

Erica Brown

הגדה של פסח
SEDER TALK

THE CONVERSATIONAL HAGGADA

Maggid Books and OU Press

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קעדת הסדר
THE SEDER PLATE



THE SEDER PLATE

There are many intricate legal discussions about the ordering of the Seder plate. Generally, we follow the arrangement of Rabbi Moses Isserles – the Rema, Rabbi Elijah of Vilna – the Vilna Gaon, or Rabbi Isaac Luria – the Ari – who, in addition to organizing the plate a specific way, also has the



The Seder plate and the matzot are now covered and the second cup of wine is poured.
The youngest child asks the following questions:

מַה נִּשְׁתַּנָּה
הַלַּיְלָה הַזֶּה מִכָּל הַלַּיְלוֹת
שֶׁבְּכָל הַלַּיְלוֹת
אָנוּ אוֹכְלִין חֶמֶץ וּמַצָּה
הַלַּיְלָה הַזֶּה
כֵּלּוּ מַצָּה

שֶׁבְּכָל הַלַּיְלוֹת
אָנוּ אוֹכְלִין שָׂאֵר יַרְקוֹת
הַלַּיְלָה הַזֶּה
מְרוֹר

join us for that. But wait. We are slaves. We could not invite guests because we didn't know that food was on its way. But then miraculously we found a bit of food. It wasn't much, but it was worth sharing. A Holocaust survivor wrote in her memoir: "Ilse, a childhood friend of mine, once found a raspberry in the camp and carried it in her pocket all day to present to me that night on a leaf. Imagine a world in which your entire possession is one raspberry and you gave it to your friend." This beautiful recollection is shared on a pillar of the New England Holocaust Memorial. When we have the capacity to give away even the most meager thing we have to give someone else pleasure, we have achieved light through darkness. And we tell those we invite for our modest meal that we know something else about true friendship. We never forget those who extend us kindness during hardship when we finally find ourselves in the position to enjoy success.



The Seder plate and the matzot are now covered and the second cup of wine is poured.
The youngest child asks the following questions:

מַה נִּשְׁתַּנָּה

WHAT MAKES

THIS NIGHT UNLIKE ALL OTHER NIGHTS,

so that every other night

we eat either bread or matza,
but tonight

there is only matza?

And that every other night

we eat many different greens,
but tonight

we will eat bitter herbs?

This year we are slaves. Next year we may be in Jerusalem. Those who can love and support us in failure, will love and support us in success and be there beside us in joy.

Name something that you shared that was hard for you to give up, but you wanted someone else to get pleasure from it more than you wanted to keep it.



What is the difference between an act of giving and an act of sacrifice?

WHAT MAKES THIS NIGHT UNLIKE ALL OTHER NIGHTS?

Questions are the platform by which great stories begin. They are there to answer a question. Why am I here? Why does the world exist? What is my purpose? When done correctly and well, a good question has transformative powers, lifting us and helping us transcend the banalities of everyday existence and touch on that which is ultimate and enduring. American artist and writer Erin Morgenstern helps us understand the power of a transformative story: "You may tell a tale that takes up residence in



Continued on the next page.



שֶׁבֶּכַל הַלַּיְלוֹת
 אֵין אָנוּ מִטְבִּילִין אֶפְלוּ פְּעַם אַחַת
 הַלַּיְלָה הַזֶּה
 שְׁתֵּי פְּעָמִים

שֶׁבֶּכַל הַלַּיְלוֹת
 אָנוּ אוֹכְלִין בֵּין יוֹשְׁבֵין וּבֵין מְסַבֵּין
 הַלַּיְלָה הַזֶּה
 כֻּלָּנוּ מְסַבֵּין

someone's soul, becomes their blood and self and purpose. That tale will move them and drive them and who knows what they might do because of it, because of your words. That is your role, your gift." On this night, we are asked to be master storytellers. It is our role. It is our gift. It is the opportunity of a lifetime offered to us annually. We can embrace another person with words of justice and injustice, song and praise, spellbinding details and sweeping endings. We want the Exodus narrative to take residence in our souls. It is the story that speaks to a sense of Jewish purpose in the world: to hear the cries of another and do something about them, to celebrate small and unexpected victories as a sacred community, to join forces and tell the world that the few and the brave can still triumph. We refuse to let people languish in servitude of any kind. We do that under the rubric of God and not only out of our commitment to humanity. We believe that spiritual forces are at work that we may not always understand, but we partner with God to improve an already blessed world.



Name one personal reason you tell the Exodus story.

How does the mandate to tell the kind of story that takes residence in someone else's soul change the way you will tell the Exodus story tonight?



WHAT MAKES THIS NIGHT UNLIKE ALL OTHER NIGHTS?

On this night, we are different. Every day offers us an opportunity to be different. It is our choice. Tonight, we *must* be different. We use the



And that every other night
 we do not dip [our food] at all,
 but tonight
 we will dip it twice?

And that every other night
 some sit to eat and some recline,
 but tonight
 we are all reclining?

story to get us there. British novelist Phillip Pullman once wrote: "After nourishment, shelter, and companionship, stories are the things we need most in the world." When our basic needs are satisfied, we turn to higher-level needs, like the need for meaning. Storytellers make meaning. Storytellers are weavers. They understand that to capture interest, stories need not only information to be engaging. Content needs to be supported by drama, the theater of a narrative. Storytellers are strategic and intentional. They drop a nugget of suspense and conflict just as our attention span flags. They know how to raise interest and generate anticipation. One of the most important aspects of storytelling is how to begin a tale, how to draw in listeners from the very first words. Every story starts somewhere. Storytellers who are good at their job do not rely on chronology or purely linear accounts. They puncture time with an arresting aspect of the story and then work forward or backward. How do we ever know where to start a story? Our master narrative starts with one critical detail that demands us to shackle ourselves and imagine the limitations to our freedoms. We begin with a synopsis that tells all before we build and embellish, elaborate and analyze: "We were slaves." And then we were redeemed. "The LORD our God brought us out of there." If the Passover story could only be told in two sentences, it would be these.

