

The Rationalist Haggadah:

A Guide to the Rationalist Seder

Material Components:

In preparing for your seder, make sure you have:

Food items

- Green vegetables
- Salt water
- Other dips
- Matzah, at least three pieces; enough for everyone on the table
- Horseradish
- Charoset, both kinds
- Intoxicating beverage of the participant's choice, enough for four hits, or chocolate for those under 18

The seder plate should contain:

- A USB memory stick, to remind us to remember traditions past (replaces Beitzah)
- Maror, or the bitter herb
- Karpas, or a vegetable other than bitter herbs
- Charoset, an edible mixture symbolizing past technologies
- And, at the center, a mobile phone, to wait for Elijah's call

Other:

- A goblet of wine for Elijah
- A hat

Italicized phrases are to be recited in unison. Instructions are in parenthesis. All other text should be read by a single reader, rotating to the left with each paragraph break. People with questions should speak up as convenient.

We are gathered to celebrate freedom and to tell stories. There are many kinds of freedom. There is freedom from literal slavemasters, freedom from false beliefs, freedom from miscoordination, freedom from despair... We celebrate all these freedoms. And when we do not have a particular freedom to celebrate, we celebrate our hope for that freedom. There are also many kinds of stories, but let's not give too much away just yet.

Now, we sing, in the original Hebrew, the 14 parts of the Seder, to assure everyone we still intend to perform a good old fashioned Seder:

Kadesh

Urchatz

Karpas

Yachatz

Maggid

Rakhtzah

Motzi Matzah

Maror

Korekh

Shulkhan Orekh

Tzafun

Barekh

Hallel

Nirtzah

1. Kadesh: The First Cup

(Everyone pour themselves a cup of wine or equivalent)

Today we drink four (or more) cups of wine, or any mind altering substance of our choice; those who have trouble staying awake until the end may choose coffee, and for those too young for or who do not want stronger things chocolate is permitted. Why four? Each will be explained in one way, but there are many other theories. For symbolic reasons, starting with wine is encouraged but not required.

The first cup symbolizes the beginning not only of the service but of civilization itself, and we give thanks for its founding:

(Raise cups and recite together)

Praise be to you, the refiners of alcoholic beverages and other intoxicating substances, for it is in no small part you that led to the founding of Civilization. To you we owe our very existence. You have called us from across time and space to gather together in celebration and rejoicing, and what you have done for us will not be forgotten. Unless we use too much, in which case someone else please remind us later.

(Drink)

2. Urchatz: Washing the Hands

We wash our hands. We wash away the concerns of the day. We wash away our lesser thoughts. And, most importantly, we wash away the dirt that's on our hands. Seriously, look at those things.

(Wash)

3. Karpas: Eat a Green Vegetable

(Everyone take a green vegetable and make sure salt water is within reach)

Karpas. A green vegetable. A symbol of rebirth. Of hope. Specifically, our hope that we've finally seen the last snow storm of the year.

Salt water. A symbol of sorrow: the tears of the oppressed. Or it could symbolize the ocean from which all life began. Symbols are versatile like that.

Why should karpas be touched by salt water? Because when times are good for us, we must remember the sorrow of those for whom these same times are not so good. And why should salt water be touched by karpas? Because when times are not good for us, we must remember that there is hope.

(Raise the vegetable and recite together)

Praise be to the green vegetable, the only thing we can eat these days without worrying it is somehow bad for us.

(Dip twice in salt water and eat)

(from this point on, feel free to eat all the karpas you like, with any of the dips)

4. Yachatz: Break the Middle Matzah

To break bread together is a symbol of fellowship. To set something aside is a symbol of planning. Let us now symbolize both.

(Two people take opposite sides of the middle matzah while a third supplies a fulcrum.

Together, they break the matzah in half.

