seder?

Yes, the Rabbis teach us. If no child is present to ask questions at the seder, adults should ask questions of and teach each other, the Talmud instructs us; and if no other adult is present, one should ask questions of oneself (Pesahim 116a). The story of the five rabbis shows that even a relatively small group of people need not lack for what to talk about around the seder table. There are always questions to be asked and timeless themes and rituals to reflect upon, and perhaps this year more than ever: with a literal plague having upended our lives; an ever-present trope of repeated hand washing; an awareness of those going hungry whom we *cannot* invite into our houses; confusion about what it means to be free when we are confined; and, above all, the fear of not knowing who will be protected through this long, dark night and live to cross the sea, back into a life of safety and security. In fact, how better to probe these painful new questions and truths than with an intimate gathering of those who live with us and know us best, through the lens of the Haggadah—a compilation of ancient and medieval texts whose authors lived through times just as insecure and fearful as 2020 has become for us?

Our disorientation is profound, as daily, weekly, and even annual routines fall away. But, even as we remain aware of the missing voices around our seder tables, let's not miss the opportunity that this unexpectedly intimate Passover presents us with: a night of potentially profound reflection about what enslavement and redemption mean at this moment. Let's cherish the people we live with, if that applies, and share wisdom and comfort with each other. Let's cherish and nurture our own wellbeing, if we live alone. And in either case—without or without children and other loved ones—let's accept this chance to meditate upon the *Mitzrayim* where so many people dwell right now and to pray for their redemption.

*Rabbi Julia Andelman, Director of Community Engagement, JTS*

## **The Four Children**

Our tradition tells us that at every holiday there are unseen guests. On Shavuot we are blessed with the Divine Presence, as we were at Sinai. On Sukkot we invite the Ushpizin—the patriarchs, matriarchs, and other venerated ancestors who join us for our meals in the Sukkah. On Pesah we are graced with Elijah's presence. But this year, especially for those of us celebrating the sedarim on our own, we should take particular care to welcome the Four Children. This year they stand in for the sons, daughters, relatives, and friends who would enliven our table with questions and comments if only they could. Even in their physical absence, they are present in our minds and hearts. Welcome them to your seder, and know that they've reserved you a seat at theirs.

*Rabbi Dr. Eliezer Diamond, Rabbi Judah Nadich Associate Professor of Talmud and Rabbinics, JTS*

## **Vehi She'amdah**

Many years I sing along to Vehi She'amdah, the paragraph that explains that not only in the Pesah story, but in every generation, there were people who hated and threatened the Jewish people, and each time God saved us. I enjoy the tune but not the message. Why, I wonder, when we are celebrating our master story of going from slaves to free people, do we have to add, "and by the way this always happens to us"? The redemption from Egypt feels less miraculous to me when we combine it with perpetual hatred and declare it the central theme of our people.

In meditation, we learn to focus on what we know to be true. We get quiet and we focus. We tune out the noise. We connect to the Divine. This year I am thinking about Vehi She'amdah as a meditation. In every generation there have been threats. Breathe. We always persevere. Breathe. God is our partner. Breathe. This is part of our story. Breathe. We know from history that as a people we survive. Breathe. We are part of an evolving narrative. Breathe. God is our partner. Breathe.

*Rabbi Stephanie Ruskay, Associate Dean of the Rabbinical School, JTS*

## The Ten Plagues

Throughout history the seder has served as a reenactment of the original Pesah story of liberation. That first story was not a reenactment, however, but rather a response to crisis as it took place in live time. After witnessing nine plagues, Moses guides the elders of Israel in their care of the community for protection from the tenth and final plague of the death of the first born. “Go pick out lambs for your families, and slaughter the Passover offering. Take a bunch of hyssop, dip it in the blood that is in the basin, and apply some of the blood that is in the basin to the lintel and to the two doorposts. None of you shall go outside the door of the house until morning” (Exodus 12:21-23). During this biblical quarantine, we can imagine how these instructions kept the Israelites physically safe and also gave them ritual for calming their anxiety. Living through our own plague now, we can understand what their experiences were like as they hunkered down in their homes: some were alone and felt lonely, listening for the faint voices of others; some were crowded and craved privacy; all felt a sense of disruption. What from our experience of the plague this year will we want to recall in future years? What will we remember as our suffering, and what will we remember as our resiliency as we look toward our liberation?

*Rabbi Naomi Kalish, Harold and Carole Wolfe Director of the Center for Pastoral Education, JTS*

## Pesah, Matzah, Maror

According to Rabban Gamliel, a person who has not mentioned these three things on the holiday of Passover has not fulfilled their religious obligation. And it is the custom of many to point deliberately at each one of those items on the seder plate as the words are spoken, as though to say: Here it is, I see it, and let me bring it into my intention at this moment. We know what these things mean literally, but what deeper instruction and spiritual guidance might they teach us this year?