Tell your family story in one great sentence.

Where did you start?

What was the most important moment in the story's trajectory?





The קערה and the מצות are uncovered.

עֲבָדִים הָיִינוּ לְפָרְעָה בְּמִצְרַיִם

וַיֹּצִיאֵנוּ יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵינוּ מִשָּׁם

בְּיַד חֲזָקָה וּבְזְרוּעַ נְטוּיָה.

וְאִלּוּ לֹא הוֹצִיא הַקָּדוֹשׁ בְּרוּךְ הוּא

אֶת אֲבוֹתֵינוּ מִמִּצְרַיִם

הָרִי אָנוּ וּבְנֵינוּ וּבְנֵי בְנֵינוּ מִשְׁעַבְדֵי הָיִינוּ לְפָרְעָה בְּמִצְרַיִם.

וְאִפְלוּ

כָּלֵנוּ חֲכָמִים, כָּלֵנוּ נְבוֹנִים, כָּלֵנוּ זְקֵנִים

כָּלֵנוּ יוֹדְעִים אֶת הַתּוֹרָה

מִצְוָה עָלֵינוּ לְסַפֵּר בִּיצִיאַת מִצְרַיִם

וְכָל הַמְרַבֵּה לְסַפֵּר בִּיצִיאַת מִצְרַיִם

הָרִי זֶה מְשֻׁבָּח.



WE WERE SLAVES

We open our Haggada with a quick précis of what happened and with an invitation. Tell us more. Use this as a framework rather than a script. Speak and speak more because with every articulation of this ancient freedom, our appreciation deepens.

Since the close of this passage tells us that the more we speak, the more praiseworthy we are, we turn next to sages of the Talmud who could not stop speaking about the Exodus. If you set out to tell the story of our Exodus, chances are you would not have come up with a Haggada. It does not read at all like Exodus 1–15, with its mounting tensions and ultimate relief. Instead, we have a number of passages which tell us how others read this story. Rabbi Eliezer and his colleagues were telling this story all night. They, too, could not stop speaking about the Exodus. They didn't even realize that the time for the morning recitation of the *Shema* was upon them. Many commentators believe that this



The Seder plate and the matzot are uncovered.

עֲבָדִים הָיִינוּ

WE WERE SLAVES to Pharaoh in Egypt,

and the LORD our God brought us out of there with a strong hand and an outstretched arm.

And if the Holy One, Blessed Be He,

had not brought our fathers out of Egypt –

then we, and our children, and the children of our children, would still be enslaved to Pharaoh in Egypt.

And even were we all wise, all intelligent,

all aged and all knowledgeable in the Torah,

still the command would be upon us

to tell of the coming out of Egypt;

and the more one tells of the coming out of Egypt,

the more admirable it is.

indicates the intensity of their storytelling. They were so absorbed that they lost all track of time.

But another reading is even more likely because it is hard not to notice the transition from night to the natural light of day unless you are hiding in a dark space, perhaps a cave or an attic, when you are discussing the Exodus. These sages were likely hiding from soldiers or representatives of the Roman administration, who may have persecuted them for external expressions of their religion. The magic of this passage is not only the length of the Exodus recollections or the passionate retelling on this Passover night long ago. It is also that despite outside dangers, they kept talking. A story worth telling is told again and again. Danger only makes the story more meaningful because it offers the reason that we endure.

Think of a story that is told and retold because it continues to inspire.

Name the last time you lost track of time because you were so absorbed in what you were doing.

Why would the Haggada make us read about the way other people read, rather than reading the story directly?





פְּנֵגַד אַרְבַּעַה בְּנִים דְּבִרָה תּוֹרָה
 אֶחָד חָכָם
 וְאֶחָד רָשָׁע
 וְאֶחָד פֶּה
 וְאֶחָד שְׂאִינוּ יוֹדֵעַ לִשְׁאֹל



THE TORAH RELATES TO FOUR TYPES OF SONS

The four children identified here are based on the four verses in the Haggada, three in Exodus and one in Deuteronomy. When examined carefully, they each reveal a different context in which you would address a child. They represent not only four types of children (as described in detail in “The Four Sons, the Right Question” in the essay section of this book), but four different types of telling. In the first verse, the ritual of the Paschal lamb is taking place in real time. It is an experiential question, a question asked at the very moment to explain an action. Why are you taking this lamb that is holy in Egypt and slaughtering it and sacrificing it and putting its blood on the doorpost? I have never seen this. It does not make sense. This is the telling of explanation, an origin story, the etiology of why we do what we do. “And when your children ask you, ‘What is this service to you?’ you shall say, ‘It is a Pesah offering for the LORD, for He passed over the houses of the Children of Israel in Egypt while He struck the Egyptians, but saved those in our homes’” (Ex. 12:26–27).

The second verse is an act of witnessing. It is not prompted by a question asked by a child but by the need and responsibility that the one who experiences something monumental must transmit it to one who has not seen it. “And you shall explain to your son on that day, ‘Because of this the LORD acted for me when I came out of Egypt’” (Ex. 13:8). The child is part of the experience in the first verse. This second child is only told about it.

