

Secular Seder Haggadah

DC/Baltimore Edition

2023

Adapted from haggadot by
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Introduction

[This and the rest of the Haggadah should be read in turns around the table.]

Passover is the festival of freedom.

It commemorates the liberation of the Children of Israel from bondage. Jews celebrate it to remember how far we've come, and how far we have left to go.

Several years ago, in New York, the rationalist community started having "rationalist seders" led by Zvi Mowshowitz. Their goal was to celebrate Passover in a way that recognized a new shared identity, as well as the older identity of Jewish heritage.

Not all of the people here may identify as rationalists. But inviting nonbelievers into your home and telling them about the traditions and beliefs of your people is in the spirit of Passover: it is traditional to say "Let all who are hungry come and eat."

We're celebrating with friends here, rationalist or not, because we care about all of you, and we want to share our beliefs and our values with you. Even when we disagree. Because that's important to us, too.

Why We're Here

So, what do freedom and remembrance mean to us, in the year 2023, as members of this community?

People in the rationalist community often talk about being *agentic*, which means: making one's own decisions, by deliberate choice, instead of accepting the default options. A lot of us *have* made unconventional choices, in our choice of work, our romantic arrangements, our living arrangements, and elsewhere. Others of us have consciously chosen a more conventional path, not because it is conventional but because it is what we *want*. And this is a big part of what it means to be free.

Some of us have come from places where they *weren't* free to make those choices, and have been welcomed. And this is also in the spirit of Passover.

And to the extent this community is *about* something, rather than just an extended subculture or friend group, it's about intellectual freedom. True intellectual freedom looks at the questions that you're "not supposed to ask". It pokes the man behind the curtain.

We don't live in a world where intellectual community comes by default. A lot of the time, the smartest and hardest-working people in our generation are too busy "making the grade" to be *curious*. Which means this

community fills a gap. It's important to have a culture where the love of reason and the freedom to explore are still valued.

The Passover seder is traditionally about passing memory and values down to the next generation. "And you shall tell your son in that day, I am celebrating what the Lord did for me when I came forth out of Egypt." We want to use the seder to pass on our values, and give our children the freedom to flourish.

And, so, we have a Seder: a teaching holiday, a remembering holiday, a holiday of gratitude and pride for hardships overcome, of compassion and welcome for those still in hardship, and of hope for the future.

Structure

Seder means *Order*. A seder is a meal structured in a particular *order*, styled after the dining customs of free Greeks.

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|--------------------|----------------------------------|
| 1. Kadesh | <i>blessing over wine</i> |
| 2. Urchatz | <i>handwashing: "unofficial"</i> |
| 3. Karpas | <i>green vegetables</i> |
| 4. Yachatz | <i>breaking matzah</i> |
| 5. Magid | <i>storytelling</i> |
| 6. Rachtzah | <i>handwashing: official</i> |
| 7. Motzi Matzah | <i>blessing over bread</i> |
| 8. Maror | <i>bitter herbs</i> |
| 9. Korekh | <i>Hillel sandwich</i> |
| 10. Shulchan Orekh | <i>Meal!</i> |
| 11. Tsafun | <i>eat the Afikoman</i> |
| 12. Barekh | <i>grace after meals</i> |
| 13. Hallel | <i>psalms</i> |
| 14. Nirtzah | <i>conclusion</i> |

We're going to keep the structure, but tweak the content; this is a firmly atheist interpretation.

1. Kadesh

[The first cup of wine is poured.]

We give thanks for the opportunity to celebrate together, for festivals and seasons of rejoicing. We drink in honor of the first refiners of alcoholic beverages, who founded civilization itself; in honor of the teachers and friends who led us to who we are today; and in honor of the rituals that are part of our human heritage.

Drink the wine *reclining*, as a symbol of freedom.

2. Urchatz

[Handwashing happens. This is a practical purification ritual; it prepares a space, clarifies the mind, and is also generally a good sanitary idea before eating.]

[It's traditional to be silent until the next part.]

3. Karpas

[Parsley is dipped into salt water.]

We now take a green vegetable, representing springtime and renewal. We dip it into salt water, as a symbol of the tears our ancestors shed as slaves. We do this to remember past injustices, but also to remind us to hope for a better future.

4. Yachatz

[The middle matzah is broken. The larger piece (also called the afikomen) is wrapped in a napkin and set aside for later.]

This is the bread of affliction. Simple bread, made with flour and water: the basic staples much of the world lives on today. About 828 million¹ people on this planet go hungry.

That number has gotten smaller over time. Not by magic, but because of people helping each other, and themselves. So: let all who are hungry come and eat. Next year, may we be one year closer to a free and prosperous world.

