



OPEN DOORS/OPEN HEARTS

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*How can we ensure that the Passover Seder is not performative, but transformative?
When we open our doors to those who are hungry, something in our hearts opens too.
This is how we begin to write a new liberation story.*

Since October 7, The New Israel Fund has been funding emergency support and resettlement for Israelis forced from their homes, and they have been supporting Israelis and Palestinians working together for a just future. They have now launched a campaign to feed the people of Gaza living at the brink of famine through the World Central Kitchen and The International Rescue Committee. The humanitarian crisis there is a moral catastrophe, and it is a Jewish moral obligation to feed those who are hungry. I hope you'll join me in support of this campaign.

Pesah 5784 – April 14, 2024

Let's talk about opening doors.

At the Seder, the very heart of our Jewish practice, some time after dinner and before Hallel, we rise from the table. We open the front door of our homes, and we recite:

שפך חמתך אל הגוים אשר לא ידעוך

Pour out Your fury against the nations who do not know You

...Pour out Your wrath on them and may Your blazing anger overtake them.

The message is tough—I've always found it dissonant both with the spirit of the celebration, and also with my core understanding of our Jewish tradition. Certainly there are strains of the tradition that lift up a harsh and vengeful God, but that image has never resonated for me. Much of my spiritual and religious life is a counter-testimony to that rage-fueled reactivity.

But this year, we come to the table shattered. The pain of the past six months—the shock and anguish over the atrocities committed against our family in Israel, the horror of the war in Gaza and unimaginable heartache there, the sense of abandonment and existential loneliness many of us have felt, as Jews, the fear of a future uncertain... it's too much.

I met a young woman last month, the same age as my daughter, who survived the massacres of October 7th. I asked her if she had a name of a loved one to share for Mourner's Kaddish... she said she had forty-two names. She had witnessed forty-two of her dearest friends die before her eyes. She was lucky to be alive, though she felt anything but lucky. She wept as she spoke to me, her voice quivering but clear. What did she want? She whispered: *I want revenge*.

Without that tender, devastating encounter, maybe I would approach *shfokh hamatkha* this year with the same discomfort and dismissiveness as I have in years past. But this year, I can, a little bit, relate to the vulnerability and desperation that must have led the author of that

prayer—back in the 9th century—to write it in the first place. I still don't share the sentiment, but I do understand it. Maybe you, too, see it a bit differently this year than in years past.

Shfokh hamatkha is a dark story—a story drenched in pain, and we are living through an era drenched in pain.

Perhaps I've been so distracted, in years past, by the dissonance of this prayer that I never before realized the deeper problem with this dark story—it's not just the sacralization of vengeance, the argument for retribution in religious language in the heart of a religious ceremony. It's the placement of those words, of that fever dream—a prayer for revenge spoken belly-full, couched between words of gratitude and praise.

Here's the problem. Every Jew in every generation is called to see ourselves as though we, personally, left *Mitzrayim*, that narrow place, and began the long walk to freedom, to a place of possibility and expansiveness. The Seder is structured to mimic that journey. We traverse sacred time following the trajectory of our ancestors: מְתַחִיל בְּגָנוּת וּמְסִיִּים בְּשִׂבַּח – we begin in degradation, and we end in praise (Mishnah Pesachim 10:4).

Our story moves from pain to promise, not the other way around.

In other words: there is no place for a revenge fantasy at the end of our Seder, the celebration of our freedom.

But there is another door opening, one that occurs hours earlier in our Seder, long before we eat, just before we begin telling our story. We rise, this time with the table set and hearts full of anticipation, to open the front door. But this time we say:

כל דכפין ייתי וייכול: *All who are hungry, come and eat.*

Think of it! Seder is an exercise in memory and spiritual mobility—just as our people moved from enslavement to liberation, so to can we. But we cannot begin to tell our story, let alone eat our meal, without recognizing that for others, even in our place and in our time, enslavement is no metaphor or abstraction. And for those who have been blessed to traverse the darkness and make our way toward the light, the only responsible thing, the only human thing to do is open our doors and invite in those who are still now where we once were.

All who are hungry, come and eat! This generous invitation is drawn from the example of Rav Huna, the Rosh Yeshiva of Sura. He was not only learned, but also full of grace. In Masekhet Taanit (20b), we read a series of extraordinary actions Rav Huna was known for in his time, culminating in the practice, before each meal, of opening his door and declaring: *let all who are hungry come and eat!*

It's clear in the gemara how extra-ordinary—out of ordinary—Rav Huna's behavior was. He was a giant of his generation. Even the great Rava admits: he'd never go *that far*.