The larger half is then set aside, away from the table)

At this time, it is traditional to declare “let all who are hungry come and eat”. But are we really prepared for every single hungry person in this neighborhood to descend on our table? Are we ready for even one? Let us not cultivate the habit of saying things we do not mean.

But the principle that no one should go hungry is an important one. And if we cannot feed our neighbors at our table, let us do so with our wallets.

(Pass around a hat into which each person puts money.

At the end of the feast, the money will be donated to City Harvest,
who will use it efficiently to feed the local hungry.)

5. Maggid: Tell The Stories

When the first human to harness fire without drawing upon an existing source discovered how to do so, she would go to a special spot in the woods, say a special incantation and then rub two sticks together until a fire began.

Later, when another wanted fire, he too would go to the special place, and he too would say the special incantation and then rub two sticks together and once again a fire began.

Still later, yet another woman wanted fire, and she too went to the special place, but suspected the special incantation didn't matter, so she didn't say it, but she did rub two sticks together, and a fire started.

Even later than that, yet another man wanted fire, and he decided to skip all that mumbo jumbo and rub two sticks together, because we focus only on what matters.

Today, of course, we just use a lighter.

The 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 tonight different from all other nights?

On all other nights we may eat either leavened bread or matzah; why on this night only matzah?

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

On all other nights we need not taste bitterness; why on this night must we eat bitter herbs?

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

On all 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 all other nights we eat sitting up; tonight, we recline.

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

Why are we going through this old and seemingly ridiculous ritual?

Being ridiculous is fun.

But why **this**?

Once We Were Slaves

We have long been slaves. We were slaves to a Pharaoh in Egypt, and while we were able to overcome that even those of us who today call ourselves free continue to be slaves of many forms to this day, from our failure to master our environment to our failure to overcome our biases and other limitations, and ultimately to death.

If we do not always struggle to free ourselves, as long as we are alive we will continue to remain so. It is our duty to tell the story of this Exodus, so that we might one day complete it.

Avadim Hayinu; ata b'nei chorin, ata b'nei lo chorin. We were slaves, but now we are free, yet we are not free. Tonight we celebrate our liberation from Egypt, literally "the narrow place." But narrow places exist in more ways than one.

Let this holiday make us mindful of internal bondage which, despite outward freedom, keeps us enslaved, and the limitations of the world we have yet to overcome.

The Four Children

(While this is being read, those not reading should refill their cups but not drink)

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!

Alternatively, we can conclude that there are four types of children. That sounds more interesting. Tradition identifies them:

The wise child wishes to know every last detail of the celebration. You should teach her it all.

The simple child asks "what is this". You should give him a useful summary.

The wicked child asks "what is this to you", refusing to bring anything of herself to the table. You must answer her sharply.

And there is the child who does not know how to ask. You must begin with him yourself.

This ordering corresponds to how difficult the children are to teach. And it is a good habit to level-grind your teaching against lower CR children. But in the story of humanity, we find the children in the opposite order:

The first generation is that of The One Who Does Not Know How To Ask. He must discover it for himself, a gravely important task. You must show him the value of knowledge, of exploration. You shall draw out his interest, his curiosity, and kindle it like a fire. You shall encourage him to look at the world and seek the truth.

The second generation is that of The Simple Child. She asks “What is this?”, and this and all her other questions you must always answer and seek to help her in answering. Hers is the golden light of the truth seeker, so do not look down upon her for what she has not yet found!

The third generation is that of The Wicked Child. He asks “What is the meaning of this to you?” He has learned that other people’s minds are fit targets for study, but not that his own is. He is master of isolated demands for rigor, which he uses as weapons, and he never fails to rationalize his own self-interest. Him you must answer sharply and unhelpfully, for more knowledge would only grant him more opportunities to hurt himself and those around him.

The fourth generation is that of The Wise Child. She asks “What is the meaning of the rules, laws and practices of the world around me?” To her you must share all that you know, down to the last detail, as well as how you have learned it, so that she may stand upon the shoulders of giants.

