



Tze Ulemad: Go Out and Learn



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On the cover:

In an 18th-century *mahzor* from Korfu, the ancient sacrifice appears not as memory but as presence. See page 7.

Introduction

In the middle of our Haggadah, we are instructed: *Tze Ulemad*. The simple meaning of these words is “Go (to the verse that follows) and Learn (what it says there about the story of the nation of the Jewish people).” We can also understand this as a calling to literally “Go out, so that we may Learn,” to leave our familiar surroundings and let go of what we already know so that we may approach the Passover seder with new insights.

It is with this second, more expansive understanding of the words “Go and Learn” that we’ve directed the intention for this year’s Passover reader.

This call is central to JTS: this notion of learning is at the center of our mission, fostering spaces where wisdom is transmitted, tested, and renewed across generations.

We are pleased to feature pieces from JTS faculty and students in various formats, including an interview with our chancellor, essays, brief insights, and images from The JTS Library’s Special Collections.

Some of the pieces directly expound upon the concept of “Go and Learn.” By offering new approaches to our texts and demonstrations of the ways Jews in different times and places encountered them, other pieces help us to fulfill this command.

We hope that this Passover reader will inspire you to “Go and Learn”; that the articles here offer fresh ways with which to think about our texts that you may bring with you to your seders, so that you may, in turn, inspire others as well. In this way, we can ensure that Passover is never only remembered—it is reseen, reshaped, and relived, such that the seder is a product of its time and also of all times.

Support for the Passover reader is made possible by Shelly and Larry Gross, in loving memory of their parents Lillian and Louis Konheim (z”l) and Joseph Gross (z”l).

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Tze Ulemad: Go Out and Learn

RABBI JAN UHRBACH, Founding Director, The Block / Kolker Center for Spiritual Arts, JTS



Tze *ulemad*, often translated “Go and learn,” is used in the Passover Haggadah to introduce the verses from Deuteronomy 25:5–8 (“My father was a wandering Aramean”) and the lengthy midrashic section that follows. The process this section models is at least as important as the specific content of the texts. It is intended to be illustrative of how we go about reading and studying, how we go about telling and understanding our stories, and how we emerge transformed as a result.

The introductory phrase, unusual in rabbinic literature, is itself a key part of the lesson. The word *tze* actually means “go out” in the imperative. It comes from the same root used to refer to the Exodus from Egypt itself, *Yetziat Mitzrayim* (Exod. 12:41). Here, joined to *ulemad* (and learn), the complete phrase invites an extended meditation on the relationship between going out and learning.

On the one hand, the capacity and willingness to go out serves as the precondition for learning. Learning demands a kind of leaving—a letting go of what we believe we already know. It requires the courage to sit with uncertainty, ambiguity, beginner status, or feeling ignorant. It entails leaving the comfort zone of familiarity and expertise, the ego gratification of being right. More concretely, we learn when we go outside of ourselves and our current surroundings and relationships, going out into the world to meet new people, see new terrain, and have new experiences.

On the other hand, it is also true that learning is often the precondition for going out. Learning spurs our imagination, inspiring us to envision new ways of doing and being, even alternative societal structures. Learning about others’ experiences can take us out of ourselves, growing our empathy and spurring us to action. Learning new ideas, philosophies, and spiritual and religious teachings can clarify or shift our values and ethics, leading us out of old patterns and into new practices and new priorities. Our ability to change our present circumstances—or leave them altogether—often follows upon having learned that there are alternative ways of being. Learning opens up possibility and hope, and can nurture the very courage that going out demands. This is why enslavers generally forbid enslaved people from educating themselves.

Of course, it is not an “either/or” but a “both/and.” *Tze ulemad*—“Go out, then learn” and “Learn so you can go out”—describes an iterative process. Going out enables learning, which enables going out, which makes further learning possible. And on and on. Or perhaps they are simultaneous, parallel, interdependent processes. Going out *is* learning, and learning *is* a form of going out.