[The afikomen should be left strictly undisturbed until after the meal.]

¹ In 2021, according to the WHO.

5. Magid

[Fill the second cup of wine. Don't drink it yet.]

The Four Questions

[If there is a child present, the youngest shall ask. Otherwise, the person who most recently joined the group should ask the four questions. The indented and underlined text is not part of the questions, and should be read in the normal order, in as unhelpful a tone as possible.]

Why is this night different from all other nights?

On other nights we eat both leavened bread and matzah.

Why, on this night, do we eat only matzah?

Don't eat bread ever. That stuff'll kill you!

On other nights we eat many vegetables. Why, on this night, must we eat bitter herbs?

No one's forcing you to do anything, buster.

On other nights we do not dip our food in condiments even once. Why, on this night, do we dip twice?

Really? Not at all? Not even ketchup?

On other nights we eat sitting up. Why, on this night, do we all eat reclining?

Did someone not like reclining? I thought that was every night!

Why are we going through this old and ridiculous ritual?

Being ridiculous is fun.

But why **this**?

Once We Were Slaves

The story of the Exodus is that long ago, the Jews were slaves to Pharaoh in Egypt, and that God liberated them from bondage.

This probably didn't happen. There's no evidence that the ancient Israelites were ever in Egypt, as slaves or as anything else; the archaeological evidence points to them being in modern-day Israel more or less continuously.

But there *is* a Jewish tradition of exile and oppression in foreign lands, starting with the destruction of the first Temple in 586 BC. And the story of Exodus has had global resonance in the context of chattel slavery in the Americas. There is something powerful about the story of a people's journey from slavery to freedom. And liberation from bondage *does* happen.

We come *from* slavery, *to* freedom. Passover is a holiday about the *future being better than the past*. It's symbolically powerful, because this is what humans *do*; we find ourselves living in oppression and misery, and then, once in a while, we fight free of it.

The Four Children

Four times the Torah bids us to tell our children about the Exodus from Egypt. From this we conclude that Jews can be kind of a nudge. We heard you the first time!

There are four types of children in the ~~ancient homeschooling manual~~ Haggadah:

- The wise child, who wants to hear all the technical details, and should be rewarded with thorough explanations.
- The wicked child, who wants to rebel against the whole thing, and should be rewarded by letting them go off on their own.
- The simple child, who wants to know what's going on, and should be given a simple answer.
- The child who does not know how to ask, who should be *shown* things to kindle their curiosity about the world.

Freedom has to be *learned*. It can't be given from on high. Are we lecturing the people around us or are we respecting their agency? If we want a culture that encourages intellectual freedom, we have to think about how to nurture it.

In The Beginning our Fathers were Idolaters

The Haggadah says, “In the beginning our fathers were idolaters.” For an ancient text, this is an impressive statement of humility. Our ancestors, it says, were not demigods, they were *people*, and, moreover, they were people who were *wrong about the most important thing*. We don’t carry wisdom in our blood, we *learn* it.

Once again, the story of the Exodus is a story of *progress*, from ignorance to knowledge as well as from slavery to freedom.

In the beginning, our fathers were idolaters. In the beginning, we were superstitious; we didn’t understand the world around us; we often died of diseases that are easily cured today. Today we have antibiotics and industrial agriculture, but people still die in slow agony from old age. Our era has its own set of taboos and dogmas. We *can’t* trust that we’ll just be right by default. Intuitions and traditions often lead us astray.

We can get better. But we have to *try*.

Oppression

The story of Passover teaches us about our own liberation from slavery. But not only that; it also teaches us to beware oppression in our own time. The tradition says in no uncertain terms:

Do not oppress the stranger, nor wrong them, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt.

Even if the stranger is very strange and icky?

Do not oppress the stranger, nor wrong them, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt.

Even if someone who superficially resembles the stranger did something genuinely bad?

Do not oppress the stranger, nor wrong them, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt.

Even if you can tell a story about how the stranger is more powerful than you?

Do not oppress the stranger, nor wrong them, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt.

Even if you are very frightened?

Do not oppress the stranger, nor wrong them, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt.

Even if--

*DO NOT OPPRESS THE STRANGER, NOR WRONG THEM,
FOR YOU WERE STRANGERS IN THE LAND OF EGYPT.*

Okay, I got it. I'm not that much of a nudge.

Ten Modern Plagues

[For each plague, remove one drop of wine from your cup.]

