



**A PASSOVER OF  
HOPE:  
THE JOY AND  
RESPONSIBILITY OF  
FREEDOM**

**An Uri L'Tzedek/Torat Chayim  
Passover Reader**

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THE JOY AND RESPONSIBILITY OF FREEDOM**

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**Passover:  
America's Remedy Against  
Bigotry and Fear  
Rabbi Dr. Shmuly Yanklowitz**

An anecdote about a rabbinic ethicist helps us understand how to welcome immigrants seeking lives of freedom in the United States. Rabbi Yisrael Salanter, founded Judaism's modern character development movement (the mussar movement). One spring, before Passover, he was called to certify the kosher status of a particular matzah factory. As he inspected the factory, he observed the conditions thoroughly. He saw that the unleavened bread, important to Jews the world over, were made according to the letter of "halacha," law. Yet, after inspecting every aspect of the factory, Rabbi Salanter refused certification. In explaining why he refused to certify the products of the factory, Rabbi Salanter looked to the workers. These women were overworked. They were paid poorly. Their needs were ignored. Because his moral compass would not allow the consumption of products prepared unethically, Rabbi Salanter refused to certify that factory's matzah as fit for use on the holiday on which Jews tell the story of their ancestors' release from enslavement. This story always inspires me to see beyond the surface of our religious and spiritual practices, seeking deeper ethical truths.

At this vital moment, our nation needs to observe Passover together. I don't mean this literally, of course. Each of us should embrace our own spiritual or religious approaches. On a cultural level, however, it has never been more imperative that we pause to reflect on the fact that

we are a nation of immigrants, strangers, refugees, proudly and collectively dedicated to liberty for all individuals who are oppressed.

It is a moment to talk about how a marginalized people found strength to break free from bondage. Indeed, the tradition calls for nothing less than a slave uprising.

In all its dimensions, the Exodus, the focal story of Passover, was never meant to be confined to the history of a particular people. Rather, the Israelites' flight from the fetters of cruelty articulates a universalistic approach to liberation from xenophobia, fear, and subjugation. Their journey remains an inspiration not only theologically but also as we consider the practicalities of leading an ethical life. Their ancient story reminds us of the plight of the poor, the challenges of the working class, and the injustices faced by asylum seekers who, like the Hebrews of old, are not regarded as worthy of respect.

The legacy of Israelite slavery, lamentably, remains a potent force in the world. While America's own sordid experience with slavery is extensive and deeply worthy of analysis, it is worth noting that while keeping humans enslaved is now (although sadly, not originally) constitutionally prohibited, the fact that human beings are nonetheless shackled has never abated. While humans are no longer owned by other humans in the manner that they were in an earlier previous era, the endless desire for material gain has created sub-classes and invisible classes, whose suffering is ignored or even approved. As consumers today, do we pay proper attention to the mistreatment of workers?

As a citizen living near the border between the United States and Mexico, I've seen the consequences of ignoring human dignity. Along with my colleagues in various interfaith advocacy movements, I've

witnessed and responded to the plight of asylum seekers that Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) agents drop off in our community. We see people arrive with needs so desperate that many are on the brink of death. Many of these people are so desperate for medical treatment, mental health care, legal support, food, and necessary hygienic supplies that they are physically, mentally, and even spiritually traumatized to the core.

When we see immigrant workers in the back of restaurants (or when we don't see these invisible people), we understand how easy it is for them to be exploited for their work because they do not enjoy the rights and protections that citizens have.

The mantra recited during the Passover service—"Why is this night different from all other nights?"—should never be relegated to one moment in the calendar. The Passover holiday calls upon us not to think of other human beings as dispensable and transactional objects in our markets of exploitation. It calls upon each of us to recall that we too were slaves and that our ethical responsibility today emerges not only from our individual and familial, but also our societal past.

As a nation, we can do better. And we can do so much more. Departing from vile justifications for injustice and gravitating back towards simple human dignity is all that is required. When I look into the face of someone who needs my help most desperately, I don't ponder the political ramifications of my actions. When asylum seekers arrive at our border, we must see them and think about why they arrived pleading desperately at our county's gates for freedom. Then, and only then, can we follow their journey from persecution to redemption.



## From a Passover of Alienation to a Passover of Empathy Rabbi Hanan Schlesinger

One of the most oft-repeated themes of the Torah is that we must remember that we were slaves and strangers in the Land of Egypt, and that God redeemed us with an out-stretched hand. Both the experience of slavery and the experience of redemption are meant to radiate one central and fundamental call to action that the Torah comes back to again and again:

***Slavery and stranger-hood*** — Love the stranger and care for him, provide for him and show him empathy. Feel his pain and act to alleviate it, deal kindly with him, for you yourself know what it means to be a stranger and a slave.

***Redemption*** — Walk in the footsteps of God who redeemed us from Egypt, and redeem the slave and the downtrodden. Provide for them as God provided for us. Just as God's mercies are upon all His creatures, so ought our mercies to be upon all His creatures.

The world is divided into *us* and *them*. That is the way that it has to be. In order to experience the security and the love of the family, the clan, the nation, there have to be those who are not part of our inner concentric circles. But at the same time, one of the most central directives of the Torah is that this division must never be so stark as to alienate the *us* from the *them*. Our love and concern must radiate out beyond the *us* towards the *them*. Our sense of *us* must empower our people to reach out to *them*.

We recall and relive our experience in Egypt on the holiday of Passover that is now at our doorstep. Passover is the centerpiece of the Jewish year and the focal point of the process of handing down the tradition to the next generation. And the focal point of Passover is the Seder night with its Haggadah text. The Haggadah tells us – “In every generation one must see himself as if he personally went out of Egypt.” We spend the whole night bringing alive the events of slavery and redemption.

Towards what end? What is the take-away? Clearly the answer ought to be: To develop within us the historical memory that will constantly remind us and inspire us to love the stranger and redeem him from his suffering!

Yet this message is completely missing from the Haggadah. It certainly harps on our misery in Egypt, but instead of using that experience to nurture empathy for those who suffer, it sees in it a paradigm for the panorama Jewish history, reminding us “in every generation they rise against us to annihilate us, and the Holy One Blessed be He saves us from them.”