The third verse offers an explanation of meaning. We describe not what is happening or what happened once but the significance of it for our lives now. It is the story of what events mean to us personally and nationally: “And when, in time to come, your son asks you, saying, ‘What is this?’ you



פְּנֵגַד אַרְבַּעַה בְּנִים

The Torah relates
 to four types of sons –
 one who is wise,
 one who is wicked,
 one with a simple nature,
 and one who does not know how to ask.

shall say to him, ‘With a strong hand the LORD brought us out of Egypt, from the grip of slavery’” (Ex. 13:14).

The last verse is the meaning of ritual and action as a result of our history. It is our opportunity to explain, when prompted, why we do what we do as a result of what happened to us. “When in time your children ask you, ‘What are the testimonies, the statutes, and laws that the LORD our God commanded you?’ you shall say to your children, ‘We were slaves to Pharaoh in Egypt and the LORD our God brought us out of there with a strong hand’” (Deut. 6:20–21).

The sages of the Talmud identified four sons who all needed to hear the same story but needed to hear it differently to understand it and to be inspired by it. But these verses can also tell us that curiosity works differently at different life stages or moments. We ask questions about what is happening to us when it is happening. We listen to those who witness events that did not happen to us and try to understand the meaning it has for them. Sometimes we seek wisdom to understand the repercussions of events in our own lives. We make choices and then the choices make us, shaping us and those around us.

We often like to assign these parts to different siblings or those with different personality traits. Why?

Parents are often stymied by just how different their children are, one from the other. For a few minutes, engage in the reverse of this exercise. Name four qualities that are similar in all of your children/siblings or those around the table. Too often we look for differences rather than highlighting similarities. Let tonight be really different and seek commonalities.





חכם

מה הוא אומר

מה העדות והחקים והמשפטים
אשר צוה יהוה אלהינו אתכם:

ואף אתה אומר לו בהלכות הפסח
אין מפטירין אחר הפסח אפיקומן.

דברים

רשע

מה הוא אומר

מה העבדה הזאת לכם:

לכם ולא לו

ולפי שהוציא את עצמו מן הכלל

כפר בעקר

ואף אתה הקהה את שניו, ואמר לו

בעבור זה עשה יהוה לי בצאתי ממצרים:

לי ולא לו

אלו היה שם, לא היה נגאל.

שמות יב

שמות יג



THE WISE SON

In the Jerusalem Talmud, the answers given to the simple son and the wise son are reversed. This touch of irony clues us into different perspectives on



The WISE SON

what does he say?

“What are the testimonies, the statutes, and laws,
that the LORD our God commanded you?”

And you must tell him the laws of Pesah:

“After eating the Pesah offering
one does not eat anything more.”

Deut. 6

The WICKED SON

what does he say?

“What is this service to you?”

“To you,” he says, not to him.

When he sets himself apart from the community,
he denies the very core of our beliefs.

And you must set his teeth on edge and tell him,

“Because of this

the LORD acted for me when I came out of Egypt.”

“For *me*,” and not for *him*;

had he been there he would not have been redeemed.

Ex. 12

Ex. 13

the nature of intelligence. Wisdom can express itself in asking about the detailed laws around a holiday – “what are the testimonies, the statutes, and laws” – or it can come in the broad philosophical sweep of history that comes with perspective – “with a strong hand the LORD brought us out of Egypt.”

What do you think: is intelligence about the trees or the forest?

How do we measure intelligence in children? How should we?





תָּם

מָה הוּא אוֹמֵר

מִה־זֹאת

וְאָמַרְתָּ אֵלָיו

בְּחֹזֶק יָד הוֹצֵאתָנוּ יְהוָה מִמִּצְרַיִם

מִבֵּית עֲבָדִים:

וְשִׂאֵינוּ יוֹדֵעַ לְשִׂאֵל

אֵת פֶּתַח לוֹ

שֶׁנֶּאֱמַר

וְהִגַּדְתָּ לְבִנְךָ

בַּיּוֹם הַהוּא לֵאמֹר

בְּעֵבוּר זֶה עָשָׂה יְהוָה לִי

בְּצֵאתִי מִמִּצְרַיִם:

שמות יג

שם

שמות יג



THE SIMPLE-NATURED SON

In the Jerusalem Talmud, this child is called not a “*tam*,” a simpleton, but a “*tipesh*,” a stupid child. We often regard this son as simply too young to ask a sophisticated question about history and memory, but the Jerusalem Talmud, with its bald use of language, offers a different interpretation that is at once more harsh and more radical. The young child of our rendition will grow into knowledge even if he developmentally cannot understand this story with its narrative complexities. The child of the Jerusalem Talmud is the child with limited mental capacity. We do not give up on this child because this is the story of the community we have created. This child is a



The

SIMPLE-NATURED SON

what does he say?

“What is this?”

And you must tell him,

“With a strong hand

the LORD brought us out of Egypt,
from the grip of slavery.”

Ex. 13

Ibid.

And the

ONE WHO DOES NOT KNOW
HOW TO ASK

you must open [the story] for him,

as it is said:

“And you shall tell your child

on that day,

‘Because of this the LORD acted for me
when I came out of Egypt.’”

Ex. 13

child not only of a family but of our entire community. This child has the obligation to know this story because he owns it the same way as any other Jewish child. The parent of this child has the obligation to find a way to make this story meaningful regardless. There is room at this table for all. Be the storyteller who finds the way inside every heart.

Share a life discovery you made because someone with a disability taught you something you could not learn on your own.



Do you think Jewish life has created enough room for those with special needs?

AND THE ONE WHO DOES NOT KNOW HOW TO ASK

“You must open for him” is the literal translation and a resplendent verb choice. This night is not only about opening up the story, but about



Continued on the next page.