We see this in the Exodus narrative itself. One way to read the story is that change begins when Moses goes out from Pharaoh’s palace and sees his brothers (Exod. 2:11). This leads to revelation/learning at the Burning Bush. That

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learning begins the process of Moses leading the entire people out of slavery, which in turn makes possible a new level of revelation/learning at Mount Sinai. The result is the endless cycle of going out and learning that is Jewish culture, practice, and history—Torah study and secular education that (ideally) lead us step-by-step out of degradation, injustice, hatred, and violence toward ever greater dignity, justice, lovingkindness, and peace.

The contrast in the Exodus narrative is Pharaoh—the one character who will not or cannot learn or go out. “I do not know YHVH,” Pharaoh famously declares; then, despite plague after plague destroying his society, he refuses to learn. This inability or unwillingness to learn becomes manifest in his hardened heart; he stays stuck, immobilized, heavy (*kaved*)—unable to go out from his current path and choose a new way. When he finally wants to go out—chasing after the Israelites—he becomes stuck, immobilized, and heavy (*bikevedut*) again, this time in the mud and mire of the Sea of Reeds (Exod. 14:25, Exod. 15:4, and Rashi).

Writ large, the Exodus narrative (and its retelling at the Passover seder) is a story of an existing world order crumbling and a new, more just society emerging, built by those who *tze ulemad* (go out and learn, who learn, and can therefore go out). Strikingly, just before actually going out (*yatzo*) from Egypt, the Israelites are commanded to instruct future generations about the Passover story, thereby becoming teachers, as well as learners (Exod. 12:26-27).

The study, discussion, storytelling, and interpretation at our seder tables is more than a celebration and reminder of our journey to freedom; it is an actualization of the journey itself.

Tze ulemad. Freedom and learning are intertwined. Go out so you can learn. Leaving is the hallmark of those who have been freed—who are no longer stuck or enslaved by external or internal forces—and don’t wait to be freed in order to learn. Rather, they go out *through* learning. Learning is the pathway to freedom. The study, discussion, storytelling, and interpretation at our seder tables is more than a celebration and reminder of our journey to freedom; it is an actualization of the journey itself. By the end of the evening, having learned something, we are a little freer than we were when we first sat down at the table.

In Every Generation: Renewing the Story of the Jewish People

An Interview with **DR. SHULY RUBIN SCHWARTZ**, Chancellor and Irving Lehrman Research Professor of American Jewish History, JTS



In thinking about Passover, Chancellor Shuly Rubin Schwartz began with the Haggadah. For her, the seder is a living textual exercise—one that demonstrates how Jewish tradition holds continuity and change in tension. The obligation to tell the story remains constant; how that story is told must always respond to the moment. What follows is adapted from this conversation.

What does the Haggadah represent to you?

To me, the ongoing exchange between teaching and learning lies at the heart of the Haggadah. And the Haggadah takes this one step further. It invites us not only to study and recite it, but to bring the experience to life. While there are essential elements that must be included, there is also enormous space for interpretation, creativity, and adaptation.

This dynamic makes the Haggadah the quintessential educational document of the Jewish people.

Passover's central imperative is to ask questions and tell the story. In addition to reciting fixed questions, participants in every era will ask—and should be encouraged to ask—unanticipated questions. Similarly, how the Passover story is told is up to us. While drawing on the traditional themes, we strive to convey them in a language our audience can hear. In this way, each seder will uniquely reflect the people gathered around the table.

What does that kind of flexibility tell us about how Judaism understands tradition?

It is incumbent upon us to continually reframe, re-energize, and evolve so that the message of the Exodus—of liberation and possibility—can speak to every generation. In this way, the Haggadah conveys the essence of Conservative Judaism, retaining the traditional framework with its required elements and timeworn melodies, foods, and rituals, while encouraging us to add our own stamp to it.

Each year, we are asked to confront the question: what does experiencing liberation require of us now? The answer is never fixed. It shifts from generation to generation, year to year, and changes depending upon who is gathered around the seder table and what each person is feeling at that time.

The seder was never meant to be static. I think those reading every word with no additions and doing the same thing every year misunderstand the seder's purpose. The Haggadah and the seder itself were designed to be fluid, inviting continual renewal, interpretation, and growth.

It is incumbent upon us to continually reframe, re-energize, and evolve so that the message of the Exodus—of liberation and possibility—can speak to every generation.

Can you give an example of how the seder itself has evolved in response to changing perspectives?