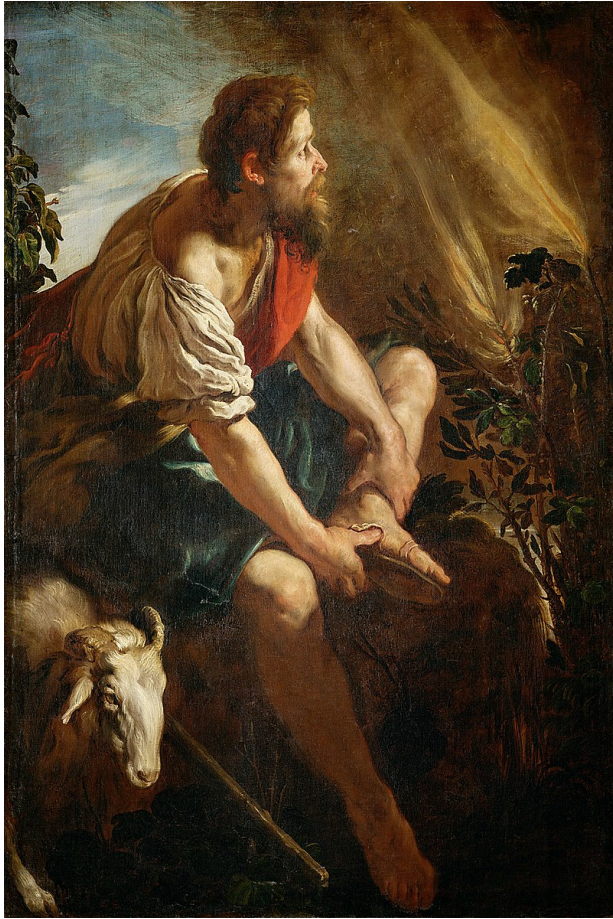
The reason for this lacuna—at least one of the reasons—may be that during the 1,000-plus years during which the Haggadah text developed, we Jews were the slaves and the strangers, and the dominant cultures were antagonistic to our way of life and often to our very existence. We were the *other* and little love was lost on us. Our forefathers were too busy surviving to find room in our hearts and in our texts to teach ourselves about love of the stranger and empathy for his suffering. The larger message of Passover was postponed for the distant future.

That future may have arrived. Reality today is different, in Israel and to a large degree in many parts of America, from that which our forefathers knew. We are no longer the *other* that we used to be, and there are other peoples, cultures and ethnic groups that have taken our place. In Israel we are the dominant culture and in America we are part of the mainstream.

These are the conditions of life that the Torah envisioned, and not the circumstances under which our forbearers have lived for the past 2,000 years. As such, it is time for our *Haggadot* and our celebration of Passover, as well as our Jewish consciousness and our behavior, to reflect that change and to go back to basics.

Let the seder be our forum to proclaim and inculcate an ethic of empathy for the other emanating from two intertwined experiences — One—Never Again! Never again shall any people suffer what we suffered in Egypt. And two – We take it upon ourselves to continually struggle to redeem the *other*, just as God redeemed us!





# **‘Here Am I’**

## **A Personal Midrash on Moses’ Search for Identity**

### **Julius Lester**

The story of Moses’ beginning is familiar—his birth during the time Pharaoh decreed death to newborn male Hebrews, his concealment by his parents for three months, his being placed finally in a basket of reeds by the bank of the Nile, and the discovery of him there by Bithiah (the rabbinic name for Pharaoh’s daughter meaning “I trust in God”).

#### **Pharaoh’s Daughter “Opens Up”**

The question must be asked: Why did God give the responsibility for his rearing to an Egyptian woman and the daughter of Pharaoh? Who was this woman and what did she impart to Moses?

I can imagine a young woman dissatisfied with the life and values bequeathed her by her father. It was a life without substance, though every physical need was filled and every material desire satisfied. She has reached that critical moment in life where dissatisfaction has become unbearable and action is required. The only problem (and it is always the problem): she doesn’t know what to do. It is at such times that God presents us with an opportunity to act, if we recognize it as such. She sees a basket among the reeds beside the river. The closed basket looks like a tiny coffin. Does it contain the body of a dead Jewish boy? She does not turn and walk away from the possible horror, but orders the basket brought to her.

The midrash records that one of the slave girls said:

*Your Highness, it is the general rule that when a king makes a decree, his own family will obey that decree even if everyone else transgresses it; but you are flagrantly disobeying your father's command?*

*Yes, because her need for identity separate from her father was much greater.*

The basket is brought to her and instead of ordering the slave girl to open it, Bithiah knows that she must be responsible for her act, and the text records this remarkable line: “And she opened it, and saw it, even the child” (Exodus 2:6).

What is this “it” she sees even before she sees the child?

The crucial word in the line is “opened.” To open is one of the most important and difficult spiritual acts we are asked to do. Only when we open can the new present itself. But opening means forsaking the comfort and knowledge of the familiar to enter the unknown, whose parameter and shape is not yet revealed.

When we truly open, we see, and we see that we see. It is the conjunction of objectivity and inner clarity and comes only after we have the courage to risk inner turmoil of unbearable proportions. This conjunction is an experience of the *Shechinah* (the Divine Presence), which is the “it” Bithiah sees.

## **Birmingham, Alabama with Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Burning Bush**

Reverend Ralph Abernathy at a rally held in a church.... told how Moses avoided looking at the [burning] bush. God finally forced Moses to look at the bush, and Moses looked at it until the fire of that bush burned within him. With that fire within, Moses took the first steps towards redeeming his people. I think that many of us felt that way about our “Birmingham” experience. Something about those days transformed our brothers’ burning desire for freedom and equality into a flame burning within us.



צדק  
JUSTICE  
צדק

JUSTICE  
תהדוף

YOU SHALL  
PURSUE

**Moses the Seeker:  
Public Story, Private Journey  
Yehuda Amichai**

Moses-our-teacher saw the face of God only once  
And forgot. He did not want to see the desert  
Not even the promised land - but only the face of God.  
He struck the rock in the fury of his longings  
He climbed Mt. Sinai and descended. He shattered the two  
Tablets of the Covenant and made a golden calf. He searched  
In fire and in smoke. But he remembered only  
The strong hand of God and his outstretched arm,  
Though not his face - just like one who wants  
To remember the face of a loved one but cannot.  
He made for himself a 'police sketch' taking from the face  
of God, the face of the burning bush and the face of  
Pharaoh's daughter as she leaned over him when he was an infant in the  
basket  
And he distributed the picture to all the tribes of Israel  
And throughout the wilderness. But no one had seen,  
And no one recognized. And only at the end of his life,  
On Mt. Nebo, he saw and died with a kiss from the face of God.