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**SEDER
TALK**

THE CONVERSATIONAL HAGGADA

**EIGHT ESSAYS FOR THE
EIGHT DAYS OF PESAH**

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Redemption Awaits

For the full Haggada text, with translation and commentary, turn to the other end of this volume.

Day One

*On the wind
in the cool of the evening
I send greetings to a friend.*

*I ask him only to remember the day
of our parting when we made a covenant
of love by an apple tree.*

“Song,” Yehuda Halevi
(Translated by Carl Rakosi)

Day One

All Who Are Hungry

After a good dinner one can forgive anybody, even one's own relations.

Oscar Wilde

There is immense joy in hosting others, in gathering together people we love and feeding them. Having others share in our personal abundance seems to multiply what we have, generating a sense of even greater blessing. When we can do that with strangers, we extend ourselves beyond the boundaries of our table and create – for a time – a new, more expansive community. The mitzva of *hakhnasat orhim* thus transforms both the one who receives our outlay of generosity and the one who gives, by doubling the perception of bounty we have. If you have enough to share, you must indeed have enough.

In a talmudic passage reminiscing about the good deeds of the great sage R. Huna, the scholar Rava plied Rafram bar Papa for information. The great rabbi thought back to his past and observed: “Of his [R. Huna’s] childhood I do not recollect anything, but of his old age I do. When he had a meal he would open the door wide and declare, ‘Whosoever is in need, let him come and eat’” (Taanit 20b). We know these words. They leap off the first pages of our Haggada, but they first lived in the behavior of a man whose scholarship was balanced by goodness. We open the Seder with our central, symbolic Passover food – the matza, bread of our affliction – and an impassioned appeal: “Let all who are

hungry come in and eat; let all who are in need come and join us for the Pesah.” We raise the matza to be sure that everyone at our table knows that though we start with poor man’s food, we invite all to join us in a magical evening of food, story, and song, as if to say: no matter how sorry our lot, we are always blessed enough to share it. No matter how desperate our situation, anyone who is in need can be assured of a place with us.

And then, in the same sentence, as we extend the invitation, we mention the Passover sacrifice, letting the needy know that even when we move from the bread of affliction to the expensive Paschal lamb, they are still welcome to join us. An invitation any less inclusive would be disingenuous, since we need both foods to tell the full story. We became a nation through the Passover sacrifice. How then can we deny it to someone who cannot afford it? This generosity of spirit was passed down to us from R. Huna. No meal touched his lips without a sincere offer to share his food with others. He did not merely utter the words. He first opened the door wide.

OUR JEWISH HOSPITALITY INDUSTRY

Opening the door or sitting by an open door is a behavior we recognize from long before R. Huna became the subject of talmudic conversation. Hospitality is the hallmark of Abraham, our patriarch and founder. When the Lord appeared to Abraham near the great trees of Mamre, “he was sitting at the entrance to his tent in the heat of the day” (Gen. 18:1). Abraham, who was recuperating from his circumcision, and may well have been experiencing his own sense of frailty, was not cooling off in the center of the tent, protecting himself from the midday sun in its shade. Instead, the verse stresses that he sat at his threshold in Canaan, seeking out passersby in need.

This may sound like strange behavior, but when it comes to identifying those who are needy, we have to leave the comfort zone of protected space. Few people will announce their neediness outright. Those in need may suffer a quiet alienation, a sense of loneliness that remains unexposed or undisclosed. And in his own state of vulnerability, Abraham also clues us into how our own fragility often makes us more cognizant of the vulnerability of others.

I have noticed, living in an observant community, bonded by the cement of *hesed*, loving-kindness, that there are certain people who are quick to identify newcomers, who think nothing of approaching strangers with a smiling “hello” and an offer for Shabbat dinner or lunch. Others remain in their small clusters of familiarity, the inner circles we create among neighbors, friends, and family. To an insider, these groups seem like casual cells of laughter, conviviality, and

conversation. To a stranger, these inner circles seem like impenetrable cities; standing on the outside, the guest or stranger feels helpless watching others who know the language and mores, the customs and accepted practices that appear foreign and inaccessible. You do not have to be in a foreign country to experience this personal dissonance. You just have to be in a crowded room where you recognize no one. Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik captured this impenetrability and its after-effects in a scene he described in his article “The Community”:

Quite often a man finds himself in a crowd of strangers. He feels lonely. No one knows him, no one cares for him, no one is concerned about him. It is an existential experience. He begins to doubt his own ontological worth. This leads to alienation from the crowd surrounding him. Suddenly someone taps him on the shoulder and says, “Aren’t you Mr. So-and-so? I have heard so much about you.” In a fraction of a second his awareness changes. What brought about the change? The recognition by somebody, the word!¹

There is a moment, often brief and fleeting, when we experience angst in a crowded room because we recognize no one and no one recognizes us. This is not a significant instance of anguish, not enough to merit attention, and yet it makes us feel small and unimportant. If no one knows us does that imply that we are not worth knowing? If no one speaks to us, does that mean we have nothing worthwhile to say? All of this changes with a simple tap on the shoulder. As Rabbi Soloveitchik brings us into this small moment of alienation and then grace, we suddenly understand that our kindness to strangers, our empathy with their feelings of vulnerability, does more than make others feel welcome. It makes them feel whole again. It has restorative properties.

