

Kol Rina
An Independent Minyan
Parashat Tzav
April 4, 2020 *** 10 Nissan, 5780

Tzav in a Nutshell

https://www.chabad.org/parshah/article_cdo/aid/2858/jewish/Tzav-in-a-Nutshell.htm

G-d instructs Moses to command Aaron and his sons regarding their duties and rights as kohanim ("priests") who offer the korbanot (animal and meal offerings) in the Sanctuary.

The fire on the altar must be kept burning at all times. In it are burned the wholly consumed ascending offering; veins of fat from the peace, sin and guilt offerings; and the "handful" separated from the meal offering.

The kohanim eat the meat of the sin and guilt offerings, and the remainder of the meal offering. The peace offering is eaten by the one who brought it, except for specified portions given to the kohen. The holy meat of the offerings must be eaten by ritually pure persons, in their designated holy place and within their specified time.

Aaron and his sons remain within the Sanctuary compound for seven days, during which Moses initiates them into the priesthood.

Shabbat Hagadol

https://www.chabad.org/holidays/passover/pesach_cdo/aid/1692/jewish/Shabbat-Hagadol.htm

What is Shabbat Hagadol

The Shabbat which precedes Passover is called Shabbat haGadol, the Great Sabbath, for many and varied reasons, as we shall explain below.

There are also many special customs associated with this Shabbat. It was in Egypt that Israel celebrated the very first Shabbat Ha-Gadol on the tenth of Nissan, five days before their redemption. On that day, the Children of Israel were given their first commandment which applied only to that Shabbat, but not to future generations: On the tenth day of this month [Nissan]... each man should take a lamb for the household, a lamb for each home (Exodus 12:3).

This mitzvah of preparing a lamb for the Passover offering four days before it was to be brought, applied only to that first Passover in Egypt, and the Torah does not tell us that we must continue to do so before every future Passover. Nevertheless, the people continued to do this to make sure that their lambs had no blemishes which would preclude their being sacrificed.

Many miracles were performed for the Children of Israel on this first Shabbat haGadol. The Torah commanded them to take their lambs and tie them to the bedpost. When they did so, their Egyptian neighbors saw this and asked:

"What is the lamb for?"

The Children of Israel answered: "It is to be slaughtered as a Passover sacrifice as G-d has commanded us."

The Egyptians, for whom the lamb was a deity, gnashed their teeth in anger but could not utter a sound in protest.

Many other miracles as well were performed in connection with the Passover offering, we therefore refer to this day as Shabbat haGadol.

Why We Celebrate Shabbat Hagadol instead of the 10th of Nissan

Why do we commemorate the miracle on the Shabbat before Passover rather than on the tenth of Nissan, the date on which it actually took place? We see that the Torah itself mentions only the date rather than the day of the week.

It is because the miracle is closely connected to Shabbat. The Egyptians were aware that the Children of Israel observed Shabbat and did not busy themselves tending animals on that day, so when the Egyptians saw them taking lambs and binding them to their

bedposts on Shabbat, they were surprised and decided to investigate what was happening.

The Children of Israel were in great danger when they were confronted and were saved only by virtue of a miracle. We therefore commemorate this miracle on Shabbat rather than on the tenth of the month of Nissan.

Moreover, had it not been Shabbat, the Children of Israel would not have needed a miracle to save them. They would have been able to deceive the Egyptians by diverting their attention or making up some kind of explanation. On Shabbat, however, they would not do so, for, as our Sages said, "Even an ignorant man will not tell lies on Shabbat." Thus, we see that they were endangered because of their observance of Shabbat, and they needed a miracle to save them.

A further reason why we recall the miracle on Shabbat rather than on the tenth of the month is that, forty years later, Miriam died on that day and the well which accompanied the Children of Israel and provided them with water in the wilderness, disappeared. When the anniversary of Miriam's death falls on a weekday, some observe it as a fast for the righteous.