## When the Going Gets Tough

Tikvah Frymer Kensky

“In every generation we [women] must look upon ourselves as if we (were the women who came out of Egypt.” The actions of the women of the Exodus story, the “righteous women of that generation”; are memorable and praiseworthy; but they are not extraordinary, not limited merely to a few heroines of the past. We all have seen the strength of women in adversity. Women fight to keep their families together in times of war, economic deprivation, and epidemics. Reticent dependent women “who never balanced a checkbook” turn into superwomen when they have to nurse ailing husbands or raise their families alone because of widowhood or divorce. All the strengths and talents that have been invisible—even to the woman herself—start coming to the fore. It is as if women are turned inside out by trouble: when the going gets tough, it seems women get going.





**The Power of Sisterhood:  
Avital Sharansky Appeals to Raisa Gorbachov  
Martin Gilbert**

On the eve of the Geneva Summit every Jewish organization, as well as many Western parliamentarians, Senators and Congressmen, urged that Avital Sharansky release should be a part of any new detente between the Soviet Union and the United States. In New York, Avital stood in silent protest outside the Soviet Mission to the United Nations, then flew to Geneva where, joined by hundreds of Soviet Jewry activists, including former Prisoner of Zion, Josif Mendelevich, she again drew the attention of the world's journalists to her husband's continued incarceration.

The Geneva Summit began on November 18, 1985. It passed with Sharansky still, after eight and a half years, a prisoner. Nor was any other prisoner given his freedom.

On the first day of the Geneva Summit, Avital Sharansky, who had already written to both Reagan and Gorbachov, sent a personal appeal to Gorbachov's wife Raisa:

*Mrs. Raisa Gorbachev,*

*I write to you now as you accompany your husband, the General Secretary, to the Geneva Summit, because I have been denied unjustly the accompaniment of Anatoly Sharansky, my husband, for more than eleven years. I send this letter to you, a wife and mother, because I am being deprived without reason of my right to be a wife and mother, to build a home. I turn to you as a woman in the hope that that you have any*

*influence on your husband's decisions your basic human compassion will bring you to ask him to set free my husband Anatoly.*

*Perhaps in your heart, you will be able to sense the suffering I have undergone knowing that the man I love most dearly is behind bars in Chistopol prison or laboring with a serious heart condition in a labour camp in the Urals. The love you feel for your own husband, Mrs. Gorbachev, should guide you in understanding the sadness and constant fear, mingled with the sense of pride and admiration that my love for Anatoly brings to me.*

*If your love for the General Secretary means sharing with him the joys of children, and grandchildren, of planning and living a life together, then you must know, Mrs Gorbachev, that these joys are all denied to me. My husband Anatoly will not come home this evening, we will not discuss together our children's progress at school or what toys to buy them, we will not consider an excursion together. Why should I not be allowed these simple pleasures, because my husband proudly declared that he is a Jew, that his home is in the Jewish Homeland?*

*Mrs Gorbachev, please do not dismiss my appeal as power politics or international relations that are not of your concern. The benign influence of wives and mothers throughout time shows that women have influenced their husbands not to ignore the human element, that a woman's voice and heart—should temper the decisions of husbands involved with tactics and strategic ploys.*

*Mrs. Gorbachev, hear the voice of a woman who suffers unjustly.*

*Let your own voice be heard.*

*Sincerely,*

*Avital Sharansky*

## Seder Family Feuds

### Rabbi Mordechai Zeller

There is often a strange dissonance between the Passover Seder, literally meaning order, and the chaos it takes to get there. In many households, Passover cleaning is a time not just for getting rid of *Hametz* (leavened bread), it is a time for an intense spring cleaning. This cleaning process is not only a technical feat, it is also an emotional task.

And then the Seder night arrives. The entire family gathers together for the reading of the Haggadah and the eating of the Matzah, accompanied with a glorious feast. After weeks of hard work, the host of the Seder finally sits down, and for a short fleeting moment it is a wonderful, and joyous occasion. But that moment doesn't last long. Very quickly, the drama begins. Sharing a space together, the explosions are almost inevitable. This special moment brings up everyone's anger, guilt, sibling rivalry, intergenerational tension and pressure. Seder?

Sounds pretty chaotic to me...

Many times we perceive these types of family tensions as a failure. But, what if the true essence of the Seder is the thing everyone is trying to avoid? Perhaps, we can view these family dramas as an integral part of the Seder?

Difficult children and unanswered questions are a big part of the Pesach drama. Perhaps our sages were hinting at this as they made sure to add depictions of dysfunctional father-son images, sibling rivalry and family feuds to the traditional text of the Haggadah?

According to Jewish law, the dough for the Matzah needs to be prepared using *mayim shelanu*, literally: water that slept, water that was not

immediately drawn from the well or faucet. Following this, our sages taught that Matzah should be made with water that was set aside for the making of Matzah, and sat through the night, waiting for the baking of the matzah the next day (the original reason for this seems to be the fear that water that is a bit warm would possibly make the dough leaven, and water set aside cools through the night).

I would like to offer another interpretation to the word *Shelanu*. When Jacob ran away from his brother Esau, the Torah says that he left Beer Sheba and set out on his way to Haran. He is alone, tired and, fearful of what is yet to come. The verse says **וילן שם כי בא השמש** – “and he slept there for the sun had set.” The Zohar explains that the sun setting symbolized his emotional state. He is in the dark. He is heartbroken, sad, perhaps depressed. When it says *vayalen sham*, the Zohar says this alludes not to him sleeping, but to another verse, describing the people of Israel complaining to Moses **על משה לאמור מה ילוננו העם**—“*Vayalono* means they complained about their thirst and lack of water.”

Going back to Jacob, he didn't just go to sleep. He complained. He was angry at God for his harsh fate. When our Rabbis taught that we learn prayer from the patriarchs, we learn the idea of evening prayer from Jacob at this moment of distress. Prayer is not only about praise, but sometimes, our pain and anger can enable some powerful prayer as well.