And there is a fifth generation: that of the Transhumanist, he who used his knowledge to master the world. We give birth through our efforts to a new universe of possibilities.

A Story about Seders

A tale is told of five rabbis, who were holding a seder in the town of B’nei Brak, and talked about Pesach until dawn broke, when their students had to interrupt them saying, “Rabbis, it is morning and time to recite the morning shema!”

This tale teaches us many things, but the most important are: A worthy seeking of knowledge is worth losing sleep over, and never let a formalized ritual interrupt something important!

The Story of Passover

This story probably didn't happen, but it's the story we have.

It was our forefather Joseph who first arrived in Egypt. And after much difficulty, he rose in prominence there by his wisdom, eventually becoming the king's chief counselor. So when there was famine in our homeland, we all went down into Egypt, and were accepted there for Joseph's sake.

But time passed. Joseph grew old and died, and eventually a new king arose over Egypt who did not remember Joseph. And he said to his people, "Look, this people are flourishing and growing strong. Let us, then, deal shrewdly with them, lest they become more powerful, and in the event of war, join our enemies in fighting against us and gain control over the region."

So they set taskmasters over us with forced labor and made us build garrison cities for Pharaoh. The Egyptians embittered our lives with harsh labor at mortar and brick and in all sorts of work in the fields. But the more we were oppressed, the more we increased and spread out, so that the Egyptians came to despise and dread us. Pharaoh charged all his people, saying, "Every boy that is born shall be thrown in the Nile, but let every girl live."

But we were not helpless, for our ancestors had made a covenant with a powerful deity. We cried out to the God of our ancestors, who heeded our plight. And Our God said, "I will go through the land of Egypt...and I will mete out justice against all the gods of Egypt."

Many perished and the suffering was great. Pharaoh, nonetheless, remained obstinate; he would not yield. Finally when Our God visited the tenth plague upon them, the death of first-born sons of Egyptians, a great cry went up throughout Egypt, and Pharaoh allowed our people out of the land.

Even then he did not relent, sending his army against us to slay us in the wilderness. But when they chased us as far as the sea, Our God opened the sea for us and permitted us to cross on dry land. But when the army followed, He closed the sea again, drowning them. And so we were safe.

The Ten Plagues

(With each plague, remove one drop of wine from your cup)

We must remember the consequences of our actions. Though we do what is necessary, we cannot forget what we must give up, so we remember the plagues unleashed upon the Egyptians:

Blood

Frogs

Lice

Insect Swarms

Cattle Plague

Boils

Hail

Locusts

Darkness

Death of the First Born

Our sages taught: When the Egyptian armies were drowning in the sea, the Heavenly Hosts broke out in songs of jubilation. God silenced them and said, "My creatures are perishing, and you sing praises?" At the same time, our ancestors broke out in similar songs, and were not silenced. From this we learn the difference between what is perfectly right and what is reasonable to expect.

But what of the plagues themselves? And of the drowning soldiers? How can it be right to cause such suffering to a populace for the actions of an unelected ruler? Or if it is not right, what is it doing in this story?

Some have said that the Egyptian people did elect the pharaoh. Not in any formal election, of course, but they still granted him the power of his office. Pharaoh was neither a wizard nor a giant -- he held power only because the populace granted him legitimacy.

Some have said that the suffering was necessary. That by doing horrors thoroughly once, such as would be remembered for millennia, God avoided needing to do horrors over and over again later. Or because inflicting horrors on pharaoh alone would only have resulted in his being replaced by another pharaoh of similar mind, and only by targeting the country could a difference be made. These limitations suggest a rather weaker God than in previous chapters, but sometimes a good story will sacrifice consistent worldbuilding for the sake of applicability.

And some have said that there is no justification. That the real lesson is how arbitrarily hideous evils can be wholly concealed by a social atmosphere in which no one is expected to point them out and it would seem awkward and out-of-place to do so.