But when this tradition is incorporated into the Haggadah, it is not only those who are extraordinarily resourced, or extremely righteous or wise who say it, but every single one of us.

Now many commentators go to great length to explain that *don't worry... this is not meant to be taken literally—we're not really inviting hungry people into our homes.*

But we must know that there *have* been times in Jewish history when this directive was taken very seriously. Elie Wiesel writes (in his *Haggadah*) that in his small town, before the war, the Jews used to wander through town searching for strangers—the poor, the uprooted, the unhappy, the hungry—to come and sit at their table as treasured guests. Without them, they could not begin their meals.

This door opening sends a clear message: the great dream of Passover is not individual liberation, but collective liberation. *Until all of us are free, none of us will truly be free. So all who are hungry, come and eat!*

Now what would happen if we were to actually open our doors and bring a hungry person to the table? Or even if we take seriously the call to open our hearts to bring true awareness of the reality of their suffering to the table?

Does that not change us? Does it not bring new significance to our own story? Does it not awaken a kind of gratitude for what we have, an awareness of the fragility of it all? A commitment to use our freedom to bring love, comfort, dignity to those who remain in the narrow straits?

This year, this question strikes me as even more urgent than in years past.

Even as we sit this year, with our hearts broken, maybe even with empty chairs at the table to symbolically hold our captives, and their dear, shattered families, we cannot ignore another terrible reality: Gaza is on verge of famine. More than a million people living there are on the brink of starvation, and that is a moral catastrophe. As Leah Solomon, writing from Jerusalem, so delicately expressed:

Before October 7, although we knew that Jewish history has seen many tragedies, few of us alive today had experienced such a cataclysm. Never, until now, were we confronted with the excruciating task of holding another people's suffering even as our own is so vast and raw, let alone doing so when the perpetrators of the atrocities against us are members of that very people, and when the suffering of that people is being inflicted in large part by our own.

Yet, it is not despite this connection, but in profound awareness of it, that we must compel ourselves to see.

The reality is beyond devastating—and our own suffering does not make it any less so. The children of Gaza are scavenging for grass and animal feed. Before us is catastrophic human suffering, a crisis that we cannot turn away from. It is in our own sacred texts that we read that:

טוֹבִים הָיוּ חַלְלֵי הַרֵב מִחַלְלֵי רָעֵב
Those who die by the sword
are better off than those who suffer from hunger. (Eikha 4:9)

Or, as the Rabbis explain in Bava Batra (8b): It's only reasonable to assert that famine is worse than the sword. One who dies of famine suffers greatly before departing from this world, but at least one who dies by the sword does not suffer.

Of course, the Rabbis go on to say that captivity is worse than all of these... What a horror that we are living through a time in which all of these forms of violence are the lived reality, and so very close to home.

Meanwhile, hunger in our time has never been because there is not enough food. We've always had enough food to feed every hungry person on planet. Hunger has always been a man-made disaster. It is not a failure of resources, but a failure of will.

The impending famine in Gaza is no different. The resources are there, they have been all along. Feeding people has not been seen as a political priority—neither for Israeli officials, nor for Hamas, nor, frankly, for world leaders. Even more so, the delivery of essential food and medicine has been cynically thwarted for months, essentially turning food into a weapon of war.

For some, on both sides of this conflict, seeing the heartache of our supposed enemy is simply not possible given the weight of our personal sorrow. Some, whether out of fear, grief, or rage, conspired early on to close their hearts. This has led to a kind of erasure, a dehumanization that only deepens the wounds of war and further entrenches us in an untenable binary.

To engage in heartless denialism about hunger and human suffering in Gaza, as some have, is no better than to deny the atrocities of October 7th, as so many around the world have. Closing the door on another's humanity only diminishes our own.

Even still, it's hard to open our door to another person—or another people's—heartache, especially when you, too, are holding fresh sorrow. I wonder how Rav Huna did it. How was he able to put aside his own desires and needs, his own grief, and open his door so graciously, again and again? In Megillah (27b), we are given a hint. This great sage was born into poverty. In fact, he was so poor that he once sold his belt to afford wine for kiddush on shabbat, and was forced to hold his pants up with a rope. I have to believe that it was because he knew the ache of hunger, the *humiliation* of hunger, that he cultivated a heart so deeply generous toward others who were hungry.