*Pesah:* Many Jewish preachers, especially from the hasidic tradition, playfully suggested that the word *pesah* actually contains two words: *peh sah*, a mouth that speaks. The heart of Pesah is remembering and telling the grand tale of the Jewish people and our deliverance, but I suggest that we may also see the hidden meaning of something else here. The true story of redemption is the life-process by which we as individual, all-too-flawed human beings work on the way we speak in the world. How may we use our words to calm, to love, and to heal instead of to hurt with insult, embarrassment, and anger? How may this be a time of the spiritual and moral disciplining of our speech? Let us work toward a redemption from *lashon ha-ra*, from all the ways we misuse the miracle of our words.

*Matzah:* With the only difference between the words *matzah* and *mitzvah* being the letter *vav*, let us read the word *matzah* creatively, like mystical midrashists—as a concealed form of *mitzvah*. Just as *matzah* represents the fundamental form of nourishment, the essence of food in its simplest form, so too Torah—activated in the world through the *mitzvot*—constitutes the hidden divine energy that sustains the world and the human soul. The letter *vav* is part of the Tetragrammaton, the four-letter name of God. And, God is often described as a majestic tree sending divine life energy to all, whose center is the trunk, the *vav*. Thus, *matzah* points us to the hidden force of *mitzvah* in the world and in our lives each day; *matzah* represents the very essence of Being, the ways in which Torah as *mitzvah*, itself the energy of God, is present in every moment. To speak the word *matzah*, to point to it on the seder plate, is to bring to mind, to our inner spiritual eye, how God is ever-present in the world through our fulfillment of *mitzvot*.

*Maror:* The bitter herb on the Seder plate recalls the Jewish collective memory of the suffering of Egyptian slavery. But I suggest that we also read the centrality of the *maror* as a lesson about our inner lives as human beings, the introspection and self-examination that this theme of Passover may stimulate in us. What is the unique bitterness—the harshness, negativity, and anger that we as individuals sometimes project outwards in ways that are hurtful? What is the pain, the suffering—what are the burdens that you or I carry within, hidden from others’ view? Let us pay attention to the *maror* that dwells within; how may we release the potentially destructive toxicity of this bitterness this Pesah and in this coming year? How might we learn to transform the bitterness of *maror* into the sweetness of *haroset* as we relate to others and to ourselves with greater compassion, gentleness, and kindness?

*Dr. Eitan Fishbane, Associate Professor of Jewish Thought, JTS*

## In Every Generation

“When midnight arrived, I knew that I was forty minutes late  
For the Exodus, I was just about done packing the red suitcase  
When I remembered I did not pack the hats for the family....”

In her poem “How I Missed the Exodus,” the award-winning Israeli poet Raquel Chalfi reimagines some of the Bible’s momentous events from the perspective of women, and raises important questions about who goes forward, who is left behind, and who misses the chance to be saved.

Our tradition teaches that in every generation one must look upon oneself as if one personally had come out of Egypt. Yet how often have we recited this paragraph during the Seder, and fully imagined the people leaving Egypt, hastily planning to cross the sea of reeds in the middle of the night? Chalfi reminds us that those who went on this monumental journey were normal people, including women who were overworked, overwhelmed, and unaware of the consequences of being late to the Exodus. This woman, when she arrived at the sea, could see only the small heads of the Israelites in the distance and the Egyptian army being swept away by giant waves. Too afraid to jump into the sea, she was never saved, and never came out of Egypt.

This Passover, many of us are in isolation, feeling lonely and deprived of our regular social context and usual mode of celebration. It might feel like we were also left behind. Looking at the somewhat humorous tone of the poem, and thinking about our history, we can find solace and comfort in the notion that in the end, we all came out of Egypt, even if we did not know how to swim.

*Dr. Ofra Backenroth, Associate Dean of the William Davidson Graduate School of Jewish Education, JTS*

## Lefikhakh: The End of Magid

The seder reaches its climax when we affirm that in every generation we should see ourselves as having been part of the Exodus from Egypt. We too were personally and collectively redeemed—and therefore (*lefikhakh*) are obligated. The Haggadah describes this obligation as being to praise the One who performed miracles for our ancestors and for us, and then immediately engages us in a brief selection from the Hallel. It’s hard to believe that this is all that’s required of us! Magid begins by calling us to join in the work of redemption—“this year here, next year in Jerusalem”—and the Haggadah connects that to the work of liberation: “this year slaves, next year free.” Now, as we approach the end of Magid, about to partake of the most tangible evidence of our blessing—a lavish meal—we thank God for bringing us “from slavery to freedom” and “from servitude to redemption.” That, and not mere verbal praise of God, defines our obligation: joining God in the work of redemption that began with our Exodus from Egypt. It’s a powerful message, made more so by the process of telling the story of the Exodus and adding to it as we go—just as we are meant to add to the work of redemption as we go.