With this idea of *Vayilono*, we can say that we are told to use *Mayim Shelanu*, water of our discontent to bake our Matzah. Perhaps we are asked to fuse water of bitterness, anger, and difficulty together with the taste of freedom. Perhaps the taste of freedom has a bitterness to it that needs to be present in the process of the Passover ceremony.

Where is this water coming from? On Rosh Hashanah, the Jewish New Year, there is a custom called *Tashlich*, the (symbolic) casting away of sins at a natural water source. In Hassidic sources, we hear of a Rebbe who would go to draw his *Mayim Shebanu* for his Matzah baking from the exact place where half a year earlier he did *Tashlich*, the casting away of one's sins.

Perhaps before Yom Kippur, we can cast away the parts of ourselves that are unfavorable in our eyes, project them unto a scapegoat and send him out to die in the wilderness. But on Passover, in order to experience the taste of freedom, we need our sins back. We need to reclaim those unfavorable parts, the split off shadow images of anger, rage and discontent.

Freedom is meaningless without them.

Perhaps this year, when someone asks those tough, uncomfortable questions, or when the tightly knit Seder begins to unravel—know and remember: this is the Seder. This is what is supposed to happen. Embrace the conflict, hold the space, let the inter-generational process work itself through. Only by reclaiming our sins, facing our unconscious shadow and owning our anger and discontent can we leave Egypt and truly become free.



# Our “Egyptian Entanglement”

## Rabbi Herzl Hefter

The Jewish narrative is forever entangled with ancient Egypt. That entanglement continues to challenge us today.

### **An Organic Entanglement**

The Talmudic Sages expand the Passover narrative from a historical encounter to an organic mother-child relationship. The Midrash compares God’s going to “take for Himself a nation from the very bowels of another nation” (Deut. 4:34) to extracting “a fetus from the womb of a cow.”

The image of the Pascal blood on the thresholds and of the people emerging from the breaking waters of the sea, is a powerful image of birthing. Egypt is portrayed not as the familiar historical oppressor but as a woman in the midst of a violent birth. Egypt is the womb in which the Israelites gestated. The portrait which the Sages paint is not one of a mere historical encounter, but rather, of an intimate organic connection.

Under the best of circumstances severing the bond between the infant and the mother is a complicated business. This is even more the case when the mother is abusive and cruel—where love and loathing are intermingled as were the light and the darkness of creation.

### **How do we emerge?**

So, how do we understand and emerge from the womb of Egypt—from what could be called, “The Egyptian Entanglement?”



The key lies in how the following verse is interpreted: [...] and the children of Israel went out with a high hand (Exodus 14:8). Onkelos deviates from the straightforward meaning of the Torah text by translating “a high hand,” be *yad ramah*, as “heads held high.”

The key to understanding the differing connotations of “a high hand” as opposed to “heads held high” is in the *Targum Yonatan* on the same verse. He translates, “heads held high” as “With a raised hand overcoming the Egyptians.”

Rabbi Mordechai Yosef of Ishbitz (1800 – 1851) explains that, in contradistinction to the raised hand, which is set against the Egyptians, the head held high indicates a different type of freedom: Heads held high signify a freedom that is “not against others with pride and a feeling of superiority rather... as free people without fear of any man” (*Mei Hashiloah, Beshalah*).

I would like to unpack this teaching of the Mei Hashiloah: There is a danger that the Israelites, because of the trauma of slavery, would not properly separate from the abusive environment in which they developed. It is very tempting to adopt a stance of victimhood and self-righteousness. Together, these characteristics seem to grant the moral high ground. However, adopting a posture of victimhood and allowing it to shape one's personality and the lens through which one views the world can be very destructive. Too often, the victim turns into the victimizer. The abused becomes the abuser. Undoubtedly, the Israelites suffered terrible injustices at the brutal hands of their Egyptian masters. However, to adopt the role as ‘victim,’ when the post slavery era did not justify it, would in a sense perpetuate the slavery. Their “freedom” would be no freedom at all; it would be slavery in a different form. Their

experience would be oriented back towards their oppressors—it would be a reaction to Egypt.

### **The Challenge Today**

Rousseau famously wrote, “Man is born free and everywhere he is in chains. Those who think themselves masters of others are indeed greater slaves than they.” Freedom for all people begins with an attitude of freedom. For the Israelites, freedom required a paradigm shift away from powerless victim to empowered servants of God joined together by a cosmic destiny.

The challenge our ancestors faced back then is analogous to the situation which we, especially those of us who live in Israel, encounter today. To what extent will we allow our *Galut*—diaspora—experience, especially recent Jewish history, our own “Egyptian Entanglement,” to orient us?

Are all of our enemies equivalent to the Nazis? Are we always the victims? Is the rule of Law “negotiable” as it was for our ancestors who suffered under anti-Jewish regimes from which they were justifiably alienated? Can we feel a sense of commonality with fellow citizens who do not belong to our religio-ethnic community?

Our freedom today depends upon understanding how we have been traumatized by recent Jewish history and consciously seeking a wholesome paradigm shift from helpless victim to empowered free people. That will determine how we answer these fateful questions. The abused child must overcome the daunting obstacles and become a mature loving adult. The Nation must progress from our very own “Egyptian Entanglement” to freedom.



## All Who Are Hungry Come and Eat

### Sharona Margolin Halickman

We begin the Magid section of the Haggadah with the words: “*Ha Lachma Anya...* This is the poor bread that our fathers ate in the land of Egypt.” Anyone who is hungry, come and eat! Anyone who needs, come make Pesach! This year we are still here; next year in the Land of Israel. This year we are still slaves; next year, free people!

Why do we invite guests after declaring that the *matzah* is poor bread? If our invitation is sincere, why are we only inviting them now?

This statement was introduced during the Geonic period of the Babylonian exile. Rav Matityahu Gaon (9<sup>th</sup> century) states that the *minhag* originally was to leave the door open so that all of the poor people would feel free to enter and join the meal. Later it became unsafe in many communities to leave the door unlocked so the guests would be invited in advance.

The reason that it is still included today is to raise awareness about giving *tzedakah* to the poor and inviting those who would otherwise not have a place to spend the seder.

We invite the poor right after we look at the poor (made with only flour and water) broken *matzah* because at that moment we remember how poor we were in Egypt and how we now want to make sure to include the poor in our happiness.

