

The Rationalist Haggadah:

A Guide to the Rationalist Seder
During Plague Years

Based on [The Rationalist Haggadah v2.3](#) by Daniel Speyer et al, modified for the present circumstances.

Material Components:

During plague years, supply chains can be disrupted and grocery stores might not be safe. Therefore, all material components that would normally be part of the Seder are now optional. If you have them around, or you can get them without taking risks, have them handy. If not, don't sweat it.

This ceremony has been adapted to be performed over a video call. If you have several people in the same house, set the camera up so it can see everyone.

When it is your house's turn to speak, the person who is leftmost from the camera's perspective goes first, then rotate left until everyone in your house has gone once. Houses go alphabetically by last name of the leftmost person in that house.

Food items

- Intoxicating beverage of the participant's choice, enough for four hits, grape juice or another fruit juice, tea, coffee, or chocolate
- Green vegetables.
 - Substitution: A flower if you lack green vegetables.
- Salt water
- Matzah; enough for everyone on the table.
 - Substitution: Any food which you can break in half or subdivide. Matzah symbolizes sacrificing culinary pleasure for safety, so consider a moderately lame food, such as a protein bar or saltines.
- Horseradish
 - Substitution: Most wasabi is actually horseradish. Alternately, some other bitter food such as romaine lettuce, kale, baking chocolate, dandelion stems or broccoli. Alternately, any food you really don't like.
- Charoset
 - Substitution: Something sweet

Other:

- A goblet of wine for Elijah

Italicized phrases are to be recited in unison. Instructions are in parenthesis. All other text should be read by a single reader, rotating with each paragraph break. When you recite things in unison, latency in the video call will make it sound like you're a little bit out of sync; don't worry about it.

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 that we're all here, let's check our sound, make sure everyone knows what order they go around in, and mutes their microphone or puts in headphones if they have problems with echo or feedback.

(Go around saying your name. In houses with more than one person, the person who is left-most from the camera's perspective goes first. Between separate houses, go in alphabetical order by the last name of the leftmost person within that house.)

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

Kadesh

Urchatz

Karpas

Yachatz

Maggid

Rakhtzah

Motzi Matzah

Maror

Korekh

Shulkhan Orekh

Tzafun

Barekh

Hallel

Nirtzah

Today's Seder is a bit untraditional; we have chosen not to gather physically, but instead to gather on a video call. Many of us don't have charoset, or matzah, or other traditional material components. There are two perspectives on why this is okay.

The first perspective is legalistic. Jewish law includes a fully general exemption for *pikuach nefesh*, saving a life; this exemption includes some pedantic restrictions which we will ignore, because gathering in person would risk spreading COVID-19. Similarly, local, secular law now tells us we shouldn't leave the house unless it's important. We also do without some material components because making special grocery trips wouldn't be worth it.

The second perspective is that Seder is about freedom, and we can have whatever kind of Seder we want, and ignore any tradition which doesn't fit the current environment, Rabbinical law be damned. There's a plague out there, which we don't want to catch or cause other people to catch; we keep up traditions if we enjoy them and get value from them, which sometimes means dropping the parts that aren't worth it.

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 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 hands thoroughly, not symbolically. Leave the table, go to a sink, and spend 20+ second doing all the steps. When everyone has returned to the call, continue.)

3. Karpas: Eat a Green Vegetable

(Everyone take a green vegetable, if you have one, and make sure salt water is within reach, if you have it.)

Karpas. A green vegetable. A symbol of rebirth. Of hope. Specifically, our hope that things will return to normal and we can buy fresh food without logistical hiccups and awkward decontamination procedures.

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)

4. Yachatz: Break the Middle Matzah

To break bread together is a symbol of fellowship. To set something aside is a symbol of

planning.

Not all of us have matzah, and in honor of those of us who don't, elbow bump as an alternate symbol of fellowship. Those who are home alone and coming in on zoom may elbow bump their webcam.

(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)

(Everyone then finds someone to elbow bump)

At this time, it is traditional to declare "let all who are hungry come and eat". But if we invited neighbors over, we would risk getting COVID from them, or giving them COVID. Let us not cultivate the habit of saying things we do not mean.

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.

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, these 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

In the story, each of the plagues befalls the Egyptians, but passes over the Israelites. This seems suspicious, given how much the plague of boils sounds like smallpox. In the reliably recorded parts of history, plagues have never seemed to care about national or ethnic divisions. Perhaps the Israelites then acted like Turkmenistan is acting today, and hid their cases.

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 functional 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 they saw the very same pattern they had claimed to see when the prism was in place.

Shall we call the scientists who published papers on N-rays free? It was not their will to publish papers full of nonsense. No outside force compelled them. Only their ignorance... and their pride which kept them ignorant. That was enough.

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."

Shall we call the gold-hiders free? Surely their desire was to live in a world of safety. But they did not build that world. Because they did not perceive it as a possibility.

A Story about Enemies

There is a traditional saying associated with Passover, that Pharaoh was not alone, but that “in **every** generation they rise up against us to destroy us”. It is a slight exaggeration: the diligent historian can find a few generations which were spared. But it is far too good an approximation for comfort. And the stories of these enemies have been told and retold, but also not told.

It is comforting to think of the destroyers as deeply unlike the people in our everyday lives. Monsters. Evil people. Aberrations. Not simply flawed, but their own ontologically basic category.

And perhaps the leaders, the instigators, were exactly that. Even so, they were neither wizards nor giants. They ruled by legitimacy, and often by popularity. The mobs were real mobs, and the elections were real elections. Even when our enemies won only 37% of the vote and politicked from there, 37% is too much to call “an aberration”.

And, sometimes, a people we knew as civilized and decent would turn against us en masse in a scant count of years, and in a similar time turn back. So not monsters. People. In the wrong circumstance.