The Four Sons (what we now refer to as the “Four Children”) is a wonderful example. Think about the *rasha*, the so-called wicked child. Our understanding of that child has changed dramatically.

Instead of seeing the child as bad, we ask: What does it mean to be labeled as bad and to feel alienated as a result? What does it mean to feel like you’re doing something wrong without understanding why? This new interpretation shifts the meaning entirely. Anyone who has felt marginalized can see themselves in that child. This adaptation allows them to feel represented in the Haggadah and comfortable being at the table, while offering an opening for conversation around a sense of otherness or judgment should this person want to initiate it.

What issues have reshaped sederim and haggadot in your lifetime?

In one generation, questions of women’s roles led to the inclusion of Miriam’s Cup. Today, many children grow up with Miriam’s Cup on the table and don’t even think to question it.

The same pattern holds for those marginalized because of sexual orientation, whose experiences inspired the orange on the seder plate—another poignant response to a feeling of exclusion.

Other moments shaped the seder as well: The postwar generation added readings to remember the victims of the Holocaust. During the struggle for Soviet Jewry, prayers were added for those Jews living behind the Iron Curtain.

One of my most memorable sederim took place in 1981, when we hosted an Iranian Jewish couple who had escaped the Ayatollah. In that moment, freedom was not an abstract idea, but a palpable presence in our midst.

Passover resonates because its message of liberation continues to meet the moment.

What makes the seder uniquely open to this kind of evolution?

Much of the seder is *minhag* rather than *halakhah*. There are a few obligatory rituals and recitations, but beyond those, observing the holiday is deeply personal. Traditions and customs—such as the food you use for karpas, what kind of haroset you eat, and how you orchestrate finding the afikomen—vary depending on where your family comes from; what adult children, newer family members or long-time guests have introduced; and what community you find yourself in. Because of this, no two sederim are the same. The more we internalize from others, the richer the seder becomes.

The seder reminds us that no one generation owns the story. We inherit it, shape it, and pass it forward.

Pesah has always been the most observed holiday among American Jews. There’s a reason for that—it draws people in and the barrier to entry is low. The seder represents both a living Judaism and a practical Judaism that anyone can both access and contribute to.

The seder reminds us that no one generation owns the story. We inherit it, shape it, and pass it forward. That has been true around dining room tables for centuries, and it is true of institutions as well.

To publish a Passover reader is to take that obligation seriously. It signals that we all must continue to respond to the questions of this moment, just as Jews have done in generations before us. The story remains. The voices around the table change. The responsibility to elaborate on the narrative endures.



In an 18th-century *mahzor* from Korfu, the ancient sacrifice appears not as memory but as presence.

MS 8236 (Mahzor Korfu, 1709) includes a miniature labeled “Korban Pesah.” Four figures stand around a table bearing a roasted lamb. The scene is set indoors, with tiled floor, chandelier, and contemporary dress. The image does not attempt historical reconstruction; it places the sacrifice in the present tense of ritual memory.

Rabbinic literature distinguishes between Pesah Mitzrayim—the first Passover in Egypt, marked by blood on the doorposts and haste—and Pesah Dorot, the Passover observed in later generations in Jerusalem (Mishnah Pesachim 9). This miniature collapses that distinction. It recalls the original act, yet frames it as an enduring obligation. The sacrifice belongs to Egypt in origin, but to every generation in command.

Experiential Education, Learning Theory, and the Passover Seder

DR. JEFFREY KRESS, Provost and Dr. Bernard Heller Professor of Jewish Education, JTS

T*ze ulema*d—Go out and learn! As is often the case, the brevity of the text—two words and a conjunction—conceals deceptively rich ideas. In a sense, they encapsulate the theme of the holiday of Pesah, one that involves going out (of Egypt) and learning (about becoming the Jewish people). And *tze ulema*d, like much in the seder, invites questions: Who is going out? Where are they going? What are they learning?



*Tze ulema*d implies that learning involves action. It is easy to connect the phrase to approaches to experiential education, learning that involves hands-on participation accompanied by reflection. While one can learn about Israel, for example, from a book, experiencing Israel through time spent there deepens one's understanding. Similarly, one can learn about prayer, Shabbat, and holiday ritual, or one can experience them directly. In this framing, the seder itself is an educational activity, one which symbolically refers to a core experience in the evolution of the Jewish people, one we *cannot* directly experience—the Exodus from Egypt.