The path to the redemption begins with righteousness as it says in Yishayahu 1:27: “The city of righteousness, a faithful city Zion will be redeemed with judgment and those that return to her with righteousness.”

How does this manifest itself today?

Many families invite guests to their seder or donate money to help provide food so that those in need can conduct their own dignified seders.

I heard about a beautiful initiative while listening to an interview on a Jerusalem radio station: A young couple takes over an entire school in downtown Jerusalem and makes a seder for 500 people who would otherwise not have a place to spend the first night of Pesach. Participants include the elderly, Holocaust survivors, lone soldiers and anyone else who doesn't want to be alone or cannot afford to conduct their own seder.

Initiatives like these will help bring us closer to the true redemption. May we spend next Pesach in *Yerushalayim HaBnuya*, the rebuilt Jerusalem.

**Parashat Bo:  
Their First Commandments  
Rabbanit Shlomit Flint**

What is the significance of the first commandments given to the people of Israel? How are they the first steps in the journey to freedom from slavery?

“The Lord spoke to Moses and to Aaron in the land of Egypt, saying: This month shall be to you the head of the months; to you it shall be the first of the months of the year. Speak to the entire community of Israel, saying: On the tenth of this month, let each one take a lamb for each parental home, a lamb for each household. But if the household is too small for a lamb, then he and his neighbor who is nearest to his house shall take [one] according to the number of people, each one according to one’s ability to eat, shall you be counted for the lamb” (Exodus 12:1-4).

In the Torah reading of *Parashat Bo*, God gives the people of Israel their first commandments as a people. The first commandment is the mitzvah of sanctifying the month and after that, to dedicate a lamb as a Passover sacrifice. The Paschal lamb is supposed to be in each family’s home for the use of that family. The continuation of the commandment becomes more exact and tells us that the lamb is supposed to be completely consumed—“according to the number of people...shall you be counted for the lamb”—so in a case where there are not enough souls in the home, a number of neighbours join together to eat the lamb.

Why does God first command the people of Israel just these specific commandments?

I would like to suggest that there is a link between these two specific commandments and the time in which they are given.

The people of Israel are enslaved in Egypt and they are not able to hear or hearken to the tidings of redemption that Moses relates to them “because of [their] shortness of breath and because of [their] hard labor” (Exodus: 6:9).

The people of Israel are preoccupied, pressured by the hard labour as Pharaoh oppresses them more than before, the sword of his evil edicts hovers over the children (of Israel) and threatens to totally destroy them. They are not free to see the miracles and their approaching redemption.

Rabbi Soloveitchik in his book *The Time of Our Freedom* (page 40) writes: “...the slave is a personality who has no choice before him...the greatness of a human being – his dignity and power of creativity—is expressed in his freedom of will and ability to choose. A slave is never presented with the possibility of choice between two alternatives. He has no need to decide anything. Someone else does so for him or her...the slave is a frightened person who lives in time without experiencing the movement of time, a person imprisoned within their self, who is unable to share their existential experience with others. That of a liberated person is the opposite case.”

In that God commands the people of Israel to keep the mitzvah of the sanctification of the new moon. He bestows on the enslaved people agency, control over the thing that they most lack: control over their time. The people of Israel decides when the month is to begin, according to the reckoning of the people of Israel the times of the festivals is determined. Liberation from slavery into freedom starts with

the acceptance of control over time, and in its wake the choice of their destiny, to be servants of the Divine Holy One.

The second mitzvah of “the taking of the lamb” allows the individual to carry out an independent act of acquiring property, something that, as slaves, certainly was not natural for the people of Israel, but which creates a situation in which in carrying out the commandment they turn from being slaves who have no property and are bound to the commands of the Egyptians into people who choose to serve their God by carrying out the Divine commandment.

Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch proposes that we understand all the laws connected with the taking of the Paschal lamb and its consumption according to the number of souls so that it will be completely eaten, as a mitzvah entailing mutual responsibility.

In this commandment the intention of the Torah is not that one links up with one’s extended family, but rather to go beyond the family framework and to connect with one’s neighbor: “he and his neighbor who is nearest to his house shall take [one]...” (Exodus 12:4).

Rabbi Hirsch speaks of mutual responsibility between the rich person, who can purchase the lamb, and the poor person who does not have the money to buy a lamb but who has a family that can help in carrying out the requirement to consume the entire lamb. The poor one needs the help of the rich one, in order to eat the paschal lamb, and the rich one needs his poor neighbor, in order to fully complete the mitzvah as commanded.



When each of the people in Egypt took a lamb for himself on the tenth of Nissan, they considered all those who lived next to them and would eat the lamb with them. He had to leave his home and go out to his neighbor, the other. The lamb of Passover requires of the individual that they leave what is familiar and comfortable within the family and turn to the other whose presence is a short, touchable, distance away from him. And we do not always find the opportunity to meet or get to know him in any depth. This requirement arouses thoughts regarding the night of the Seder (the festive feast) in our time which is usually celebrated in the family framework. It perhaps demands of us to think of opening our homes on Seder night to our neighbours and to the community within which we live.

**Appendix:**  
**The Power of Sisterhood:**  
**Women Face off against a Tyrant, Pharaoh,**  
**to Save Baby Moshe**  
**Compiled by Noam Zion**

*Note from the editors:*

*The following is a collection of sources around the topic of Jews resisting tyranny and evil.*

**ENSLAVEMENT: The Wisdom of a Villain**  
**Exodus 1**

- 1) Now these are the names of the children of Israel coming to Egypt, with Yaakov, each-man and his household they came.
- 2) Re'uven, Shim'on, Levi and Yehuda,
- 3) Yissachar, Zevulun and Binyamin,
- 4) Dan and Naftali, Gad and Asher.
- 5) So all the persons, those issuing from Yaakov's loins, were seventy persons, Yosef was (already) in Egypt.
- 6) Now Yosef died, and all his brothers, and all that generation.
- 7) Yet the Children of Israel bore fruit, they swarmed, they became many, they grew mighty in number—exceedingly, yes; exceedingly; the land filled-up with them:
- 8) Now a new king arose over Egypt, who had not known Yosef.
- 9) He said to his people: Here, (this) people, the Children of Israel, is many-more and mightier (in number) than we!
- 10) Come-now, let us use-our-wits against it, lest it become many-more, and then, if war should occur, it too be added to our enemies and make war upon us or go up away from the land!