*Dr. Arnold Eisen, Chancellor, JTS*

## Motzi Matzah

“Seven days you shall eat unleavened bread,” the Torah commands us in Exodus 12:15. But we are also told in Exodus 12:39 that we eat matzah because the Israelites, having been driven out of Egypt, were unable to linger long enough for the dough to rise. What then is the reason we eat matzah? It would have been more logical for the command to have followed the narrative version, thereby clearly serving as a commemoration of the account of the hasty departure. Why does the Torah present the mitzvah before the story has transpired? Abarbanel (Don Isaac Abarbanel, 1438-1507, Spain/Portugal/Italy) articulates this same question, and suggests in response that the reason for commanding the mitzvah at the time preceding the Exodus was in essence experiential. God wanted the mitzvah of matzah to have the maximum impact upon the psyche of the Israelites, and so intentionally commanded them to bake matzah before the fact. When they were carefully kneading the dough, vigilantly ensuring that it not rise before the baking, the sudden, unexpected departure before baking caused the Israelites to be extremely concerned lest the dough become leaven, causing them to violate the very first commandment God had given them. This heightened their awareness of the extraordinary nature of the redemption, epitomized by the discovery that the dough they took with them had miraculously not risen even after a journey of a few days. This experience became etched in their memories and in their collective consciousness, ensuring that they transmit this experience to generations to come. Today, we are experiencing a

fearful, unexpected, transformative event of our own. How will this experience become etched in our communal memory? Of what might it serve to heighten our awareness?

*Dr. Walter Herzberg, Assistant Professor of Bible and Professional Pastoral Skills, JTS*

## **Maror**

For most of the seder so far, we have been thinking about our collective past through stories. We remember by retelling—as we recount not just the Exodus itself but its recounting and expounding by ancient sages. Yet if the goal is really to see ourselves as though “we too were slaves in Egypt,” all of this can feel somewhat abstract. After all, we experience the world not just in our thoughts but in our bodies. We may be increasingly aware of that this year as we are hypervigilant to our own physical symptoms. (“I feel like I can’t breathe! Is it COVID-19? No, it’s anxiety.”) It is no coincidence that we describe our own emotions using physical metaphors (“my heart sank” or “I was boiling mad”), as did the rabbis who wrote the Haggadah and their Greco-Roman contemporaries, who perhaps did not even fully consider emotion to be a category separate from physical sensation. To understand the bitterness of slavery, both for our ancestors and for those who lack basic freedoms today, we therefore try to understand what that bitterness felt like in a visceral way. We eat the bitter herbs and wince; perhaps tears spring to our eyes. This year, may this acknowledgment of our physical response to difficult emotions inspire not only empathy for others who suffer, but increased understanding and care for our own embodied experience of our feelings.

*Dr. Sarah Wolf, Assistant Professor of Talmud and Rabbinics, JTS*

## **Korekh**

I’ve often bemoaned the fact that the original Korekh was probably delicious: the ancient matzah a bit more flexible, and the maror a spicy condiment on the roasted sacrificial lamb, nothing like our brittle matzah layered with eye-watering bitterness, with only a symbolic nod to the meat of the Passover offering. But I believe that Hillel was getting at something in suggesting that the best way to honor the Torah’s directive to eat the offering with matzah and maror (Exodus 12:15) is by layering the three together to make an entirely new dish. Hillel’s example serves as a reminder that raw ingredients are in our hands to be transformed.

A midrash in Seder Eliyahu Zuta (redacted 10<sup>th</sup> century CE) vividly illustrates this theme. A king who had two beloved servants gifted each of them a measure of wheat and of flax. The wise servant wove the flax into a beautiful cloth and ground the wheat into flour to bake bread. He placed the bread on a table spread with the cloth. The less wise of the two did nothing with what he was given. When the king returned and asked to see the gifts he had given the two servants, he was naturally more pleased by the servant who had transformed his gift into something both beautiful and useful.

This year, the component parts of the Pesah experience may feel a little different, and I’m seeking to embrace the challenge: I hope adventurous new recipes will emerge from a creative approach in the kitchen (as I avoid extra trips to the grocery store), and new insights from the disorientation of sedarim shaken from their routines.

The directive in Korekh to mix media also invites us to mix metaphors. Hillel combined the basic ingredients of pesah, matzah, and maror into a sandwich that is far superior in taste to that of its individual ingredients, and we integrate their symbolism of divine connection, present freedom, and past oppression (respectively) into a story that is multi-layered and experienced uniquely each year. The holiday of Pesah is not just one of these themes, but rather all of them at once, in a way that is both messy and real. Korekh is a creative endeavor; and in this unusual year, we can all be sandwich artists, combining what we feel with what we eat into a concoction that will both nourishing and delicious.