The continuing narrative about Abraham in Genesis 18 imparts a number of other important lessons about hospitality:

He [Abraham] said, “If I have found favor in your eyes, my Lord, do not pass your servant by. Let a little water be brought, and then you may all wash your feet and rest under this tree. Let me get you something to eat, so you can be refreshed and then go on your way – now that you have

1. Joseph Soloveitchik, “The Community,” *Tradition* (Spring 1978) vol. 17, no. 2: 16. The essay was first delivered as a talk at the 78th annual meeting of the Conference of Jewish Communal Service in Boston, May 31, 1976.

come to your servant.” “Very well,” they answered, “do as you say.” So Abraham hurried into the tent to Sarah. “Quick,” he said, “get three seahs of fine flour and knead it and bake some bread.” Then he ran to the herd and selected a choice, tender calf and gave it to a servant, who hurried to prepare it. He then brought some curds and milk and the calf that had been prepared, and set these before them. While they ate, he stood near them under a tree. “Where is your wife Sarah?” they asked him. “There, in the tent,” he said. Then the Lord said, “I will surely return to you about this time next year, and Sarah your wife will have a son.” Now Sarah was listening at the entrance to the tent, which was behind him.

Abraham had a keen sense of the needs of others, perhaps born of his own experience with alienation. It takes a stranger to recognize a stranger. When Abraham actually saw people on the horizon he hurried in their direction. “Abraham looked up and saw three men standing nearby. When he saw them, he ran toward them from the entrance of his tent to meet them and bowed low to the ground” (Gen. 18:2). The verse stresses the verbs of hospitality: seeing, rushing, meeting, and bowing. It is easy enough to ignore someone in one’s peripheral vision. We do it all the time when we don’t want the emotional complications that result from eye contact. In a short customer service book by Ari Weinzweig, *Zingerman’s Guide to Giving Great Service*, the author outlines a rule for all employees of his restaurant. If a customer is within ten feet, employees must make eye contact. Within four feet, they must approach him. Eye contact and then physical movement minimizes the detachment that can develop if eye contact is avoided and distance is preserved. Before the bar mitzva of one of my boys, a friend asked me if I was practicing the six-month rule: “Don’t look anyone you’re not planning to invite in the eye for six months before a *simḥa* [a joyous occasion].” I told her it was a ridiculous idea, but as the date neared, I understood perfectly what she meant. By looking at you, I feel obligated to you or experience shame that I have not included you.

Abraham looked up, saw his guests, and then hurried to greet them by prostrating himself low before them. This final action is difficult to understand. Bowing low – to the ground – seems out of place here, especially given Abraham’s own weakened constitution. But perhaps Abraham knew that strangers always feel humbled in unfamiliar circumstances. He preempted their sense of alienation with a physical gesture that communicated his own humility, as if to say to them with one deep bow, I am no better than you simply because I am from here and you are not.



Abraham and the Three Angels, James Tissot

The French artist James Tissot (1836–1902) captures the extremity of this encounter in his majestic watercolor “Abraham and the Three Angels.” In the composition, the approaching angels are viewed from inside Abraham’s tent, which is carpeted by colorful, fringed Oriental rugs and pillows. The tent folds narrow the window of observation, and the tops of the heads of the three approaching strangers in white appear to be cut off to Abraham who, in the painting, is lying on the floor of his tent cutting a sharp diagonal from the right-hand corner of the painting until the middle of the composition. This image of submission demonstrates that Tissot was a careful and literal reader of this Bible story. Abraham’s physical position hints to recovery from his circumcision, but also, and more importantly, suggests how he diminished himself in the presence of others. Through intentional contraction, he made space for these strangers and honored them. He let down the defenses that one might typically put up when confronting three unfamiliar men approaching the entrance to one’s home.

The text in Genesis 18 emphasizes speed as another aspect of humility, putting someone else’s time before one’s own. Abraham and Sarah – who themselves did quite a bit of traveling in Genesis – understood that people who are traveling generally have a destination and somewhere they have to be within a time frame. If I hesitate as a host, then I am not really at your service. I am

working within my own framework of convenience. With surprising alacrity, emphasized several times in the narrative, Abraham and Sarah offer up a meal both expensive and time-consuming to produce. Roasting meat and kneading bread require time, but they also indicate that the host has indeed put himself out for his guest. In Jewish law, the host is supposed to distribute the portions to his or her guests since he or she will, we presume, be more generous than a guest serving himself.

The mitzva of *hakhnasat orḥim*, welcoming guests, is not merely about greeting strangers at the threshold with friendly gestures. The infinitive “*lehakhnis*” means to cause one to enter, to bring one inside. In other words, we are not merely asked, in fulfillment of this commandment, to be welcoming, which is to say a gracious hello and make introductions. We are obligated to bring someone who stands on the outside of our lives into our lives. That movement from outside to inside requires effort, sensitivity, and energy. It mandates us to consider the factors that would constitute being on the outside and minimize them so that strangers can become friends.

EATING WITH STRANGERS

Equalizing the playing field between host and guest also requires intensifying our understanding of the dining experience we offer at the Seder and every Shabbat and holiday. In *Religion for Atheists*, Alain de Botton acknowledges the significance of communal dining as a way that religion teaches people to reach out to others. He bemoans the fact that in modern society, we have more restaurants than ever, “but what is significant is the almost universal lack of venues that help us transform strangers into friends.”² As an atheist, de Botton suggests the creation of what he calls the Agape Restaurant, from the Greek word for love. It would have an open door and separate families and couples. It would have a guidebook of rules for the meal, much like the Seder has, with prescribed topics to stimulate conversation. In fact, de Botton mentions the Seder as a prime example of a meal that achieves brotherhood. He appreciates the fact that meals taken with strangers force goodwill and, at the very least, minimize suspicion:

Prejudice and ethnic strife feed off abstraction. However, the proximity required by a meal – something about handing dishes around, unfurling napkins at the same moment, even asking a stranger to pass

2. Alain de Botton, *Religion for Atheists* (New York: Pantheon, 2012), 41.

the salt – disrupts our ability to cling to the belief that the outsiders who wear unusual clothes and speak in distinctive accents deserve to be sent home or assaulted.³

In this vein, he believes that there are fewer effective means of diminishing distance and promoting tolerance than forcing people to eat supper together. Inviting guests to join us is thus not only an act of compassion toward the other. It is an instruction manual in goodness for ourselves. It helps us overcome the natural prejudices that we develop in the presence of strangers. It is a way we tell ourselves that strangers are really potential friends, and that a shared meal can actualize that potential. Relationships change when we break bread together, when we bring others into our homes and our lives. Isaiah reminds us of our mission, “Is it not to share your bread with the hungry and bring the homeless poor into your house?” (Is. 58:7). Our very purpose is to ensure that others live with us in dignity. To achieve it, we must bring them in.

Many years ago, when I was studying Bible in the class of Professor Nechama Leibowitz, of blessed memory, she suddenly paused with a question reminiscent of Isaiah’s words: “There was never a time when Jews did not take in their homeless. When did Jews stop taking in the homeless?” She allowed the weight of this question to sit, thick in the air, as she waited for a response. No one was quite sure what she was getting at. She dismissed the guesses and said simply, “When Jews got wall-to-wall carpeting.” When we had nothing, we were happy to split that nothing with others. Sleep on the floor, as long as you have a place to sleep. But as we began the journey to material success, we could not have someone sleep on the floor because it might damage our fine carpeting.

On Passover we don’t break bread together, but we do crumble matza as a group. And anticipating de Botton’s thinking, the Hebrew Bible stresses that our experience of alienation as slaves must translate into the responsibility to minimize the dislocation or oppression of others: “You shall not wrong a stranger or oppress him, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt” (Ex. 22:20). A variation of this verse appears dozens of times in the Hebrew Bible. Maimonides wrote that anyone who does not share food on a holiday experiences sham happiness: happiness of the stomach, he called it.

When a person eats and drinks [to celebrate a holiday], he is obligated to feed converts, orphans, widows, and those who are poor and needy.

3. Ibid. 43.

In contrast, a person who shuts the gates of his courtyard while eating and drinking with his children and wife and does not feed the poor and destitute, is not rejoicing in the joy of the holiday as a mitzva but merely celebrating his stomach. (*Mishneh Torah*, Laws of Holidays 6:18)

Authentic happiness comes not from material pleasure but from emotional generosity. When I share, I am thanking God by telling God that I have more than enough and that I am a steward for the happiness of others.

TO HAVE EQUALLY

A mishna about pre-Passover practice and Seder ritual wants us to think about those outside our household and their needs especially on a holiday, offering a subtle understanding of the intense foreignness that the destitute experience.

The evening of Passover close to the time of the afternoon service, a person should not eat until night falls. Even a member of the Israelite poor should not eat until he reclines, nor should one give him fewer than four cups of wine, even if he is fed through a soup kitchen. (*Pesaḥim* 10:1)

We want all at the Seder table to look forward to the symbolic meal that accompanies the story of the Exodus and also enjoy the festive meal at its center. This anticipation is regarded in the halakhic category of “*hidur mitzva*,” the beautification of a commandment. If a person eats right before the Seder, he or she will not experience the requisite hunger that creates an added layer of holiday anticipation. Maimonides wrote that the sages of old used to refrain from eating on Passover eve to go into the holiday with great appetite (*Mishneh Torah*, Laws of *Ḥametz* and Matza 6:12). Even if a poor person who is fed through a soup kitchen is presented with food right before the holiday – an opportunity one in such dire straits would hardly pass up – he should refrain from eating so as to experience the same state of anticipation as his better-off neighbor. The mishna adds the detail “until he reclines.” Reclining is regarded as the prerogative of the rich at mealtime. Lean back and be served rather than serve. The poor person who is used to sitting rigidly over his food, ready to jump at the call of those with greater power or money – akin to a slave in this regard – must wait to eat until he can do so with the mindset of the free man. He must recline and then eat. The sages understood that the tensions of poverty are well-aligned with the mentality of servitude, and that economic deprivation stands in the way of true freedom. The medieval Talmud commentators add that even were this man to sit on a bench

for the Seder, as he is generally accustomed, he must recline and his reclining is still considered the act of a free man even if the fantasy of freedom is not entirely supported by the furniture.⁴ The absence of pillows and sofas cannot diminish his role-playing for the evening.

In discussing the four cups of wine that all must drink at the Passover table, the mishna employs a strange circumlocution of language in reference to the poor person. It twists the language in the law, reading: “Do not give him fewer than four cups.” Why not write: “Give the poor man four cups,” in a positive, declarative way to avoid all ambiguity? The sages of the Mishna understood a great deal about human nature. They knew the human tendency to grab what you can when you can and to give less than is necessary when you can cut corners. We might have thought that for a poor person, three glasses of wine would be more than sufficient or perhaps even one glass would do, since it is one more than he would have had if he is truly needy. And yet, if Passover is to be the great hospitality equalizer, we cannot deny the poor man his due. He must participate in the meal like everyone else. The four cups of wine punctuate and accentuate the story, corresponding with the four expressions of freedom that ring out of the Exodus story itself: “Say to the Israelite people: ‘I am the Lord, and I will **bring you out** from under the yoke of the Egyptians. I will **free you** from being slaves to them, and I will **redeem you** with an outstretched arm and with mighty acts of judgment. I will **take you** as My own people and I will be your God” (Ex. 6:6–7). We partake of the first cup as Kiddush, the opening prayer for all Shabbat and holiday meals. We have the second cup over the reading of the Haggada’s core story, the third completes the meal, and the last follows the Hallel phase of the Seder after the meal. The poor person must be part of the trajectory of this experience in its entirety, not partially. And, if those in charge of dispensing charity fail to deliver four cups or the financial equivalent so that the poor person can recite and drink in this story, then he must go to extreme lengths to purchase his freedom, so to speak. The Rashbam, Rashi’s grandson, and other later commentators specify that he must go as far as selling his own clothing or indenturing himself in some paying relationship so that he can purchase the wine. If we have failed to make accommodation to bring the most vulnerable into the narrative, then they must bring themselves into it. If they stand on the outside without the requisite tools and feelings, then both they and we will have betrayed the Exodus narrative wholesale.