The Story of the Story of Passover

The story we just told is very old. It was told orally for centuries, then written down, then retold more precisely for even more centuries. There are no surviving competing accounts, but some of the pieces still sound a little implausible.

At first we believed the story. It was the only story. What else would we do?

Then we invented skepticism, guessed that the story never happened, and cast it aside.

Then we invented anthropology, and picked the story up again to try to use it to understand the people who told it in the first place.

Then we invented memetics, and realized the more interesting question is why this story kept getting retold while almost all others from that age are forgotten.

Who knows what we'll invent tomorrow?

A Story about War

Two tribes live next to each other. Each fears the other will attack, and so builds weapons to hold in readiness. And then, seeing that the other has built weapons, builds more weapons. Their clothes are threadbare. Their children are hungry. But still they spend their time making weapons, lest the other tribe build more. They would prefer to live in peace, and make no weapons, but whichever tribe adopted that policy first would surely be killed.

Are these tribes free? There is no pharaoh putting the whip to their backs, but still they do not live as they choose.

In the next valley, there are two more tribes. They distrust each other as much as the first two, but they are ruled by a powerful empire. The empire forbids tribes to fight each other, and enforces that rule with unstoppable legions. And so these two tribes have the peace and prosperity that the first two tribes wanted.

And in the valley beyond that, there are two more tribes, who only **think** they are ruled by a powerful empire. The empire has long since collapsed, but they still believe that **if** they fight, the empire will come and punish them. And so they don't fight. And by the most naive interpretation of counterfactuals, their belief is true. And they too, live in peace and prosperity.

That is the power of a story.

They also pay taxes to the empire, by floating valuable timber down a river from which no one will collect it. That too, is the power of a story.

And in a farther, more distant valley are two tribes who really understand timeless decision theory. They should publish a paper or something.

Interlude: The Power of the Story of Passover

Does the story of Passover have a role like that one? To cause an entire society to make locally flawed but globally optimal choices? We hardly have to ask. Our tradition beats us over the head with it:

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.

A Story about Seeing

(excerpted from the writings of the American Physical Society)

Shortly after the discovery of X-rays in 1895, there was a flurry of research activity and soon another form of radiation was discovered, called N-rays. The rays could be detected with a phosphorescent screen, which glowed slightly brighter when hit by N-rays.

Within months of the first announcement, many scientists would claim to have seen the rays. Hundreds of papers were soon published on the topic.

Soon various properties of the N-rays were "discovered." For instance, the rays were found to go through wood and metals, but were blocked by water. At the same time, other scientists found they could not replicate the results. In fact, they could not see any evidence of N-rays at all.

In the summer of 1904, a skeptic went to observe the experiments, in hopes of clearing up the matter.

In the most well known demonstration, they showed how N-rays could be spread out into a spectrum by an aluminum prism, detectable by noting a slight increase in brightness at some points along a phosphorescent strip.

The experiments had to be done in a darkened room, which gave the observer the opportunity to play a trick. Unseen by the demonstrators, he removed the crucial prism

from the apparatus, and then asked that the demonstration be repeated.

Not knowing the prism had been removed, the demonstrators continued to insist he saw the very same pattern they had claimed to see when the prism was in place.

A Story about Money

(excerpted from the writings of Ferrett Steinmetz)

Peasants have had a problem since the dawn of time: **where can you put money that people can't beat you up and take it?**

You'll see peasants who buried their scant piece of gold under the tree trunk in the yard, just in case the barbarians came. Which worked well until Grandpa Joe died and forgot to tell people where the gold was, or until the barbarians tortured you until you spilled the beans, or the barbarians had raided enough villages to know all the usual hiding places.

For much of history, the "We were smart enough to accumulate a little cash to help us with future problems, now what?" has been a constant issue that people wrestled with. And there was practical, helpful advice that wouldn't save you, but it was better than nothing: Bury it under the earth. Don't tell anybody. Run when the raiders come.