The seder itself is an educational activity, one which symbolically refers to a core experience in the evolution of the Jewish people, one we *cannot* directly experience—the Exodus from Egypt.

*Tze ulema*d can also be seen as a shorthand for powerful educational theories that don't necessarily involve hopping on the next El Al flight. Think about the metaphors for learning that you may be familiar with. *Young children are like empty vessels waiting to be filled. She's so smart, she's like a sponge soaking up information.* These metaphors set the learner in a relatively passive role, as receptacles of whatever content is at hand.

Generally speaking, educators have come to reject such metaphors and instead frame learning as an active process.

An alternate metaphor is that of a scientist who brings their

current understandings of a phenomenon into the lab, collects data, and modifies or solidifies their initial understandings accordingly. The learner *constructs* new understandings from old. With the shifting metaphors of learning comes a reframing of the role of the educator from being, as a popular saying goes, “the sage of the stage” (spouting information for students to “soak up”) to “the guide on the side,” curating encounters with new information, perspectives, or information that are likely to prompt learners to adjust their understandings. This *could* happen through experiences such as a trip to Israel or participating in prayer, but it could also happen in a classroom and even at a dinner table.

As we “go out” to encounter new information and ideas, our frameworks for making sense of phenomena in the world, which psychologists refer to as “schemas,” become more elaborate and complex. As a basic example, a very young child may form a schema for “dog”: relatively small, furry, crawls around. They may develop positive and/or negative emotions related to dogs and establish a behavioral repertoire associated with them (approach and try to engage with; avoid at all

costs). With experience, the child learns that dogs can come in various shapes, sizes, and degrees of furriness. They also learn that not everything with four legs and fur is a dog.

From this perspective, all learning is a matter of *tze*, of going out, or incremental change to our schema. Psychologist Irv Sigel (1921–2006) emphasized that the role of an educator is to, in his terminology, “distance” learners from their existing schemas, to call on them to use new data to shape their understanding. Educators and parents achieve this, according to Sigel, through implementing “distancing strategies” that call upon learners to “go out” of their schema¹.

Active learning is all well and good, but you might be wondering, what does any of this have to do with Passover?

The structure of the seder itself stretches one’s understanding. We’re familiar with dinner. We may sit down with our family for dinner regularly or at least occasionally. We may even include some prayers and singing. But the seder is radically different from an everyday dinner or even a Shabbat meal. And we’re familiar with Jewish ritual observances and prayer services. These often take place at a synagogue or, at the very least, not at a dinner table. A seder makes its uniqueness known through its very being. It is a dinner like no other and it is a liturgical event like no other. Our attention is drawn to elements of the ritual that represent the unique experience of the Exodus of the Israelites from Egypt, while at the same time referencing the quotidian Jewish experiences of ritual, family, and of course, food.

Relatedly, we take note that Sigel and others point to question-asking as a primary distancing strategy. To Sigel and others, a good question calls upon the learner to analyze their existing schema in light of new observations, inputs, or ideas. In case the distinctive qualities of the seder escape one’s conscious notice, the seder liturgy directs our attention to these through the inclusion of the so-called Four Questions. Why “so-called”? Because structurally speaking, there is only one question (How

is this night different from all other nights?) and four *answers* provided (On all other nights . . . while on this night . . .).

Those answers serve as prompts for further exploration. Sure, we dip twice or lean while we eat, etc. But why? The answers raise questions, and the questions beget deeper understanding. Though framed as answers and not questions, this section functions as a distancing strategy, drawing attention to what makes this night special. The entire setup of the evening is an exercise in unpacking those different elements².

Toward the end of the *magid* section, we note that in every generation, everyone should see themselves as if they came out of Egypt. This passage calls upon us to raise new questions every year: timeless questions, those that are relevant specifically at this moment, and questions that spark further conversation among all the generations at our seder table. In this way, we continue to fulfill the imperative of *tze ulema*.

A seder makes its uniqueness known through its very being. It is a dinner like no other and it is a liturgical event like no other.

