

Secular Seder Haggadah

Maiger Edition

2017

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Introduction

[Read by the hosts.]

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.

Today's seder is not entirely a rationalist seder, in the sense that we haven't invited solely a group of rationalists. But its roots go back to those seders in New York, and the values we want to convey are the same. Most of the people here don't 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 and 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

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

So, what do freedom and remembrance mean to us, in the year 2017, 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, when we have a new generation to pass them on to, 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. Korekh | <i>Hillel sandwich</i> |
| 9. Shulchan Orekh | <i>Meal!</i> |
| 10. Tsafun | <i>eat the Afikoman</i> |
| 11. Barekh | <i>grace after meals</i> |
| 12. Hallel | <i>psalms</i> |
| 13. 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 780 million people on this planet go hungry.

But that number has gotten smaller since this time last year. 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.]

5. Magid

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

The Four Questions

[The youngest person asks the four questions.]

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?

On other nights we eat many vegetables. Why, on this night, do we eat maror?

On other nights we do not dip vegetables even once.
Why, on this night, do we dip twice?

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

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 didn't actually 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

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

- The wise child, who wants to 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 believed in magic and could barely feed ourselves and stay alive. 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

One rationalist value that is also a Jewish value is the ability to notice when *things are not OK*.

No rationalizing. No looking away. It's not okay, and it has to *end*. If necessary, with a strong hand, and an outstretched arm, and with great terribleness, and with signs, and with wonders.

Today, not everyone is free.

Nearly 2.5 million Americans are incarcerated. More than half are imprisoned for nonviolent offenses, mostly as a result of the War on Drugs. Some are detained without trial for years. 97% of criminal charges go to plea bargains rather than trials, pressuring the innocent to plead guilty and virtually eliminating the possibility of a "fair trial." Nearly one in ten prisoners is sexually abused.

Not everyone is free.

Freer immigration could end global poverty. For example, 82% of Haitians who aren't living in poverty today, got that way by immigrating. People are trapped in poor, war-torn, or oppressive countries, by nothing but our (mostly groundless) fears of welcoming strangers.

Not everyone is free.

Disabled people are still trapped in abusive institutions. Millions of elderly people live in nursing homes which can be little better than institutions.

Not everyone is free.

We are here to celebrate freedom, but we are also here to mourn and fight for those who don't have it.

Ten Modern Plagues

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

The top ten causes of death worldwide:

1. Heart disease
2. Stroke
3. Pneumonia
4. Emphysema
5. Lung cancer
6. Diabetes
7. Alzheimer's disease
8. Diarrhoeal diseases
9. Tuberculosis
10. Road injury

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.

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]

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. 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]

9. Shulchan Orech

[Serve the meal!]

10. 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.]

11. 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!

12. 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]

13. *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!