*Rabbi Ariella Rosen, Director of Admissions, The Rabbinical and Cantorial Schools, JTS*

## **Shulhan Orekh**

The festive meal reminds us that holidays are a time for joy. We are supposed to rejoice on our festivals (Deuteronomy 26:11). When the sacrificial system came to an end, rejoicing was enabled by good food and wine (Pesachim 109a). Maimonides was concerned, however, that rich, tasty foods might become an end in themselves instead of a means toward genuine rejoicing. In his law code the Mishneh Torah, he writes: “And while one eats and drinks himself, it is his duty to feed the stranger, the orphan, the widow, and other poor and unfortunate people, for he who locks the door to his courtyard and eats and drinks with his wife

and family, without giving anything to eat and drink to the poor and the bitter in soul—his meal is not rejoicing in a divine commandment (*simhat mitzvah*), but a rejoicing in his own stomach” (Laws of Rest on Festivals 6:18). For Maimonides, the highest joy is helping others to rejoice by supporting them. We should not only rejoice in the presence of others; we should give them reason to rejoice.

At this trying time of “social distancing,” it is easy to slip into solipsism and lose our connectedness with others. But we shouldn’t. We should reach out, putting a virtual arm around a virtual shoulder. Let’s try our best to steady ourselves by being aware of the material and spiritual needs of others, supporting them as we can, and helping them to find hope, uplift, and even joy.

*Dr. Alan Mittleman, Aaron Rabinowitz and Simon H. Rifkind Professor of Jewish Philosophy, JTS*

## Tzafun

The seder provides us with rituals for coping and living with uncertainty. In the original Pesah story, the Israelite slaves confronted the uncertainty of whether they would go free or remain enslaved, whether they would live or die. They embarked on a journey that led them toward an unknown future. Today, at multiple times over the Pesah season, we engage in rituals of seeking what is elusive in our lives. We prepare for Pesah with the search to make sure that no *hametz* (leaven) remains in our homes. Spiritually, we can dedicate this time to reflecting on how we would like to improve and grow. For just as we need to remove the literal *hametz* from our household, so too we need to remove the spiritual *hametz* from our lives. Proverbs tells us that to be human is to search: “The nature of God is to conceal a thing, but the nature of kings is to search a thing out” (Proverbs 25). In Tzafun we search again—this time for the *afikoman*. When we broke the middle matzah, we hid the larger piece, symbolizing that there is more in our lives that is unknown than known. Our spiritual search for the *afikoman* invites us to search for what is broken in our lives, including brokenness that perhaps we have not yet acknowledged, pain we may not have healed from.

*Rabbi Naomi Kalish, Harold and Carole Wolfe Director of the Center for Pastoral Education, JTS*

## Hallel

Here we are, you and I, sitting at leisure—happy and well fed, enjoying the warmth of our homes. We know we are blessed. What to do? “Sing God a new song—hallelujah.” This is religion, by the usual definition, hymns and prayers to God; but the seder also wants another sort of “new song” from us. We have work to do that only we can perform, using all the abilities and tools at our command. Feast tonight. Sing your heart out. Then go out and do at least one act of justice tomorrow, and another one of kindness.

*Dr. Arnold Eisen, Chancellor, JTS*

## Had Gadya



Had Gadya, the beloved closing song for many people’s seder celebrations, originated in the 16<sup>th</sup> century Prague Haggadah as an Aramaic and Yiddish composition. This animal parable, which depicts a progressively more violent series of upheavals, has been appreciated for its ability to keep kids (and the rest of us!) awake, and has been read throughout history as an allegory of Jewish victimhood and power. In 1919, the Russian Jewish artist and architect Eliezer (“El”) Lissitzky produced a book-length series of prints illustrating the song with his unique and colorful blend of folkloric whimsy and avant-garde abstraction. Lissitzky’s *Khad Gadya* is one of the most essential books in the history of Yiddish print, the history of modern Jewish literature, and, given Lissitzky’s stature as an artist, designer and typographer, possibly even in the entire trajectory of 20<sup>th</sup> century art. Its influence can be felt in the work of the American minimalist artist Frank Stella, who created “Khad Gadye After El Lissitzky” (1982-84), a series of collaged images using lithographs, linoleum block, silkscreen, and rubber relief.

Lissitzky’s original drawings on display at the Tel Aviv Museum of Art inspired Stella, and each print in his series bears a line from *Khad Gadye* as its caption. The story of the goat that precipitated the arrival of both the Angel of Death and God endures in the artistic imagination and around holiday family tables far and wide—encouraging optimism and faith in a dark time.

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