¹ Sigel, I. E., Kress, J. S., & Elias, M. J. (2007). “Beyond Questioning: Inquiry Strategies and Cognitive and Affective Elements of Jewish Education.” *Journal of Jewish Education*, 73(1), 51–66. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15244110601175178>

² Also see Klein, R. (2023). “The Passover Seder as an Exercise in Piagetian Education Theory.” *Religious Education*. 118. 1–13.

Renaming the Enemy

RABBI NAOMI KALISH, Harold and Carole Wolfe Director of the Center for Pastoral Education; Assistant Professor of Pastoral Education, JTS

One year, I invited a few people from an interfaith dialogue group to join my family for our Passover seder. An extended family from Egypt came; some of them lived in the United States and some were visiting from Alexandria.

Before we began the seder, I told my guests that it would be good for us to discuss terminology. I did not want to offend my guests by referring to the villains of the Passover story as “the Egyptians.” Even though I know that the phrase refers to ancient Egyptians, the sound of it and the conflation of time and texts might feel personal and uncomfortable to my guests. I said, “I know you have the story of the Exodus in the Quran. What do you call, for lack of a better word, the ‘bad guys?’”

My guests were quick to respond that they refer to the people who oppressed the Hebrews as “Pharaoh’s people.” They expressed the assumption that not all of the Egyptians were bad and that they, too, were living under tyrannical rule. By renaming or re-referring to the villains as “Pharaoh’s people,” they resisted vilifying and dehumanizing an entire group of people.

My friends’ understanding of the conflict in the Exodus story reminded me of an interpretation about the oppressors in the Exodus story. In the story of Egyptian slavery as told in the Book of Deuteronomy, we read the verse *קשה וירעו אותנו המצרים ויענונו ויתנו עלינו עבודה קשה*, typically translated as “The Egyptians dealt harshly with us and oppressed us; they imposed heavy labor upon us” (Deut. 26:6, *Revised JPS Translation*, 2023).

By renaming or re-referring to the villains as “Pharaoh’s people,” they resisted vilifying and dehumanizing an entire group of people.

In his commentary on this verse, the Netziv of Volozhin (*Naftali Zvi Yehuda Berlin*, 1816–1893) reinterpreted the first of these words—*vayareiu*. Instead of understanding it as simply meaning “The Egyptians mistreated us,” he apparently understood it grammatically as a *hif’il*, a causative verb meaning “The Egyptians made us into the wicked ones, who lacked gratitude” (*HaEmek Davar* on Deut. 26:6). They propagandized the Hebrews, vilifying them as an entire people, an essential step in the process of oppressing a minority group.

A close reading of the text indicates that the biblical narrative also perpetuates a generalization about the Egyptians, suggesting that they all participated in the oppression of the Israelites. However, we know that Pharaoh’s daughter saved Moses as a baby, and there is no reason in the text to assume that all Egyptians participated in the oppression of the Hebrews.

A more accurate statement would be that Pharaoh and his people, his leadership team, perpetuated vilifying propaganda against the Hebrews. In conflict, all too often, vilifying and generalizing takes place in both directions regardless of power and privilege.



From these two stories—the Egyptians who attended my seder and from the Natziv’s telling of the story of the oppression of the Hebrews—I gained three specific insights about communicating in the presence of conflict. First, I try to avoid using the definite article “the” (such as, “the Egyptians”) so as not to generalize and label entire groups of people. Second, I try to identify and name the specific people or institutions that took specific actions. This clarity calls for a sense of accountability. Finally, I practice *hakarat hatov*, recognizing the good actions taken by people. I hope that these insights offer a helpful model for disrupting generalization and transforming conflict at our Passover seders and beyond.



On a narrow column of a 14th-century Spanish siddur, gratitude climbs the page.

MS 4366 (the Schloss–London Siddur), a 14th-century Sephardic manuscript from Spain, sets *Dayenu* in a narrow vertical column. Each clause *אילו... ולא... דיינו* stands on its own line. The eye climbs the page as the voice moves through the litany. The design is not incidental. Iberian manuscripts often list refrains in this stepped form so that repetition becomes visible, as well as audible. The layout belongs to a Spanish graphic tradition that treats liturgical sequence as structure to be seen not only heard.

Love and Resistance

SARAH ROCKFORD, JTS Rabbinical Student

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.