But really, the advice that truly would have helped these people is, "**How can I stop the barbarians from breaking into my house and stealing all my shit?**"

And the answer given back then was probably, "That's just the way the world is. Only an idiot keeps a big treasure and doesn't hire five crossbowmen to defend his life! Everyone knows it's foolish to amass treasure, spend it all now!"

The trick is, we actually solved this fucking problem. Banks? Are amazing! I can keep, you know, a 401k worth enough to buy a house, and don't have to worry about some douche with a gun stepping into my house and taking it all in one fell swoop! That change has allowed for fantastic changes to society, where ordinary people can save up for retirement in a place where practically no amount of force on Earth can physically steal their cash, and we don't even think about how safe we are these days.

That took a lot of complex societal changes. We had to say, "We need to work together

to ensure no random barbarians come and kill us.” We had to say, “People just breaking into homes is horrible, let’s create a police force to stop that.” We had to say, “How do we pay for the police force to stop burglaries?” and fund them with tax dollars. We had to say, “You know, it’s really not cool to steal, let’s create a culture that stops thinking it’s kind of clever,” and did that. We had to say, “People who put their money in banks need to be protected from bad business practices,” and enacted all sorts of regulations and protections.

The idea that they could one day pretty much eradicate the barbarians was unimaginable to a bunch of peasants living near Venice. But they managed it. It took generations, and a lot of blood, and a lot of change. And as judged by a lot of the ways some people live in ghettos today (or some non-ghetto folks had their retirement funds chewed up by predatory bankers) we still clearly haven’t spread this glory to everyone, but damn if we as a society didn’t work up some solutions a fuck of a lot better than “Hide your gold.”

Other Stories

(Anyone with a story they think should be told is welcome to do so now)

(Anyone with a theme they think a story should be told about may propose it and everyone else will try to think of a relevant story)

A Story about Knowledge

(adapted from the writings of Richard Feynman)

When Richard Feynman was teaching in Brazil, he set his students a small challenge: to tell the **absolute** direction of polarization, for a **single** piece of polaroid. They hadn't any idea.

He knew this took a certain amount of ingenuity, so he gave them a hint: "Look at the light reflected from the bay outside." Nobody said anything.

Then he said, "Have you ever heard of Brewster's Angle?"

"Yes, sir! Brewster's Angle is the angle at which light reflected from a medium with an index of refraction is completely polarized."

"And which way is the light polarized when it's reflected?"

"The light is polarized perpendicular to the plane of reflection, sir." They knew it cold! They even knew the tangent of the angle equals the index!

"Well?" he asked. Still nothing. They had just said that light reflected from a medium with an index, such as the bay outside, was polarized; they had even said which **way** it was polarized.

"Look at the bay outside," Feynman instructed, "through the polaroid. Now turn the polaroid."

"Ooh, it's polarized!" they said.

Because it is not enough to know; one must understand.

A Story about Giving

(of uncertain origin)

It is said that one day Mohandas Gandhi was running very late, and boarded a train that had already started to leave the platform. He made it aboard, but his shoe caught on something, slipped from his foot and fell to the track. Immediately, he pulled off his other shoe and hurled it backwards as hard as he could, until it came to rest near the first shoe. "Why did you do this?" the other passengers asked. "Let whoever finds it," he answered, "find a matched pair."

Why is this story retold so widely? He sacrificed a shoe whose mate was already lost -- a thing of no value. Who would not do such a thing? Why is this deed noteworthy?

The hard part is not knowing that an unmatched shoe is useless, nor in guessing that someone will find what is lost on train tracks, nor even in caring. The hard part is thinking -- in that unfortunate moment -- not of one's own loss, but of how to make things better for someone else. In that very moment, before the train travels beyond the reach of your throwing arm.

Because it is not enough to know; one must remember in the relevant moment.

