

Love and Resistance

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This piece was adapted from a speech given at an azkarah (memorial gathering) for Rabbi Eliezer Diamond (z"l).

This year we lost a beloved teacher, Rabbi Eliezer Diamond (z"l). A longtime member of the JTS Talmud faculty, he taught with equal parts head and heart. For Rabbi Diamond, learning and teaching were devotional enterprises, and he worked to bring the tradition to life and to connect our learning to our lives. Every year around Pesah, Rabbi Diamond set aside class time to teach about the holiday so that when we sat down at the seder table, we were prepared to see ourselves as participants in the story, as people journeying from slavery toward freedom.



Rabbi Diamond pointed out that one of the challenges in casting ourselves in the Passover story is that the Israelites do not play a particularly prominent or active role. In fact, the Torah suggests that the Israelites don't believe Moses when he tells them that God is coming to free them from slavery. In Exod. 6:9, they are described as *mikotzer ruah*, which we might translate as "spiritually exhausted." They are so worn down by Pharaoh's oppressive regime that they cannot hear Moses's prophetic message.

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I am not a slave in Egypt, thank God, but this year I do identify with the feeling of spiritual exhaustion. I am exhausted by the constant barrage of bad news about global chaos and violence and assaults on our civil liberties. It's painful to identify—even in measure—with the spiritual condition of the Israelites before they are liberated from Egypt. It's hard to make a difference in the world around us when you feel as impotent as the Israelites.

Rabbi Diamond would have pushed back on this sentiment. He taught a Midrash Tanhumah on Parashat Pekudei that describes the origin of the copper mirrors that women donated as materials for the construction of the Mishkan. That takes us back to the scene of the enslaved Israelites:

While the Israelite men were making bricks in Egypt, Pharaoh decreed that they were not to sleep at home so that they would not sleep with their wives [thereby conceiving children]. R. Simeon the son of Halafta said: What did the Israelite women do? They would go to the Nile to draw water, and the Holy One, blessed be He, would fill their jugs with little fishes. They would [sell some of these fish and], cook and prepare [them], and buy some wine [with the proceeds of the sale], and then bring it to their husbands in the fields, as it is said: In all manner of service in the field (Exod. 1:14). While the men were eating and drinking, the women would take out their mirrors and glance into them with their husbands. They would say: "I am more attractive than you," and the men would reply: "I am handsomer than you." In that way they would arouse their sexual desires and become fruitful and multiply. The Holy One, blessed be He, caused them to conceive on the spot.

I love this midrash because it tends to make people blush a little bit. When you get over your embarrassment and look at the story again, the women in the midrash emerge as powerful, active characters resisting Pharaoh with the simple tools they have on hand—copper mirrors. They resist Pharaoh by holding tight to their relationships, loving one another, and investing in their families.

This midrash complicates the Torah's image of the Israelites as immobilized and exhausted, and it also challenges us to find a different way to relate to the story. Though we may not be able to hear Moses's prophetic call right now, perhaps we can hear this midrash and Rabbi Diamond calling us to hold fast to our relationships. **Loving one another—our families, friends, and communities—is in and of itself a profound act of faith and an investment in a liberated future.**

Zikhrono livrakha. May Rabbi Diamond's memory and teaching continue to be a blessing that reminds us of the power of love in a broken world.



In the spring of 1945, Jewish GIs and newly liberated survivors gathered for seder.

Printed in Dahn, Germany, in 1945, *The Rainbow Haggadah* was prepared by the US Army's 42nd Infantry Division. A hand-colored rainbow stands over the Hebrew word Haggadah. Below it sit the plain signs of the table: matzah, wine, cups, a menorah. That spring, in a shattered Germany, Jewish soldiers held the seder with survivors of the camps, their first Passover after liberation. The words of the Exodus were not distant history; they were read in the presence of men and women who had just come out of bondage.