11) So they set gang-captains over it, to afflict it with their burdens. It built storage-cities for Pharaoh-Pitom and Ra'amses.

12) But as they afflicted it, so did it become many, so did it burst forth. And they felt dread before the Children of Israel.

13) So they, Egypt, made the Children of Israel subservient with crushing-labor;

14) They embittered their lives with hard servitude in loam and in bricks and with all kinds of servitude in the field - all their service in which they made them subservient with crushing-labor.

### **The Deceit of Pharaoh's Soft Talk**

THE EGYPTIANS MADE THE CHILDREN OF ISRAEL SERVE WITH RIGOR (*B'FEH-RAKH*) (Ex.1:14) (*Midrash Exodus Rabbah* 1,11)

Rabbi Samuel ben Nahman says: With rigorous tyranny. Rabbi Elazar says: By gentle persuasion. Pharaoh assembled the Israelites and begged them as a favor to join him in brick-making. Following the royal example, each man set to with a will. At the end of the day, Pharaoh had each man's bricks counted, and then ordered that the same number should be made each day. And so they did to each Israelite, namely, the number of bricks they made on the first day became the prescribed number for each subsequent day. Rabbi Yonatan says: Harsh labor means they reversed the labor assignment, so men were assigned women's work and women were assigned men's work.

## The Midwives: Resources for Resistance

15) Now the king of Egypt said to the midwives of the Hebrews—the name of the first one was Shifra, the name of the second was Pu'a

16) he said: When you help the Hebrew women give birth, see the supporting-stones: if he be a son, put him to death, but if she be a daughter, she may live.

17) But the midwives held God in awe, and they did not do as the king of Egypt had spoken to them, they let the (male) children live.

18) The king of Egypt called for the midwives and said to them: Why have you done this thing, you have let the children live!

19) The midwives said to Pharaoh: Indeed, not like the Egyptian (women) are the Hebrew (women), indeed, they are lively, before the midwife comes to them, they have given birth!

20) God dealt well with the midwives. And the people became many and grew exceedingly mighty (in number).





## **The Ethnicity of the Midwives: Egyptian or Hebrew? Nehama Leibowitz**

Exodus 1:15: Now the king of Egypt said to the midwives of the Hebrews the name of the first one was Shifra, the name of the second was Pu'a.

**Rav:** They were a mother and her daughter – Yocheved and Miriam.

**Josephus** (Jewish Antiquities): Pharaoh commanded that the Egyptian midwives should watch the labors of the Hebrew women, and observe what is born, for those were the women who were enjoined to do the office of midwives to them; and by reason of their relation to the king, would not transgress his commands.

**Rabbi Yaacov Hai Parado:** If they are from another nationality, then it is justified to say that they acted for fear of God; but if they had been Hebrews there would be no reason to mention fear of God, for every person loves his/her own people.

**Nehama Leibowitz:** *Yiraat Elohim*, fear of the Lord in the Torah praises or condemns someone who opposes or does not oppose injustice to a member of another people or a minority or a stranger or someone helpless without protection. That is the test of whether someone has fear of God in their heart. *Yiraat Elohim*, fear of God, in the Bible is a demand made on all human beings created in the image of God. But if

one does not have fear of God in their heart, the heart of the non-Jew, then the Torah considers that to be a betrayal of all their obligations. Therefore the interpretation that the midwives who feared God were Egyptians is to be preferred.

## Pharaoh's Daughter Rebels

### Exodus 2

22) Now Pharaoh commanded all his people, saying: Every son that is born, throw him into the Nile, but let every daughter live.

## II

1) Now a man from the house of Levi went and took (to wife) a daughter of Levi.

2) The woman became pregnant and bore a son. When she saw him—that he was goodly, she hid him, for three months.

3) And when she was no longer able to hide him, she took for him a little-ark of papyrus, she loamed it with loam and with pitch, placed the child in it, and placed it in the reeds by the shore of the Nile.

4) Now his sister stationed herself far off, to know what would be done to him.

5) Now Pharaoh's daughter went down to bathe at the Nile, and her girls were walking along the Nile.

She saw the little-ark among the reeds and sent her maid, and she fetched it.

6) She opened it and saw him, the child, here, a boy weeping! She pitied him, and she said: *One of the Hebrews' children is this!*

7) Now his sister said to Pharaoh's daughter: Shall I go and call a nursing woman from the Hebrews for you, that she may nurse the child for you?

8) Pharaoh's daughter said to her: Go!

9) The maiden went and called the child's mother.



10) The child grew, she brought him to Pharaoh's daughter, and he became her son.” She called his name: *Moshe*/He-Who-Pulls-Out; She said: For out of the water *meshitihu*/I-pulled-him.

## The Batya Association

THE NAME of the Biblical heroine, the daughter of Pharaoh who adopts Moses, is not mentioned in the Bible. One rabbinic midrash calls her *Batya* which means “The daughter of God” and regards her as a convert to Judaism. Her adoption of Moses was motivated, they suggest, by her infertility.

Appropriately the American association of adoptive Jewish parents with infertility problems is called *Batya*.



**I'm not a doctor, but I am a rabbi.  
Here's my spiritual prescription  
for the coronavirus  
Rabbi Dr. Shmuly Yanklowitz**

I am not a medical professional, an epidemiologist or an expert on pandemics. I leave the serious information in those important fields for the professionals who have the appropriate training to help us get through the coronavirus epidemic.

Even though I do not possess medical knowledge, as a rabbi and social activist, I believe I can try to humbly prescribe ethical vaccines that can remedy jilted nerves and worried minds. My words are not meant to heal physically but to inspire spiritually.

At this challenging time, it seems appropriate that those in the positions to (re)build confidence should do so. In that spirit, I am sharing thoughts on how we might be able to spiritually cope with the uncertain reality that has rapidly spread throughout the world. The coronavirus is not only a disease of the body, but also presents an existential crisis that has put governments, businesses and, most important, communities and individuals on edge.

I pray that we can get through it all. People are scared — and rightly so. We are truly living in an era of plague; we are largely unprepared. Communities throughout the world have been caught off-guard by the virus' potent potential for wanton havoc and daily disruption.