A Story about Errors

(excerpted from the writings of Scott Alexander)

Imagine a prankster with superhuman skill in surgery manages to cut open and rearrange your eyes while you're asleep. She gives your vision a sort of tilt-shift effect that makes everything appear smaller. And at the time, you happen to be on a World Tour.

Your friend asks you how Paris is, and you say: "It looks very small! It's full of tiny people and a miniature Eiffel Tower!" Your friend corrects you and tells you Paris is actually normal sized.

Then you're in London. You mention how it's full of dwarves and a cute little clock tower the size of a sewing needle. Once again your friend corrects you and tells you London is normal size.

The next week you're in Beijing. You're tempted to dismiss it as a city of midgets and of medium-sized portraits of Mao. But by now you've wised up. Your experiences in Paris and London have taught you that there's something wrong with your vision and you had better be more careful.

A detractor might say "What can learning about Paris and London possibly teach you about Beijing? It's on a totally different continent and steeped in a totally different culture. Lessons learned in Europe just don't transfer!" But as long as you're using the same faulty vision to view each city, the lessons learned do transfer. Even if facts about China are completely uncorrelated with any facts about Europe, your errors about both will be correlated because it's the same person erring each time.

Conclusion

Today's oppression looks quite unlike building stone cities for pharaoh in Egypt.

Today's coordination failure looks quite unlike two warring tribes in a valley.

Today's mystery looks quite unlike a new form of electromagnetic radiation.

Today's just-how-it-is crime looks quite unlike a barbarian horde.

But unless we learn from those experiences, we will be the same flawed people who failed at those problems. We tell stories to relive our forbears' experiences, and so bring them into ourselves. To understand them. To remember them at need.

I was a slave in Egypt, and then a greater power brought me forth.

I went hungry to support war preparations, and then a story saved me.

I published papers on N-Rays, and then a prank revealed my folly.

I buried my wealth and fled the barbarians, and then saw the rise of rule-of-law.

And without those redemptions, I and my children and my children's children would have continued to suffer.

So even if all were wise, all perceptive

All learned in science and in the humanities

All strong in courage, diligence and ambition

Still it would be incumbent upon us to tell these stories.

Enough?

Traditionally, we sing “Dayenu”: it would have been enough.

Our sages asked: what do we mean by this? In some of the traditional pairings, one step without the next would have left us all dead! How can that be enough? And it was answered: 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.

And it has almost been said, “Keep two truths in your pocket, and take them out according to the need of the moment. Let one be, ‘we have achieved great things’ and the other be ‘we have a terribly long way yet to go.’”

Determining which moment needs which truth is left as an exercise for the reader.

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

*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, Dayenu!*

*Had we mastered wheat and olives,
but not raised ourselves stone cities,
but not raised ourselves stone cities, Lo Dayenu!*

*Had we raised ourselves stone cities,
but not written tomes of wisdom,
but not written tomes of wisdom, Dayenu!*

*Had we written tomes of wisdom,
but not severed law from vengeance,
but not severed law from vengeance, Lo Dayenu!*

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

*Had we severed law from vengeance,
but not learned to bake and slice bread,
but not learned to bake and slice bread, Dayenu!*

*Had we learned to bake and slice bread,
but not mapped out all Earth's surface,
but not mapped out all Earth's surface, Lo Dayenu!*

*Had we mapped out all Earth's surface,
but not crafted printing presses,
but not crafted printing presses, Dayenu!*

*Had we crafted printing presses,
but not named the rights of humans,
but not named the rights of humans, Lo Dayenu!*

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

*Had we named the rights of humans,
but not thought of mass production,
but not thought of mass production, Dayenu!*

*Had we thought of mass production,
but not tamed and harnessed lightning,
but not tamed and harnessed lightning, Lo Dayenu!*

*Had we tamed and harnessed lightning,
but not taught it math and logic,
but not taught it math and logic, Dayenu!*

*Had we taught light math and logic,
but not banished death forever,
but not banished death forever, Lo Dayenu!*

*Lo dayenu. Lo dayenu. Lo dayenu. Dayenu, Dayenu, Dayenu
Lo dayenu. Lo dayenu. Lo da-ye-nu. da-ye-nuuuuuuuuuuuuuu!*

The Second Cup of Wine

The second cup represents the celebration of human progress and achievement.