The top ten causes of death worldwide²:

1. Heart disease
2. Stroke
3. Chronic obstructive pulmonary disease
4. Lower respiratory infections
5. Neonatal conditions
6. Lung cancer
7. Dementia
8. Diarrheal disease
9. Diabetes
10. Kidney disease

We are here to celebrate spring and the renewal of life, but our world is still a graveyard -- for now. May we work towards the day when that's no longer true.

² In 2019, according to WHO.

Enough?

The traditional song Dayenu gives thanks for each of the miracles of the departure from Egypt. *If* we had been brought out of Egypt, *but* God had not judged the Egyptians, it would have been enough! *If* God had judged the Egyptians, *but* not destroyed their idols, it would have been enough! And so on.

We celebrate each step toward freedom *as if* it were enough, then start out on the next step. If we reject each step because it is not the whole liberation, we will never achieve the whole liberation.

And yet, if we celebrate our past victories and become complacent, so too will we never achieve the whole liberation. And so we have come to sing “Lo Dayenu”: it would not have been enough.

Lo Dayenu

*Had we crawled forth from the ocean,
but not learned to speak with language,
but not learned to speak with language, Lo Dayenu!*

CHORUS:

*Lo dayenu. Lo dayenu. Lo dayenu.
Dayenu, dayenu, dayenu
Lo dayenu. Lo dayenu. Lo dayenu. Dayenu, Da-ye-nu*

*Had we learned to speak with language,
but not mastered wheat and olives,
but not mastered wheat and olives, Lo Dayenu! CHORUS.*

*Had we mastered wheat and olives,
but not severed law from vengeance,
but not severed law from vengeance, Lo Dayenu!*
CHORUS.

*Had we severed law from vengeance,
but not crafted printing presses,
but not crafted printing presses, Lo Dayenu! CHORUS.*

*Had we crafted printing presses,
but not tamed and harnessed lightning,
but not tamed and harnessed lightning, Lo Dayenu!*
CHORUS.

It would not have been enough. And it's still not enough.
But tonight, we're here to celebrate what we *have*
accomplished as of yet.

In Every Generation

Since ancient people settled down and started farming, every generation has struggled to improve on the previous one, to leave behind a better life for their children.

We laid railroads and blasted apart mountains, so that our children could travel quickly and in comfort. We scoured every corner of the globe, so that none of our children would face smallpox again. We dug wide canals and built mighty ships, so that our children could eat strawberries anytime they pleased.

We didn't accomplish these things just by repeating the traditions of our ancestors. Building a better world *required* us to look through our own eyes, and judge the world on our own terms. We saw what our parents were wrong about, so that our children could know the truth.

In every generation, it is every person's duty to build a better world for themselves and their descendants.

And in every generation, it is every person's duty to see what their ancestors could not, and do their best to surpass them.

Second Cup of Wine

[Fill and raise glasses]

This cup is in honor of all those who saw the beauty and anguish of a pale blue dot in the void of space, and thought it could be something more.

[Drink]

The Three (or more) Things

A rabbi once said, and is often quoted in such things, that as long as you discuss the significance of three things you have fulfilled your obligation at the Seder. Well, actually, what he said was that he who does not discuss the significance of these three things has not fulfilled his duty, but since he could have named any number of other things and chose not to, clearly he didn't think anything else was necessary: The Passover Sacrifice, The Matzah and The Bitter Herb.

“Passover sacrifice? What sacrifice?”

In ancient times, our people brought lambs to the temple to sacrifice. We haven't done this in thousands of years. But in token of this connection to our past, we have a roasted beet on our seder plate.

“What is the significance of Matzah?”

Matzah symbolizes freedom. The story goes that when our people finally had the opportunity to go free, they took it so quickly they did not allow their bread to rise. We eat it in memory and in celebration.

Matzah also symbolizes poverty. There are many in the world for whom leavened bread is a luxury product. They probably don't subsist on matzah, but often on things little better. By eating it, we share a small

measure of their experience, and it helps us to remember them. We eat it in solidarity and in struggle.

Matzah is also a symbol of strength. We live comfortably here, but that can change in an eyeblink. If we ever find ourselves faced with the choice of bowing down to a tyrant, or walking away from everything to wander in a desert, at least we know we are strong enough to subsist on matzah for the first week. That makes it slightly less terrifying.

“What is the meaning of this Bitter Herb?”

It is important for all to know that things can change and become better or worse depending on our choices and actions. The bitter herb shows us the consequences of making a bad decision, as well as reminding us that avoiding such bitterness in our lives is the result of a long string of good decisions and the hard work of many generations. We remind ourselves that it need not always be thus.

“Why is there an orange?”