What were these people thinking? No doubt there are records, buried in history’s great haystack. Without the diligence of a true historian, one finds... traces.

Some were caught up in excitement, in community, in presentation. They mistook the feeling of being a part of something grand, something winning, for being part of something right. And they mistook words artfully spoken for words which were true and good.

Some were caught up in loyalty, patriotism or obedience. Subordinating themselves to people or institutions unworthy of it.

Some were caught up in a story, about how we ruled the world, and any amount of blood was worth shedding to set the world free. And they hardened their hearts to the suffering of falling overlords, and closed their ears to any who denied their story’s truth.

Some were caught up in normality. They selected their views from those championed by

respectable politicians and serious journalists. They refused to indulge in crazy conspiracy theories about how their leaders told loud, bare-faced lies. And they refused to associate with creepy, fanatical Jew-sympathizers.

They did not want our blood on their hands, but they have it. Shall we call them free?

But we know there was some freedom to be had. Because some did not get caught up. Some did not collaborate. Some resisted actively: hid people, burned records, forged passports...

Did they not feel the pull of the forces that caught up their neighbors? Maybe. But some, we must assume, did feel it. And then they checked themselves against consequentialism, or ran into an ethical injunction, or had some sort of second-thought that pointed out something had gone wrong.

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.

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

"Ooh, it's polarized!"

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.

Because it is not enough to know; one must generalize, but carefully.

A Story about Change

(Adapted from the writings of Eliezer Yudkowsky)

Journalists who talk about the Terminator movies in a report on AI, do not usually treat Terminator as a prophecy or fixed truth. But the movie is recalled—is available—as if it were an illustrative historical case. As if the journalist had seen it happen on some other planet, so that it might well happen here.

There is an inverse error to generalizing from fictional evidence: failing to be sufficiently moved by **historical** evidence. The trouble with generalizing from fictional evidence is that it is fiction—it never actually happened. But history **has** happened, and **should** be available.

Why should I remember the Wright Brothers' first flight? I was not there. But as a rationalist, could I dare to **not** remember, when the event actually happened? Is there so much difference between seeing an event through your eyes, and seeing an event through a history book? Photons and history books both descend by causal chains from the event itself.

So the next time you doubt the strangeness of the future, remember how you were born in a hunter-gatherer tribe ten thousand years ago, when no one knew of Science at all. Remember how you were shocked – to the depths of your being – when Science began explaining the great and terrible mysteries. Remember how you once believed that you could fly by eating the right mushrooms, and then you accepted with disappointment that you would never fly, and then you flew.

Do you remember how many times your biases have killed you? You don't? I've noticed that sudden amnesia often follows a fatal mistake. But take it from me, it happened. I remember; I wasn't there.

Remember all that you once thought was right and proper, and then changed your mind. Don't imagine how you *could* have predicted the change, for that is hindsight bias.

Remember how, century after century, the world changed in ways you did not guess.

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.

Today's atrocity looks quite unlike rail cars and gas chambers.

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 forebears' 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.

I supported the mass slaughter of the innocent, and then I had second thoughts.

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, hopefully at least one person on the Zoom Call somewhere has lamb roasting in the kitchen, and 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.

(Wash hands using sanitizer, if you have it handy, or go to a sink and wash your hands there. When everyone has cleaned their hands, continue.)

7. Motzi:

(If you have matzah and are in a group, pass around the matzah, and have everyone break off a piece. Otherwise take a piece of matzah if you have it, or of mildly-lame quarantine food if you have that, or your cup if you have neither. Then lift the pieces/cups 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 matzah or substitute)

8. Maror:

(If you have maror/bitter herb and matzah, put the maror on matzah and hold it up. If not, raise a toast.)

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

(Eat Maror or substitute)

9. Korech

There's a story about Rabbi Hillel and shawarma, but it's gotten hopelessly mangled. If we have charoset, let's just eat it already. It's clearly a late addition to the ceremony that doesn't have a proper symbolic role and hung on through deliciousness. If you don't have charoset, have whatever is the most delicious quarantine food you have available.

(Eat some charoset if you have it, optionally on matzah)

10. Shulchan Orech

Serve the meal!

(If you have food to eat, begin doing so now. Take a 5 minute break to wash your hands, get your food, go to the bathroom, etc, then return to the Zoom Call. If you're in a different time zone and had dinner already, you can stick around for freeform discussion followed by some traditional songs.)

(After about 30 minutes, continue, even if some people are still eating.)

11. 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 retail workers, farmers, delivery drivers, and everyone else going to work to keep things running while we shelter in place

Praise them

Praise to everyone who cooked, organized, or otherwise helped bring us together tonight

Praise them

Praise to the health-care workers, who will try to save us if we screw up

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

12. Hallel

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.

(Look around for Eliyahu haNavi. If he is present, 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)

13. Nirtzah

At this time, we close with two traditional songs. Under normal circumstances, these are somewhat drunken affairs with people singing in myriad keys and rhythms. Today, with the lag on our Zoom call, it will be completely cacophonous. And that's okay, we're doing it anyway.

Because of the lag, you may be tempted to slow down your speech to match the speech of others coming in over your headset, but that will just make everyone slower. Just plough ahead!

Who Knows One?

(Leader asks "Who knows what one is?" and anyone can call out what one is. Then the leader asks "Who knows what two is?" and anyone can call that out, then everyone repeats what one is. Then the leader asks "Who knows what three is?" and anyone can call that out, then the group says what two and one were. This pattern is repeated with four and then up through twelve. Try to avoid answers we've used before.)

Khad Gadya

And of course, Khad Gadya. It has been suggested that this song details the history (and future!) of our people, that 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] butcher, 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!