FOOD FOR THOUGHT

[Left- and Right-Brain Judaism \(Tzav 5780\) by Rabbi Jonathan Sacks](http://rabbisacks.org/tzav-5780/)
<http://rabbisacks.org/tzav-5780/>

The institution of the Haftarah – reading a passage from the prophetic literature alongside the Torah portion – is an ancient one, dating back at least 2000 years. Scholars are not sure when, where, and why it was instituted. Some say that it began when Antiochus IV's attempt to eliminate Jewish practice in the second century BCE sparked the revolt we celebrate on Chanukah. At that time, so the tradition goes, public reading from the Torah was forbidden. So the Sages instituted that we should read a prophetic passage whose theme would remind people of the subject of the weekly Torah portion.

Another view is that it was introduced to protest the views of the Samaritans, and later the Sadducees, who denied the authority of the prophetic books except the book of Joshua.

The existence of haftarot in the early centuries CE is, however, well attested. Early Christian texts, when relating to Jewish practice, speak of "the Law and the Prophets," implying that the Torah (Law) and Haftarah (Prophets) went hand-in-hand and were read together. Many early Midrashim connect verses from the Torah with those from the haftarah. So the pairing is ancient.

Often the connection between the parsha and the haftarah is straightforward and self-explanatory. Sometimes, though, the choice of prophetic passage is instructive, telling us what the Sages understood as the key message of the parsha.

Consider the case of Beshallah. At the heart of the parsha is the story of the division of the Red Sea and the passage of the Israelites through the sea on dry land. This is the greatest miracle in the Torah. There is an obvious historical parallel. It appears in the book of Joshua. The river Jordan divided allowing the Israelites to pass over on dry land: "The water from upstream stopped flowing. It piled up in a heap a great distance away ... The Priests who carried the ark of the covenant of the Lord stopped in the middle of the Jordan and stood on dry ground, while all Israel passed by until the whole nation had

completed the crossing on dry ground.” (Josh. ch. 3).

This, seemingly, should have been the obvious choice as haftarah. But it was not chosen. Instead, the Sages chose the song of Devorah from the book of Judges. This tells us something exceptionally significant: that tradition judged the most important event in Beshallach to be not the division of the sea but rather the song the Israelites sang on that occasion: their collective song of faith and joy.

This suggests strongly that the Torah is not humanity’s book of God but God’s book of humankind. Had the Torah been the our book of God, the focus would have been on the Divine miracle. Instead, it is on the human response to the miracle.

So the choice of haftarah tells us much about what the Sages took to be the parsha’s main theme. But there are some haftarot that are so strange that they deserve to be called paradoxical, since their message seems to challenge rather than reinforce that of the parsha. One classic example is the haftarah for the morning of Yom Kippur, from the 58th chapter of Isaiah, one of the most astonishing passages in the prophetic literature:

Is this the fast I have chosen – a day when a man will oppress himself? ... Is this what you call a fast, “a day for the Lord’s favour”? No: this is the fast I choose. Loosen the bindings of evil and break the slavery chain. Those who were crushed, release to freedom; shatter every yoke of slavery. Break your bread for the starving and bring dispossessed wanderers home. When you see a person naked, clothe them: do not avert your eyes from your own flesh. (Is. 58:5-7)

The message is unmistakable. We spoke of it in last week’s Covenant and Conversation. The commands between us and God and those between us and our fellows are inseparable. Fasting is of no use if at the same time you do not act justly and compassionately to your fellow human beings. You cannot expect God to love you if you do not act lovingly to others. That much is clear.

But to read this in public on Yom Kippur, immediately after having read the Torah portion describing the service of the High Priest on that day, together with the command to “afflict yourselves,” is jarring to the point of discord. Here is the Torah telling us to fast, atone and purify ourselves, and here is the Prophet telling us that none of this will work unless we engage in some kind of social action, or at the very least behave honourably toward others. Torah and haftarah are two voices that do not sound as if they are singing in harmony.

The other extreme example is the haftarah for today’s parsha. Tzav is about the various kinds of sacrifices. Then comes the haftarah, with Jeremiah’s almost incomprehensible remark:

For when I brought your ancestors out of Egypt and spoke to them, I did not give them commands about burnt offerings and sacrifices, but I gave them this command: Obey Me, and I will be your God and you will be My people. Walk in obedience to all I command you, that it may go well with you. (Jer. 7:22-23)

This seems to suggest that sacrifices were not part of God’s original intention for the Israelites. It seems to negate the very substance of the parsha.