The orange was historically added to the seder plate to symbolize the inclusion of gay and lesbian Jews. The original idea came from a short story in which a rabbi told a Jewish lesbian that there’s as much room for a lesbian in Judaism as there is for a crust of bread on the Passover table. Susannah Heschel, the Jewish scholar

who introduced the orange, felt that bread on the seder plate was a step too far. She instead chose to use an orange to symbolize the fruitfulness for all Jews when marginalized Jews are contributing and active members of Jewish life.

We include the orange here to symbolize our willingness to break with tradition when it conflicts with our highest values, like love for other people. And it also symbolizes our desire to harmonize tradition with our values, even when some things have to change.

“What about the apple stuff?”

The charoset originally symbolized the mortar we supposedly used to make bricks when we were slaves, but it’s also here out of deliciousness. We have two kinds, to symbolize the importance of reaching outside your normal circles to properly explore solution space, and as a reminder that sometimes disagreement doesn’t mean either party is wrong.

Lastly, the egg (or eggplant) symbolizes springtime and the renewal of life.

6. Rachtzah

Just as earlier we washed our hands of the distractions from outside, now we wash our hands so that we might move from remembrances of the past to the feast of the present and promise of the future.

7. Motzi

[We take the top matzah and smaller piece of the middle matzah to eat now.]

[Pass around the matzah. Everyone break off a piece. Then lift the pieces up and say:]

Praise to the growers of wheat, and the millers of flour, and the transportation network that brings foodstuffs together and then to our door.

[Eat]

8. Maror

[Pass around the horseradish and matzah; put some horseradish on a piece of matzah.]

Praise to the marvels of hormesis, which allows people to enjoy painful things like cold showers and horseradish, and to bounce back from adversity.

[Eat]

9. Korech

[Make sandwiches with the bottom matzah, charoset, and horseradish.]

Rabbi Hillel, who wrote the first formulation of the Golden Rule, also liked to eat his Passover lamb sacrifice with matzah and bitter herbs. We no longer make animal sacrifices, but we eat the sandwich without the lamb to honor the tradition. Just as we'd want our descendants to preserve our values and our history, we do the same for our ancestors.

[Eat]

10. Shulchan Orech

[Serve the meal!]

11. Tzafun

It's time to eat the afikomen, which is definitely still in its place on the seder plate.

[Eat it reclining, because we're free.]

12. Barech

The third cup symbolizes completion. We have worked hard and built a community, and now we have the opportunity to celebrate and give thanks together.

[Refill and raise cups]

Praise to the joys of everyday living, to the achievements that brought us to this day.

[Drink]

By the labor, skill, and occasionally valor of many others, we have come to enjoy this meal tonight. Let us give thanks and praise.

Praise to the founders of civilization

Praise them

Praise to the domesticators of crops

Praise them

Praise to those who made it possible to gather ingredients from across the world

Praise them

Praise to the authors of recipes

Praise them

Praise to those who ensure we have peace and safety in which to enjoy this meal

Praise them

Praise to the farmers and the ranchers

Praise them

Praise to the maintainers of this building

Praise them

Praise to those who cooked this meal

Praise them. Praise them. Praise them with great praise!

13. Hallel

Praise

Those gathered shall now offer specific praise for things others at the table have done during the past year.

[Freeform praise]

[After each praising, everyone say:] Praise them

Elijah

At this time, it is traditional to speak of Elijah the prophet, who will come one day and usher in an age of peace and justice. Though according to some traditions, he will come when we have ushered in such an age, making his own role a little less clear. In any case, we hope for the age, and we hope for the prophet.

[Open the door and fill Elijah's cup]

The Fourth Cup

[Fill glasses]

The fourth cup is the cup of the future. The redemption is not yet complete. There are not so many outright slaves left in the world, but there are not none either. And there are few indeed who are able to live exactly as they wish. We continue to look to the day when all shall be free, and to even better days beyond.

[Raise glasses]

Praise to the idea of a brighter tomorrow, to the hope and work it inspires, and to the path of eternal growth.

[Drink]

14. *Nirtzah*

At this time, we close with traditional songs, plus any the group wishes to add.

Chad Gadya

It has been suggested that this song details the history (and future!) of our people, this it describes the power of God, that it explains the nature of both reality and evil, and even that the song is just about a goat.

Then came...

*Us, who smote
the angel of death, who slew
the butcher, who killed
the ox, that drank
the water, that quenched
the fire, that burned
the stick, that beat
the dog, that bit
the cat, that ate
the goat
my father bought for two zuzim.
Chad gadya, chad gadya.*

Okay, not yet. But next year!

Next year in Jerusalem!