On the night of the Seder, everyone is a king. Everyone is a free person. Thus, everyone is entitled to experience freedom deeply. For the poor, the

4. See *Tosafot* and *Mordekhai* ad loc.

problem standing between himself and the re-enactment of freedom this night is only what money can buy. We use *tzedaka* to make sure that this obstacle does not stand in the way.

CREATING COLLECTIVE CONSCIOUSNESS OF THE STRANGER

As an illustration of this equalizing power, we turn to Emma Lazarus (1849–1887). Her family had settled in the United States in America’s colonial days. She wrote a poem whose lines would be immortalized in bronze on the pedestal of the Statue of Liberty, placed there in 1903. She donated the sonnet to an auction to raise funds for the statue’s pedestal and was herself an advocate for immigrant rights. “The New Colossus” compares the Statue of Liberty to the ancient Colossus of Rhodes, the largest statue in the ancient world, built to celebrate the Greek victory over Cyprus and once considered among the Seven Wonders of the World. “The New Colossus” commemorated something else, not the collapse of the strong under the more powerful, but the welcoming of the weak and the vulnerable into the sheltering arms of freedom.

Give me your tired, your poor,
Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,
The wretched refuse of your teeming shore.
Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost to me,
I lift my lamp beside the golden door!

It is as if Lazarus herself had invited us through her golden door and into her dining room to participate at the family Seder. And she points to the feeling that the inviter must create for the invited to feel welcome. The poem offers us an embrace; but for some, having guests is an obligation, preceded by a chilly offer that alienates even as it includes. Lazarus’s lamp, like Abraham’s position at the threshold, represents ways to seek out the stranger rather than reactively attend to his needs when he appears. The lowlier the tempest-tost immigrant, the more home matters, Lazarus suggests.⁵ The most vulnerable often become aware of their alienation only after they have been welcomed somewhere. The intake

5. One scholar, Daniel Marom, posits that Lazarus’s stanzas were not only informed by her Jewish background and understanding of the Jewish immigrant experience but were a direct contrast to the image represented by the statue itself, the Roman goddess *Libertas*, who holds the Declaration of Liberty in one hand and a torch in the other. In other words, the message on the statue’s pedestal undercuts the statue itself, suggesting that the words rather than the image capture what the embrace of the stranger really means.

of kindness makes them aware of how truly hungry they were for warmth, for any crumb of kindness. A friend shared with me that she invited a family with a handicapped son for a Shabbat meal, and the woman broke into tears, she was so grateful. She told the hostess that such offers of company came so infrequently that they precipitated joyful weeping.

ON BEING A BETTER HOST

If we were to take a page out of Abraham's playbook on hosting, we might turn to certain rabbinic laws and customs that emerged as a result of a close reading of Genesis 18. As noted above, the host should offer the portions because the host will always be most generous. We should accompany our guests four cubits from the door (about 6 feet) to show them we are not anxious for them to leave. But most of all, we should be mindful of the rabbinic dictum, inspired by Abraham's narrative, that puts us in the mindset of a good host: "Be happy as you sit at your table and the hungry are enjoying your hospitality" (*Derekh Eretz Zuta* 9). We should experience joy when we open our tables to others. Professor Daniel Sperber in his series *Minhagei Yisrael* (Customs of Israel) mentions a kabbalistic practice reported by the medieval scholar Rabbenu Bahya ben Asher: those who invested a great deal in hosting the poor and the stranger were buried in coffins made out of their tables as a positive judgment on how they welcomed people to their homes.⁶ Your table judges you, and you will leave a legacy based on its availability to the stranger.

Moving from ancient wisdom to contemporary practice, we turn for guidance on making guests feel welcome to New York restaurant entrepreneur Danny Meyer in *Setting the Table*:

Hospitality is the foundation of my business philosophy. Virtually nothing else is as important as how one is made to feel in any business transaction. Hospitality exists when you believe the other person is on your side. The converse is just as true. Hospitality is present when something happens *for* you. It is absent when something happens *to* you. These two simple prepositions – *for* and *to* – express it all.

Hospitality is measured not by what we are served, but by how we are served, by whether we feel that someone is doing something for us rather than to us. Meyer looks for warmth, enthusiasm, good listening skills, and excellent follow-up in

6. Daniel Sperber, *Minhagei Yisrael*, vol. III (Jerusalem: Mossad HaRav Kook, 1994), 184.

employee hires and evaluates his employees accordingly. Strong interactive skills and emotional intelligence are critical in terms of the atmosphere he tries to create in every eating venue. He aims for what he calls legendary hospitality, the kind of service that makes people remember and talk. He also makes an important distinction between hospitality and service:

Understanding the distinction between service and hospitality has been at the foundation of our success. Service is the technical delivery of a product. Hospitality is how the delivery of that product makes its recipient *feel*. Service is a *monologue* – we decide how we want to do things and set our own standards for service. Hospitality, on the other hand, is a *dialogue*. To be on a guest's side requires listening to that person with every sense, and following up with a thoughtful, gracious response. It takes both great service and great hospitality to rise to the top.