What does it mean? The simplest interpretation is that it means “I did not only give them commands about burnt offerings and sacrifices.” I commanded them but they were not the whole of the law, nor were they even its primary purpose.

A second interpretation is the famously controversial view of Maimonides that the sacrifices were not what God would have wanted in an ideal world. What He wanted was avodah: He wanted the Israelites to worship Him. But they, accustomed to religious practices in the ancient world, could not yet conceive of avodah shebalev, the “service of the heart,” namely prayer. They were accustomed to the way things were done in Egypt (and virtually everywhere else at that time), where worship meant sacrifice. On this reading, Jeremiah meant that from a Divine perspective sacrifices were *bedi'avad* not *lechatchilah*, an after-the-fact concession not something desired at the outset.

A third interpretation is that the entire sequence of events from Exodus 25 to Leviticus 25 was a response to the episode of the Golden Calf. This, I have argued elsewhere, represented a passionate need on the part of the people to have God close not distant, in the camp not at the top of the mountain, accessible to everyone not just Moses, and on a daily basis not just at rare moments of miracle. That is what the Tabernacle, its service and its sacrifices represented. It was the home of the Shechinah, the Divine Presence, from the same root as *sh-ch-n*, “neighbour.” Every sacrifice – in Hebrew *korban*, meaning “that which is brought near” – was an act of coming close. So in the Tabernacle, God came close to the people, and in bringing sacrifices, the people came close to God. This was not God’s original plan. As is evident from Jeremiah here and the covenant ceremony in Exodus 19-24, the intention was that God would be the people’s sovereign and lawmaker. He would be their king, not their neighbour. He would be distant, not close (see Ex. 33:3). The people would obey His laws; they would not bring Him sacrifices on a regular basis. God does not need sacrifices. But God responded to the people’s wish, much as He did when they said they could not continue to hear His overwhelming voice at Sinai: “I have heard what this people said to you. Everything they said was good” (Deut. 5:25). What brings people close to God has to do with people, not God. That is why sacrifices were not God’s initial intent but rather the Israelites’ spiritual-psychological need: a need for closeness to the Divine at regular and predictable times.

What connects these two haftarot is their insistence on the moral dimension of Judaism. As Jeremiah puts it in the closing verse of the haftarah, “I am the Lord, who exercises kindness, justice and righteousness on earth, for in these I delight,” (Jer. 9:23). That much is clear. What is genuinely unexpected is that the Sages joined sections of the Torah and passages from the prophetic literature so different from one another that they sound as if coming from different universes with different laws of gravity.

That is the greatness of Judaism. It is a choral symphony scored for many voices. It is an ongoing argument between different points of view. Without detailed laws, no sacrifices. Without sacrifices in the biblical age, no coming close to God. But if there are only sacrifices with no prophetic voice, then people may serve God while abusing their fellow

humans. They may think themselves righteous while they are, in fact, merely self-righteous.

The Priestly voice we hear in the Torah readings for Yom Kippur and Tzav tells us what and how. The Prophetic voice tells us why. They are like the left and right hemispheres of the brain; or like hearing in stereo, or seeing in 3D. That is the complexity and richness of Judaism, and it was continued in the post-biblical era in the different voices of halachah and Aggadah.

Put Priestly and Prophetic voices together and we see that ritual is a training in ethics. Repeated performance of sacred acts reconfigures the brain, reconstitutes the personality, reshapes our sensibilities. The commandments were given, said the Sages, to refine people.[1] The external act influences inner feeling. “The heart follows the deed,” as the Sefer ha-Chinuch puts it.[2]

I believe that this fugue between Torah and Haftarah, Priestly and Prophetic voices, is one of Judaism’s great glories. We hear both how to act and why. Without the how, action is lame; without the why, behaviour is blind. Combine Priestly detail and Prophetic vision and you have spiritual greatness.[1] Tanhuma, Shemini, 12. [2] Sefer ha-Chinuch, Bo, Mitzvah 16.