Is the Seder not designed to do to our hearts precisely what that childhood hunger did to Rav Huna's? Thirty-six times in the Torah we are reminded to treat the stranger fairly, and generously, and even lovingly... *because we were strangers in the land of Egypt*. The whole point of the Seder, arguably, is to remind us that we know the heart of the stranger. To remind us the bitterness of enslavement, and that first taste of freedom. *That* is our story—built into the Jewish collective consciousness over thousands of years.

Open your doors, the tradition calls out to us. *Open your hearts!*

All who are hungry, come and eat.

The careful construction of the Seder takes us on a narrative journey from narrowness to expansiveness. If we take seriously that first opening, of our doors and our hearts, if we allow the Seder to be not performative but transformative, then by the time we open the door that second time, we will have changed.

What, then, are we to do with the revenge fantasy of *shfokh hamatkha*—pour out your wrath?

Haggadot today increasingly offer an alternative in the form of a liturgical piece called *shfokh ahavatkha*—don't pour out your rage, pour out your love.

*Pour out your love on the nations who have known You
and on the kingdoms who call upon Your name.
For they show loving-kindness to the seed of Jacob
and they shield your people Israel
from those who would devour them.
May they see the good of your chosen ones
and rejoice in the gladness of your nation. (Psalms 106:5)*

שְׂפוּךְ אֲהַבְתְּךָ עַל הַגּוֹיִם אֲשֶׁר יָדְעוּךָ
וְעַל מַמְלָכוֹת אֲשֶׁר בְּשִׁמְךָ קוֹרְאִים
בְּגִלְלַת חֲסֵדִים שָׁהֵם עוֹשִׂים עִם זָרַע יִשְׂרָאֵל
וּמִגִּינִים עַל עַמְּךָ יִשְׂרָאֵל
מִפְּנֵי אוֹכְלֵיהֶם,
יִזְכוּ לְרֵאוֹת בְּטוֹבַת בְּחִירֶיךָ
וְלִשְׂמוֹחַ בְּשִׂמְחַת גּוֹיְךָ. (תְּהִלִּים קו"ה)

Some argue this text offers a legitimate alternative, given that it, too, is quite old. It appears, they say, in a 16th century manuscript from Worms, Germany. But others argue that the poem is actually a forgery, that it was really written only one hundred years ago, by a rabbi who fled Galizia and then Vienna, ultimately escaping the Nazis by coming here, to the United States.

I find the impulse to address the need for another narrative, another end to this story, equally meaningful whether it emerged 500 years ago or 100, or even yesterday. This text reminds us that we can, we must choose love.

This year, we must choose to open our doors in righteousness. When we say, *let all who are hungry, come and eat*, let's mean it. If we do, then by the time we open our doors again, now with bellies full, we will not be able to pour out our wrath, but instead our hearts will be open to the power of love to heal us all.

Some of us will follow in the footsteps of Elie Wiesel and the Jews of Sighet, and invite the hungry to sit at our table. *All of us* can help feed the hungry, by supporting the New Israel Fund's

campaign to feed the people of Gaza through the World Central Kitchen (WCK) and The International Rescue Committee (IRC).

For six months, NIF has been funding emergency support and resettlement for Israelis from the south and the north who have been forced from their homes by Hamas and Hezbollah—because it is a Jewish moral obligation to meet our Jewish family in sorrow, and support them in their time of need.

And NIF has been funding for decades Israelis and Palestinians working together for a just and shared future—because it is a Jewish moral obligation to plant the seeds for a peaceful future.

And now they are funding humanitarian support for Palestinians in Gaza—because it is a Jewish moral obligation to see the humanity in every person, to feed the hungry, and to uplift the image of God in every human being.

I often quote my teacher, Rabbi Harold Schulweis, who insisted that the great question of our lives is:

“How we are to master the trauma, how we are to confront the world, how we are to extract meaning and morale from our nightmare so that we and our children can live with wisdom, courage and hope...?”

That question, which he wrote for those grappling with a post-Holocaust reality, has been brought back to the forefront so plainly and painfully since October 7th. What story will we tell from our suffering? What will we choose?

This Passover, I hope we'll open the door to a renewed commitment to our beautiful, broken Jewish family. To feel our pain, our vulnerability. Our anguish. To listen and to feel more deeply.

And I hope we'll choose to open the door, and our heart, to the suffering people of Gaza. I hope we'll do this as Jews. As human beings. As people who see ourselves, every year, every day, *k'ilu yatzanu mi-mitzrayim*, as though we, ourselves, have left the narrow place, and walked toward the place of greater understanding, greater healing, and greater love.

This year, may our open doors pry open our broken hearts—so that love pours out... toward our people and all people, so that vision of collective liberation will be not a fantasy, but a reality.

Shabbat shalom.