It's hard to make a difference in the world around us when you feel as impotent as the Israelites.

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.

Questions for This Seder

We posed four questions to students this year and are thrilled to share some of their responses. They are offered not as conclusions, but as invitations. Consider using these questions at your seder table.

*Tze ulema*d (Go out and learn) is not confined to the beit midrash. It unfolds wherever honest reflection meets shared conversation. May these questions help spark your own.

The Question You're Sitting with This Year:

What question are you carrying into this Passover? It might be textual, theological, personal, or unresolved. Why does this question feel alive for you right now?

Elyse Wolman, JTS Rabbinical Student

Every year, I think about the **עש** (wicked child). In the Haggadah, the **עש** asks: "What is this service to you?" By saying "you," he excludes himself. Therefore, we reply: "Because of what God did for me when I came out of Egypt." For me and not for him. It concludes saying that the **עש** wouldn't have been redeemed. Why does the **עש**'s question imply



I believe we should shift the focus away from ensuring survival to ensuring accessibility.

exclusion? And why must we respond so harshly to this question? This interpretation of the **עש** reflects the rabbis' worries about students challenging authority in a way that would challenge the foundation of Jewish tradition. However, these worries and this interpretation reflect a changing religious landscape in which it was necessary to have a firm foundation to ensure survival.

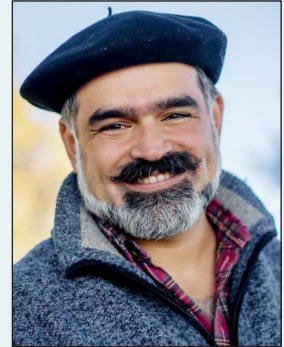
Our society today is not like that. Today we live in a relatively stable religious landscape. I believe we should shift the focus away from ensuring survival to ensuring accessibility. While the ancient rabbis were aiming to promote a specific paradigm for learning, Jewish educators today recognize that each child learns differently. And, more importantly, these differences aren't a reason to dismiss a child's curiosity. I view the **עש**'s question as one many Jews today are asking: Why does Jewish practice matter to us? Why should this matter to us? These questions are valid. I believe we need to ask ourselves: Does there need to be a villainous figure in our Haggadah's metaphor for the next generation of Jewish children? Does the **עש** need to exist at all?

Teacher ↔ Learner:

Describe a moment when you arrived as a teacher and left as a learner, or expected to learn and found yourself teaching. What did that moment reveal?

Arnon Z. Shorr, MFA in Creative Writing Student

The Torah speaks of four archetypical sons and prescribes different approaches to teaching each of them. As for my son, there's only one of him. But is he wise? Is he wicked? Or simple? Does he even know how to ask a question?



Consider the evidence: There was that one time when he intentionally failed (and eventually dropped out of) a Judaics elective at school. I made him learn Mishnah Pesachim with me instead. Once a week, he begrudgingly allowed me to yammer at him about the things a bunch of ancient rabbis once said about Passover. We had only managed to slog through the first half of that book by the time Passover came along. One day before the holiday, I found myself scrambling solo to scrub the kitchen. My mother-in-law was in the hospital, my wife had flown down to Baltimore early, and my daughters

were too young to help. And my son had made the mistake the previous day of thinking that scootering at high speed down a steep hill was a fun thing to do on a Shabbat afternoon and so all he could do was sit in the kitchen with his ankle elevated, feeling bad that he couldn't help with anything. That night, with the kids bundled into the car for the mad dash down I-95, I tasked him with reading the entire second half of Mishnah Pesachim (the half we hadn't gotten to yet) out loud in the car because I wouldn't be able to get us to Baltimore in time for a *siyyum* (and I really didn't want to suffer through the Fast of the Firstborn after an overnight drive). The *siyyum*, a

traditional celebration to mark the completion of the study of a tractate of Talmud or a book of Mishnah, requires its participants to eat and supersedes the minor pre-Passover fast. My son was suddenly eager to participate in this ritualized rabbinic loophole. And at the seder, 12 hours after we triumphantly recited the *hadran* at our little two-person *siyyum*, my son interjected with things he had learned in those *mishnayot*. The same nattering of bygone rabbis that felt like cruel paternal torture only a few months earlier had become elevated wisdoms that he could use to contribute to, and thereby enhance, our ancient conversation.