Rabbi Sacks' Shiur [Lesson] for Shabbat Hagadol 5780

<http://rabbisacks.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/A-Dvar-Torah-by-Rabbi-Sacks-for-Shabbat-Hagadol-5780-1.pdf>

I think I've learned more about the strengths, the weaknesses, the complications, and the glitches about the social media in the last few weeks than ever before. But how are you? I hope you are well. I hope you are safe. I hope you are keeping safe, and I hope the people around you, your family and friends are safe as well.

This is a very, very difficult time and it becomes really acute when we see it from the perspective of Pesach. This year we're clearly dealing with an enormous phenomenon. Just today, the General Secretary of the United Nations has called this “the greatest challenge facing humanity since World War II”. So anything that I have to say, I say with absolutely humility and with hesitancy, because none of us know for sure what all of this means. But let me, in any case, share some thoughts with you.

Ma Nishtana hashana hazot mikol hashanim? What makes this year different from all other years? I think the answer is that we have never been more alone and we have never been less alone. What do I mean? We have never been more alone because the social distancing and the isolation that we've been practising mean that we are unable to celebrate Pesach the way it should be celebrated, in the way it has been celebrated ever since Pesach Mitzrayim, ever since the days of Egypt itself. It is usually celebrated around large tables, with extended families. And of course, this year our families are mostly going to be fragmented and so many of us will be alone.

But at the same time, we have never been less alone. The whole world is today eating lachma anya, the bread of affliction. The whole world is tasting maror, the bitterness of suffering. The whole world is in Mitzrayim, in the sense given in Psalm 118, “Min hameitzar karati ka”, meaning “from the confinement, from my isolation, I have called to

God.” And it is as if all humanity is suffering the penultimate plague, the plague of darkness about which the Torah says “lo ra’u ish et achiv, v’lo kamu ish mitachtav”, meaning, no-one was able to see their closest friends and relatives, and no-one was able to get up and leave the house. That's how it feels right now.

Now, the really wonderful Israeli musician Ishay Ribo has just today released a song on YouTube, a beautiful song about the current crisis called Keter Melucha. If you haven't heard it yet, I do urge you to hear it because it's really special and very beautiful and powerful. And in the course of this song, he asks HaKadosh Baruch Hu, “Umah ata rotzeh shenavin mizeh?”, What do you want us to understand from this? “Umah ata rotzeh shenilmad mizeh?” What do you want us to learn from what is happening to humanity? “V’eich neyda lehitachad b’parod hazeh?” And how on Earth will we ever come together, given that we have been forced so far apart?

Well, those are good, good questions. They are the questions that I really want to address in this shiur. Let us look at some passages in the Haggadah specifically for the light they shed on where we are today, because where we are today is a bad place. As I speak, the pandemic has already affected 203 countries around the world. 885,000 people have been infected. 44,000 people have died. 563 in Britain in the last 24 hours. This is huge and it's difficult, but it's worth saying, first and foremost, that on Pesach, unusually, we don't only recall our suffering. We recall the suffering others. There is that famous story in the Gemara (in both Megillah and in Sanhedrin), where the Egyptians were drowning in the Red sea, and the angels began to sing a song and God rebuked them and said, ‘My creatures, the people I made, are drowning in the sea and you're singing a song of victory?!’

We care about the suffering of others, even our enemies. Some people say that's why we spill a drop of wine when we mention each of the Ten Plagues. Some people go further and they say look very carefully at the two passages in the Torah which really examine the festivals in parshat Emor and parshat Re'eh. Look carefully and do the arithmetic and you will see that simcha, rejoicing, is mentioned once in connection with Shavuot, three times in connection with Succot. But while discussing Pesach, simcha is mentioned, not once.

Nowhere does it say that there is simcha on Pesach. Everyone wishes everyone else a chag kasher v’sameach on Pesach , but I've always been deeply uncomfortable about that because Pesach is not, biblically-speaking, a festival of joy. Why? Because Pesach is a festival plucked, rescued even, from the heart of suffering, whether it was the suffering of our ancestors or whether it was that of the Egyptians. And today, when we are seeing the immense suffering of the whole world this festival of Pesach is very apt. We will reflect on the suffering of others as well as on our own, and in this very fact is hope.