You might read this and think it's good advice for a business but not really for a private home. There is truth to this. Yet when people make hospitality their business, best practices surface. Imagine that every time we invited guests we aimed for legendary hospitality. Imagine that we set that standard for our institutions, our schools, synagogues, community centers. And think about the messages we could take away and apply in our own homes. We are not yet close enough to that goal.

These hosting behaviors can not only change and deepen our relationships with others, they also model the kind of behavior we should expect in families. In *How to Run a Traditional Jewish Household*, Blu Greenberg writes that

Hakhnasat orhim [welcoming guests] is a wonderful mitzva for children: a) it is a concrete model from which to learn the art of sharing; b) children have an opportunity to become acquainted with all different kinds of people, including non-Jews; c) it reminds them, periodically, that they are not the center of the universe.⁷

That reminder needs to be made more than periodically to help children acknowledge and embrace others.

7. Blu Greenberg, *How to Run a Traditional Jewish Household* (Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson, 1988).

ON BEING A GOOD GUEST

In our Grace After Meals, we make a point of blessing those who host us: “May the Merciful One bless the heads of this household, their entire family, and all that is theirs.” We cannot bless God for a meal only in the abstract sense of divine provision. We must also acknowledge the concrete way in which others have provided for us. This is the other side of the hosting equation, which can prove complex if our expectations are unrealistic or we are mired in entitlement with a dollop of ingratitude. While our Jewish texts remind us to be generous in bringing others into our lives, the Talmud also understood how difficult it is to be a “generous” recipient of the kindness of others:

What does a good guest say? “How much trouble my host has gone to for me. How much meat he has set before me. How much wine he has given me. How many cakes he has served me. And all this trouble he has gone to for my sake!” But an inconsiderate guest, what does he say? “What kind of effort did the host make for me? I have eaten only one slice of bread. I have eaten only one piece of meat, and I have drunk only one cup of wine! Whatever trouble the host went to was done only for the sake of his wife and children.” (Berakhot 58a)

It is hard to understand why anyone would minimize a host’s generosity unless we believe that at heart, people are uncomfortable on the receiving end of goodness, which may make them feel dependent or needy.

If we think this behavior never surfaces in such a direct and outright fashion, listen for a moment to the words of Rabbi Joseph Telushkin in *The Book of Jewish Values* on his candid estimation of what often happens at the end of a meal:

I know that when my wife and I entertain, we spend hours preparing the house and planning the event so that our guests can spend as pleasant an evening as possible. The thought that some of them might afterwards dissect us critically pains me. And I don’t think I am being paranoid in suspecting that many of them do so; I realize how often I have acted that way myself.⁸

8. Joseph Telushkin, *The Book of Jewish Values* (New York: Crown Publishing, 2011), 307.

We may think that Rabbi Telushkin is being overly sensitive until we catch ourselves doing this as we leave a host's home, critiquing the experience, the décor, the food. We may sense a touch of ingratitude when we host others. I am often struck by how many guests leave my home having no idea what my husband and I do or think about, while we have asked them a myriad of questions about themselves. When curiosity is so one-sided, it makes us wonder how people feel about their experience at our table. Miss Manners, Judith Martin, makes a helpful, tongue-in-cheek suggestion to this end: "It is easy to be the perfect houseguest. All you have to do is to remember everything you've learned in the last few years about being totally honest, in touch with your feelings, able to communicate your needs, and committed to doing what makes you feel comfortable. And then forget it."⁹ She continues the point: "The best present a guest can make after he has left and written thanks is his silence. This must consist not only of the wonderful silence that pervades the house when he leaves, but of his own precious silence in refusing to divulge family secrets to others."¹⁰

Miss Manners reflects the advice from another rabbinic source: "The guest should comply with every request the host makes of him" (*Derekh Eretz Rabba* 6). This refers both to what a host asks specifically of a guest in terms of help preparing or serving, but it may also include the implicit request that guests not criticize their hosts, judge them, or reveal to others inadequacies in their food or their company. We honor those who honored us with an invitation by respecting their privacy and thinking well of them.

BEYOND THE SEDER TABLE

By spilling over the Passover tradition of an open table of physical and spiritual nourishment beyond the Seder night, we honor the message of the holiday and its lessons for our behavior yearlong. Our mandate, having experienced alienation as strangers in a strange land, is to welcome others with a warm embrace, and to remember that we did not learn the art of hospitality from hostility. We learned it from the very first Jews – Abraham and Sarah – who taught us by example the way that strangers become friends and friends become angels.

9. Judith Martin, *Miss Manners' Guide to Excruciatingly Correct Behavior* (New York: W.W. Norton and Co., 2005), 274.

10. *Ibid.* 276.

LIFE HOMEWORK

- What is one behavior or action you can adopt to become more hospitable? Name one way you can be a better guest.
- How can you personally make our synagogues, schools, and Jewish organizations more friendly and open to strangers?
- Think of the most hospitable person you know. What “ingredients” describe his or her character?
- Use Passover and the first Hebrew month of our nationhood as a chance to build a more diverse, compassionate, and engaged community this coming year by inviting unlikely guests to your table once a month. Transform social dining – where we invite our relatives and friends – into the mitzva of *hakhnasat orḥim*.