(Raise cups)

Praise to the inventors of celebrations, for life would be dull indeed if we only did practical things!

(Drink)

The Three 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.

Since we want to make sure that everyone out there gets a good and officially sufficient Seder, in case any relatives come asking nosy questions, we'll discuss all three right now.

“Passover sacrifice? What sacrifice?”

In ancient times, our people brought lambs to the temple to sacrifice. This was one small piece of an entire organization of society that is long gone and nearly forgotten. To perform the sacrifice in this society would be pointless, silly, and likely in violation of health codes. But in token of connection to our past, we have lamb roasting in the kitchen, and we will eat it shortly.

This is also in token of the fact that lamb is delicious.

“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.

A contradiction? No. A trade-off. Often we must accept a loss in one arena of life to get what we need in another. Sometimes it is better to wander free in the desert than to remain a well-fed slave. And sometimes it isn't. But we must face the choice squarely, for choices too terrible to think about will be made without thought.

Facing these choices requires strength. And 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 seek out a variety of perspectives and experiences, and 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, such as it is now rather than as it was in the land of Egypt.

6. Rachtzah:

Now the hands are washed again. 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. And this time, as Tyler Durdan says, we use soap!

7. Motzi:

[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, and to those giant rollers with spikes on. Those things are nifty.

(eat some of the matzah)

8. Maror:

(Take some maror, put it on the matzah and hold it up)

Praise to the diversity of human experience that even manages to include this stuff.

(eat)

9. Korech

There's a story about Rabbi Hillel and shawarma, but it's gotten hopelessly mangled. Let's just eat some charoset already. It's clearly a late addition to the ceremony that doesn't have a proper symbolic role and hung on through deliciousness.

Here we have two kinds of charoset: sephardic and ashkenazic, 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.

(eat some charoset, both kinds, optionally on matzah)

10. Shulchan Orech

(Serve the meal!)

11. Tzafun

With our meal concluded, we sing Pharaoh's Song. After ten plagues, he came to understand that the best solutions are usually the easiest, and that keeping us as slaves... was hard. So he let us go.

(to the tune of *Want You Gone* by Jonathan Coulton)
(If not everyone is attentive, sing anyway -- they will be by the end)

*Well here I am again
It's always such a pleasure
Remember when you slew
my first-born son?*

*Oh how we laughed and laughed
Except I wasn't laughing
Under the circumstances
I've been shockingly dumb*

*You want your freedom? Take it
That's what I'm counting on
I used to want your work, but
Now I only want you gone*

*Your god's a lot like you
(Maybe a bit more vengeful)
Now little froggies are upon my head*

*One day they'll wrap me up
Pretend I'll live forever
It's such a shame when you die
They'll all admit that you're dead*

*You might starve in the desert
That's what I'm counting on
I'll let you get right to it
Now I only want you gone*

*Goodbye to Joseph's kin
Oh, yes, I now remember
This would be funny
if it weren't so sad*

*Well now you're being chased
Your back's against the water
Once my army kills you, then
I'll stop feeling so [redacted]*

*Go face some new disaster
That's what I'm counting on
You're someone else's problem
Now I only want you gone
Now I only want you gone
Now I only want you gone*

And so we return to where our evening began: with the exodus. The stories of our past are not relevant for their general lessons alone, but for how the specifics of the past shape the present. Let us strive to understand how our experiences today are shaped by decisions in the past. Our own and others'.