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A Teaching That Rocked Your World:

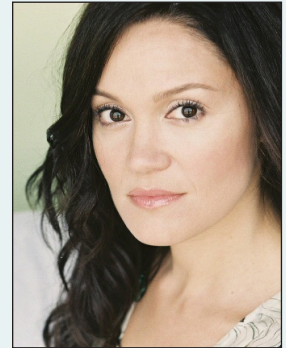
Since last Passover, what teaching, text, or idea changed the way you think about Judaism, the world, or yourself? What shifted for you, and why did it matter?

Monica Osborne, PhD, MFA in Creative Writing Student

Pesah is about freedom: from exile, from bondage, from pain. I've always found the notion that we can ever be truly free to be complicated. Emmanuel Levinas says that our responsibility for others precedes our freedom. But we realize this only in a face-to-face encounter, when a person's vulnerability places a demand on us that exists before we consciously choose anything. So it's responsibility, not freedom, that comes first. If we are free, it is a freedom that is shaped by our responsibility to others. The irony: We talk about escaping bondage, but to be free we must acknowledge that we are held hostage to this responsibility. And we are ethically obligated to fulfill it.

I've been thinking about what this means as Pesah approaches and as images of the stranger, the vulnerable, are everywhere. What does it mean to be responsible for them? People, innocent and guilty, are taken and sent away; we have conversations about what is right and what is fair as we watch it unfold. Often we disagree and we stop talking to each other. We forget that we're also responsible for the person we disagree with. The political conflicts with the ethical. We are angry on all sides. Everyone should be free, we say, without understanding what it means

and what it requires of all of us. And I think to myself: **This Pesah, can we not all take one step back and hold space for everyone, for people on both sides of the fence?**



I've always found the notion that we can ever be truly free to be complicated.

A Passover Teaching You Carry with You:

Is there a teaching, ritual, or question connected to Passover that you return to again and again? What makes it enduring for you, and how does it continue to teach you?

Philip A. Pizzo, MD, MA in Spiritual Care and Counseling Student

I became a Jew by Choice late in life after a long secular career in science and medicine that had spiritual, but not religious, underpinnings. After my conversion and in tandem with other life transitions, I felt an even stronger desire to learn more about Jewish history, Jewish texts, and Jewish literature. I delved into Jewish holidays as a student, a reader, and a questioner. With Pesah specifically, my studies of history and William Dever's archeology challenged the logos of the stories of Exodus, placing them on a different scale and timeline than I had imagined. Yet the mythos became more important, and I felt inspired by the message of liberation from bondage, the founding of a people and a nation. Embracing and choosing a life that tries to repair our damaged world has had deep resonance. I found parallel thinking in Victor Frankl's statement from *Search for Meaning*, "You cannot control what happens to you in life, but you can always control what you will feel and do about what happens to you."

I came to appreciate that the telling of the stories in the Haggadah each year has helped preserve Judaism from antisemitism, assaults, pogroms, and genocides that have been part of Jewish life from its inception through today. Rituals have made a difference, and the central message of Pesah—the prospect of escaping to new lives—is powerful and enduring. Pesah is meaningful not only because it offers an opportunity for collective memory, but because of how it sets the stage for the telling—through text, read aloud, questioned, and deeply considered. Even though I have no Jewish family other than my spouse, I find Pesah deeply meaningful because I feel connected to a people and to words that have lasted for millennia. Because virtually every other part of my life has been comprised of short half-lives, the holiday of Pesah offers an intergenerational connection, even if loosely woven. That symbolism is special because it puts the focus on people and fosters a community with a history, expectations, and hopes for the future, individually and collectively.



The central message of Pesah—the prospect of escaping to new lives—is powerful and enduring.