But hope can't be lost. At this moment, we want to protect ourselves and our families; this is human nature. From a Jewish perspective, from a social justice perspective, from a human perspective,

we cannot descend into pointed tribalism at a time when we must come together as a collective of mind and soul. The coronavirus is a huge burden placed on humanity, but one that can be handled through shared action, compassion and a desire to see this disease contained before more lives are needlessly lost.

As I reflected inward about how the coronavirus is affecting the world, I thought about soul remedies that could help guide us — in the Jewish community and beyond — through this arduous ordeal and into a brighter tomorrow. Here’s my six-part prescription for getting through this crisis with our souls intact.

### **1. There is no value in placing blame.**

We are already seeing our worst impulses play out in this crisis. Because the present strain of coronavirus originated in China, some are blaming “the Chinese” or even all Asians for the outbreak, which is absurd and hateful. And then there are community leaders such as an ultra-Orthodox rabbi who bizarrely blamed the LGBTQ community for spreading the disease. These are the wrong reactions: Whatever we do, we cannot fall into the trap of blame. Blame harms more than it helps; it is myopic and never leads to practical solutions. Of course, we must hold reckless public officials accountable if they neglect public welfare, but this is different from directing baseless blame at large populations. Rather than join the blaming team, we should join the helping team.

There are times where we cannot help as much as we’d like, but we can still do as much as we can from a distance. We must simply adjust our mindset to think about how we can all effectively work together with the help of experts to deal with the task at hand.

## **2. Be afraid.**

Yes, this must sound like unusual advice in a time of pandemic. But we must be skeptical of those in office who say “Everything is fine. Stop panicking and live your life!” It is a natural human emotion to be afraid of the unknown and the uncertain. We live in times where every day’s events constitute a reminder that we cannot control the world as much as we might want. Politically, culturally and spiritually, the world is experiencing levels of disequilibrium that are difficult to endure. It would seem then that, rationally, we should live in fear of what tomorrow may bring. Rather than denying that human impulse to have fear in the face of serious risks, we can channel that fear productively.

Hold the fear. Hold your love ones close. But don’t be held motionless — physically, emotionally or spiritually — by this disease. Feel it but own it, refine it, control it. Use it. We need to react boldly to situations such as the one that challenges us right now and with the clarity of mind that tells us that fear should inspire us to be courageous; troubling times calls for passionate and resolute leadership. Our fear can inspire us to hold one another even closer and with deeper resolve.

## **3. Wipe out evil.**

In the Jewish tradition, the nation of Amalek is synonymous with the worst evil imaginable. The Amalekites saw the most vulnerable among the Israelites and instead of helping them, pursued and killed them, targeting in particular the weakest among the weak. The Torah records the deeds of the Amalekites and their actions, juxtaposing the meekness of the Jewish people with the pure cruelty of the nation of Amalek. We are commanded to vanquish Amalek and eliminate its memory from this

world. The coronavirus — the disease itself! — is Amalek-like since it appears to have the most serious consequences for some of the most vulnerable among us, the elderly and the immunocompromised. By protecting and supporting the most vulnerable people around the world, we have the ability to live up to the commandment to wipe out Amalek once more.

As tensions among communities may run high, we must learn again the lessons of interdependence: The coronavirus demonstrates the profound ignorance of the belief that we keep ourselves “safe” by building walls to separate us from our neighbors and by locking up immigrants at the border. In a world as interconnected as ours, we keep ourselves safe by respecting the truths revealed by science, by cooperating and working together within and among nations, by caring for the most vulnerable among us, and by creating a society that keeps as many of us as possible healthy and financially secure. In a world so focused on “us vs. them,” the coronavirus reminds us that in a profound sense, there is only us.

The only sane path forward is more compassion, more justice, and more humility about the degree to which we need each other.

#### **4. Embrace a sabbatical.**

One of Judaism’s great gifts to the world is the idea of the Sabbath, the sacred break from the labors of the week. But the Sabbath is more than lounging around with nothing to do. It’s about renewal and the need to nourish the soul through extra time to study. One of the side effects of the coronavirus might be the ability for those who need to stay home to use that time away from the workplace or the outside world productively.

Some folks need to show up at work, travel and go about business as usual. But to the extent that one can, it will be vital to care of yourself and those that you love. Through the gift of physical and spiritual rest, we may experience breakthroughs that will allow our society to manage this disease more effectively.

### **5. Be gentle.**

Always be gentle with others. Everyone is doing the best they can. Human beings are fundamentally frail. To compensate for uncertainty and imperfection in this moment, some people will act out with pure hubris. But this hubris hides vulnerability and pain. We do not know what others go through on a daily basis.

The coronavirus may give us the ability to realize that humility in the face of great challenge can be a factor leading us toward communal healing. To be under quarantine, as whole countries are essentially imposing at this point, cannot be a pleasant feeling. It's isolating and humiliating. To be gentle also means to be empathetic to those who find themselves cut off from society. This disease has upended routines all over the world. We can be understanding of how it has ruined the daily lives of people who only want to support themselves and their families. This universal reality brings us together rather than tearing us apart. Let us have the strength to be understanding and kind in this time of great tumult.

### **6. Love is contagious, too.**

The coronavirus is highly contagious, but so are the actions we can take inspired by love and joy. We are reminded yet again of the total



interconnectedness of all life on this planet. The amazing phenomenon of life and its parallel humbling frailty can inspire wonder and deeper empathy. While, of course, we must heed medical experts to undertake precautionary measures to avoid the spread of the virus, we can also do our best to spread happiness and positivity, international cooperation and a positive attitude to help quell this virus.

To give up on the better angels of our nature is akin to defeat. At the least, to acknowledge people's good intentions and engage others out of love rather than fear are ways to help defeat the trials put before us by the coronavirus. Spread love, spread warmth, spread optimism. The times may seem bleak, but we can all do our part to ensure that a brighter tomorrow is around the corner.

Friends, this is a difficult time for all. No one has been spared from the effects of the coronavirus. Not all of us will be infected by the virus, but we are already affected. There is no denying that the global attention to this ailment has radically shifted the world's power landscape indefinitely.

But, for a moment, looking past these macro-effects can offer an opportunity to consider how each of us, at an individual level, can be spiritually renewed in our collective efforts to halt this disease and get through this moment.

## Contributors

**Yehuda Amichai** was an Israeli poet and a recipient of the esteemed Israel Prize. Internationally recognized for his literary contributions, Amichai is considered Israel's greatest modern poet.