And let us be ever-mindful of how our decisions today can shape experiences in the future. Our own and others'.

As a token of this, we set aside the Afikomen earlier tonight. Now we retrieve it from where we set it, and eat.

(Retrieve, distribute and eat the Afikomen)

12. Berach

The third cup, together with any dessert, symbolizes that there is always room for dessert.

(Refill and raise cups)

Praise to the joys of everyday living, may we always find room for them.

(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

All those gathered shall now offer specific praise for what the others at the table have accomplished during the past year.

(Freeform praise)

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.

But who was he? And why is he the traditional banner-bearer of the new age?

(The next section is to the tune of Alexander Hamilton.

Check to see who does and doesn't know it.

Those who don't should be skipped.)

(Original by Lin Manuel Miranda)

(Some lyrics by Scott Alexander)

How does a grouchy, bad-tempered son of a Tishbite
Dropped in a forgotten age straight off a Torah page
Grow up to be a prophet and a sage?

The game-over desert rover with just a shofar
That each year so far we invite to passover
He preached so much woe for
The enemies of Torah
In two chapters, he became a prophet known world-over.

When idolatry came, and desecration reigned
 Our land saw its future drip, dripping down the drain
 Went with malice to the palace, a message in his brain
 And he spoke his first refrain, saying God would hold the rain

Well the word got around, they said this kid's pretty holy
 Chastises the wicked, cares about the lowly
 He's the only one of us who dares stand up to Omri
 And we're proud to call him our own - what's he called, then?

Eliyahu haNavi

His name was Eliyahu haNavi

There were a million things he hadn't done

But just you wait, just you wait...

Well, soon he'd tell the men of Baal they'd both call their lords' names
 Two gods fightin' see which one from the sky could pour flames
 High on a hill, with their kill, their prayers shrill

Elijah got fire but the Baalites got nil

Fled into the desert; the desert would hide him from his foes
 Left Ahab not a clue where he goes; asking but no one knows
 His host crying, "Prophet, why did God take my son?"
 Eternal praisin', dead raisin' -- that child's life had just begun

There would have been nothing, no way out
 For someone less devout
 He would have died there in the drought
 'Cause water's hard to do without
 Started prayin'; first a raven
 Then the Zarephath widow
 Gave him bread from flour jug
 That somehow never did run low.

Eliyahu haNavi

We are waiting in the world for you

You could never back down, you never learned to take your time

Oh Eliyahu haNavi
When Am Yisrael sings for you
Do we know what you overcame?
Do we know you rewrote the game?
The world has never been the same...

His chariot's in Heaven now, see if you can spot him
 Just another righteous soul ascending from the bottom
 Assyria destroyed his home but we never forgot him

When we... strayed from truth.
 He... called us back.
 Now? We pray for him.
 We... await him.
 And he? Might just wait 'till we're worthy.

There's a million things we haven't done
But just you wait!

What's that name, now?

Eliyahu haNavi!

(Look around for Elijah
 Check the phone to see if he's called.
 If he has, let him take over the seder, if not, proceed as written)
 (Refill 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 two traditional songs, plus any the group wishes to add.

Who Knows One?

(Leader asks “Who knows what one is?” and anyone can call out what one is. Then leader asks “Who knows what two is?” and anyone can call that out, then everyone repeats what one is. Then leader asks “Who knows what three is?” and anyone can call that out, then group says what two and one were. This pattern is repeated with four and then up through twelve. You may not repeat answers from previous years.)

And of course, Khad 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...

the Scientist, who ended
 death, who slew
 [a/the] slaughterer, who killed
 [a/the] ox, that drank
 [a/the] water, that quenched
 [a/the] fire, that burned
 [a/the] stick, that beat
 [a/the] dog, that bit
 [a/the] cat, that ate
 [a/the] goat
 my father bought for two zuzim.
 Khad gadya khad gadya.

And together we say:

OK, maybe not quite yet. But next year!