Opening the Door in Dark Times

RABBI GORDON TUCKER, Vice Chancellor for Religious Life and Engagement, JTS

There is a moment in the Passover seder that I always find very poignant, though I suspect it is not for the same reason that it moves so many others. It is the opening of the door for Elijah, just after we've given thanks for the festival meal and before completing the uplifting songs of *Hallel*. Elijah is anticipated as the herald of the Messiah, and so opening the door, especially at the Feast of Redemption, is to welcome the long-awaited Redemption (such is the understanding of the practice by the Maharil in the 14th–15th century). The poignancy of that ritual moment for me is, alas, downbeat in nature. For we know by induction from centuries of experience, including the worst of times, it is nearly certain that there will be no one at the door. We may indulge a fantasy, imagining an invisible visitor somehow sipping wine. But invisible redeemers, though they may fascinate and delight our children, are no substitute for the real thing that the world so desperately needs. And so, I sadly see the opening of the door as an inevitable dashing of hope.



What can the mood be in these times, this year, when we open our doors? We are, after all, witnesses to unprecedented corruption from so many leaders at home and abroad, and the cruelty of separating children from parents who are left

We fear for the triumph of injustice and for the fate of democracy and decency. There is dissonance between our fear and despair on the one hand, and the triumphalism in the words of the Haggadah on the other, which may be difficult to bear.

with almost no recourse. How can we sing words of welcome to the invisible Elijah without those words turning to ash in our mouths?

The German scholar Daniel Goldschmidt, in his commentary on the Haggadah, took note of a paradox inherent in the Passover eve liturgy from the start. For the seder came into existence after the destruction of the Second Temple. And yet, as the Mishnah tells us, the liturgy included *Hallel* and a “Blessing of Song.” Goldschmidt commented as follows: “The praises of God contained in the *Hallel*, gratitude for all the kindnesses shown to God’s people, rescuing and protecting them from danger, must have spoken to the post-destruction generations as sardonic humor (literally: mocking the unfortunate).” It surely was that for so many generations of Jews who had experienced poverty,

persecutions, and pogroms. And it is just as surely for us. We fear for the triumph of injustice and for the fate of democracy and decency. There is dissonance between our fear and despair on the one hand, and the triumphalism in the words of the Haggadah on the other, which may be difficult to bear.

What then can we do? It is perhaps instructive that the opening of the door is followed by a recitation of verses beginning with lines from Psalm 79: “Pour out your fury on the peoples who do not know You.”

To whom are these words addressed? The conventional answer is that they are addressed to God, who is asked to inflict retribution on those who have harmed God’s people. But perhaps we can imagine the “you” here to be each celebrant at the seder reading the Haggadah. That is, after we see the emptiness at the hoped-for door of redemption, we are prompted to pour out our *own* fury at what the world can inflict. We need the catharsis of expressing rage at the violation of human

bodies and souls, the cruel shipping of those bodies to places unknown as if they were disposable commodities, and the disenfranchisement of those who were promised the equality God ordained for human beings.

So yes, the expression of rage is not out of place. It is natural and does no good when it is kept in. But there is one more crucial element in this cathartic moment that must not be missed. For the anger to which we give expression is placed just before the third psalm of the *Hallel*, Psalm 115. The opening words are: “Lo lanu, A-donai, lo lanu, ki leshimkha ten kavod” (“Not for us, Lord, not for us, but rather for the glory of Your name”). Goldschmidt believed that the cathartic verses of anger were intentionally placed here as a preamble to Psalm 115. And that juxtaposition, as we ponder all that ails the world today, conveys a very weighty and critical message. We are given leave to express our wrath at what the pre-messianic world can mete out, but then we are immediately reminded that the anger must translate itself into acts that are not about *our* aggrandizement or felt need for revenge but exist solely to further the kind of world that gives testimony to God’s presence and purposes.

As the door opens this year, let us both testify to the truth of our shredded emotions and yet work for the truth of God’s purposes for the world and its inhabitants.

Adapted from a piece created for the Academy of Jewish Religion.



MS 4481, copied and illustrated by Joel ben Simeon in Germany around 1445, pairs *Shefoch hamatkha*—“Pour out Your wrath upon the nations that do not know You.” (Ps. 79:6; 69:25)—with a scene of Elijah riding a donkey and sounding a shofar. The verses call for divine judgment on persecuting powers. Elijah, rabbinic herald of the Messiah, signals imminent redemption; the donkey recalls Zechariah 9:9. The shofar, instrument of revelation and ingathering (Isa. 27:13), shifts the focus from vengeance to covenantal restoration, integrating eschatological hope into the Passover liturgy.



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