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Rabbanit Sharona Margolin Halickman is the Founder and Director of Torat Reva Yerushalayim, a non-profit organization based in Jerusalem which provides Torah study groups for Israelis of all ages and backgrounds. She was the first Madricha Ruchanit at the Hebrew Institute of Riverdale. Sharona lives in Jerusalem, with her husband, Josh and her children, Dov, Moshe, and Yehuda.

**Martin Gilbert** is a British-Jewish historian who focuses on 20th century European history including Jews in the Soviet Union

**Rabbi Herzl Hefter** is the founder and Rosh Beit Midrash Har'el in memory of Belda Kaufman Lindenbaum, in Jerusalem. It is a beit midrash for advanced rabbinic studies for men and women. He is a graduate of Yeshiva University where he learned under the tutelage of Rabbi Yosef Dov Soloveichik ל"צ, and received smikha from Rabbi Aharon Lichtenstein ל"צ at Yeshivat Har Etzion where he studied for ten years. Rabbi Hefter taught Yoreh De'ah to the Kollel fellows at the

Gruss Kollel of Yeshiva University and served as the head of the Bruria Scholars Program at Midreshet Lindenbaum. He also taught at Yeshivat Mekor Chaim in Moscow and served as Rosh Kollel of the first Torah MiZion Kollel in Cleveland, Ohio. He has written numerous articles related to modernity and Hasidic thought.

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**Rabbi Hanan Schlesinger** lives in Alon Shvut Israel and is one of the founders of Roots/Shorashim/Judur, The Palestinian Israeli Grassroots Initiative for Understanding, Nonviolence and Transformation. Currently he serves as its Director of International Relations. He also is the founder of the American Friends of Roots, a multi-faith organization dedicated to supporting the work of Roots/Shorashim/Judur. Rav Hanan frequently speaks in the USA together with one of his Palestinian partner about the amazing work that Roots/Shorashim/Judur is doing in Judea/Palestine.

Prior to the founding of Roots, Rav Hanan spent his whole career teaching Jewish studies in various seminaries, colleges and frameworks in the Jerusalem area, among them the Pardes Institute, Beit Midrash Elul, Nishmat and Yeshivat Bat Ayin. He also spent two years as part of the Judaic Fellows Program in Boca Raton Florida and over ten years in

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**Rabbi Dr. Shmuly Yanklowitz** has twice been named one of America's Top Rabbis by Newsweek and has been named by The Forward as one of the 50 most influential Jews and one of The Most Inspiring Rabbis in America. Rabbi Dr. Shmuly Yanklowitz has twice been named one of America's Top Rabbis by *Newsweek*. *The Forward* acknowledged Rabbi Shmuly as one of the 50 most influential Jews and named him as one of The Most Inspiring Rabbis in America. Rabbi Yanklowitz is the author of seventeen books on Jewish ethics and his writings have appeared in outlets as diverse as the *New York Times*, the *Wall Street Journal*, the *Washington Post*, the *Guardian*, and the *Atlantic* among many other secular and religious publications. He has served as speaker at the World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland and a Rothschild Fellow in Cambridge, UK. The "coronavirus" piece was first published by JTA in March 2020.

**Rabbi Mordechai Zeller** is a clinical and educational psychologist in training, working in the psychiatric ward in Tzfat and in special education schools and preschools in the Gilboa region. Rabbi Zeller served as the Rabbi and Jewish chaplain at the University of Cambridge, recently returning to Maaleh Gilboa with his family. For many years he has been teaching Jewish and comparative mysticism, Hebrew mythology and dream research. He teaches at Yeshivat Maale Gilboa and in Tzfat.

**Noam Zion** is the Director of Shalom Hartman Institute's Resource Center for Jewish Continuity. He specializes in teaching Jewish Holidays, Bible and Art, and has edited several educational books for the Shalom Hartman Institute.

## About Uri L'Tzedek

Uri L'Tzedek is an Orthodox social justice organization guided by Torah values and dedicated to combating suffering and oppression. Through community based education, leadership development and action, Uri L'Tzedek creates discourse, inspires leaders, and empowers the Jewish community towards creating a more just world. Learn more about the work of Uri L'Tzedek at [www.utzedek.org](http://www.utzedek.org).

## About Torat Chayim

Torat Chayim is a rabbinical association of Orthodox rabbis committed to fostering a more pluralistic and progressive future. Its members (over 300 men & women) work together to foster Torah-rooted progress in the Jewish community and in society at large.

The name Torat Chayim was chosen because Torah is about rootedness and Chayim is about dynamism. We want a Torah that is strongly rooted in tradition and that is also responsive to—and pushing us forward in—our time. Further, Torah is about life. It is about ethics, human dignity, and the perpetuation—and sanctification—of life. We embrace a life-affirming, dignity-affirming Torah, and work to ensure that Torah only adds to—and never detracts from—human dignity and the sanctity of life.

Learn more about the work of Torat Chayim at [www.ToratChayimRabbis.org](http://www.ToratChayimRabbis.org).



## Illustrations

(In order of appearance)

*The Signs on the Door*, c. 1896-1902, by James Jacques Joseph Tissot (French, 1836-1902), gouache on board, 9 3/8 x 4 1/2 in. (23.8 x 11.5 cm), at the Jewish Museum, New York. Public Domain.

A Shepherd. Caption: "This is a shepherd leading his sheep. He is carrying a lamb in his arms." Illustration from the 1897 Bible Pictures and What They Teach Us: Containing 400 Illustrations from the Old and New Testaments: With brief descriptions by Charles Foster

Domenico Fetti, *Moses vor dem brennenden Dornbusch (Moses before the Burning Bush)*, circa 1613-1617, oil on canvas, Kunsthistorisches Museum. Public Domain.

Passover demonstration on April 11th 2006, downtown Boston. Photograph by Jonathan McIntosh. This file is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution 2.0 Generic license.

*Moses Speaks to Pharaoh*, c. 1896-1902, by James Jacques Joseph Tissot (French, 1836-1902), gouache on board, 7 7/16 x 11 1/4 in. (18.9 x 28.6 cm), at the Jewish Museum, New York. Public domain.

*Pharaoh and the Midwives*, miniature on vellum from the Golden Haggadah, Catalonia, early 14th century, at the British Library, London. Public Domain.