There is a strange provision in parshat Masei, that says that anyone who killed another person accidentally, a manslaughterer, should go and take shelter in the city of refuge, and stay there “ad mot haKohen Hagadol”, meaning until the High Priest dies. Now, what

on has the death of the High Priest to do with the cities of refuge?

The Gemara offers various explanations in masechet Makot, but the Rambam in chapter 40 of Book III of The Guide for the Perplexed says something really revolutionary. He says the reason is that a manslayer had to stay in the city of refuge because the family of the victim naturally bore him animosity. They wanted to take revenge. But, says Rambam, when the High Priest dies, a communal mourning is experienced. And when you have aveilut k'lallit, meaning when you have communal mourning, individual people forget their private animosities. And therefore, all the desire for revenge goes away. In other words, shared suffering brings people together, even people who found it very hard to be together before.

I suppose that's what Chazal meant when they said tza'arat rabim chetzi nechamah. When many people suffer, that is half of the consolation because suffering brings us together. That is why the Torah doesn't use the word simcha on Pesach. It is candid in focusing on the suffering because out of that suffering comes togetherness. Out of that suffering, for instance, our people was born.

Now let me take that a little further and ask the following question, which bothered me for many years. We open the Seder each year with Ha lachma anya..., It means, "This is the bread of affliction that our ancestors ate in the land of Egypt. Whoever is hungry, come and eat." I used to wonder, Is this hospitality? Calling out, 'Hey, guys, are you hungry? Come and share my suffering!' It seems like a very strange form of hospitality.

A second question, seemingly unrelated: What is the matzah? At the beginning of the Seder, it's ha lachma anya, The bread of affliction that our ancestors ate in Egypt. But later on, when we come to the section of the Haggadah that begins, Rabban Gamliel, matzah zo... al shum ma? At this point in the Seder we make completely the opposite point. We say that the matzah represents the bread that our ancestors ate as they were leaving Egypt because they were in such a hurry [to depart Egypt for freedom] that they couldn't stop or delay, and let the bread leaven, and that's why it never rose.

So on the one hand at the beginning of the Seder, matzah is the bread of affliction that our ancestors ate in Egypt. But by the middle of the Seder it's the bread of freedom that our ancestors ate as they were leaving Egypt. How do we reconcile that contradiction? And oddly enough, these two questions have the same answer. I discovered this answer by reading that great book by the survivor of Auschwitz, Primo Levi, his great book about Auschwitz, *If This Is a Man*.

In this book, Levi says that the worst time of all in Auschwitz was actually the 10 days after the Germans left. They left fearing the Russian advance. They took with them any prisoner who could still walk on the Death March. And all who were left in Auschwitz were the patients in the Auschwitz hospital and people who couldn't walk. And for 10 days, they had no food, no shelter, no heat, no nothing and it was January in Poland. It was freezing. He said those 10 days were a nightmare. But eventually, he and two friends decided to light a fire and gather together for some warmth.

And then, he says, as the heat began to spread, something seemed to relax in everyone.

These are his words: “And at that moment Towarowski (a Franco-Pole of twenty-three, with typhus), proposed to the others that each of them offer a slice of bread to us three who had been working [making the fire]. And so, it was agreed”.

Levi continues, “Only a day before, a similar event would have been inconceivable. The law of the camp said, “Eat your own bread. And if you can, eat the bread of your neighbour,” and left no room for gratitude. It really meant when he offered me some bread, that the law of the camp was dead. It was the first human gesture that occurred among us. I believe that that moment can be dated as the beginning of the change by which we who had not died slowly changed from prisoners to human beings again.”

Let us really think about this. One person offered Primo Levi a small slice of his bread of affliction during this Death March, and Primo Levi knew that was the moment at which he became a human being again. When we share our affliction with others, and we share what little we have with others, we turn the bread of affliction into the bread of freedom. Affliction shared is the beginning of redemption.

So I do urge you before Yom Tov comes in, to find somebody you can help and give a little, whatever food they need, or whatever else they need. But I also urge you to remember that this year, we are going to be sharing affliction with the whole world. But that is the first step to freedom. When we can share our affliction, we have begun to be free human beings.

And now, let's delve a little deeper. What actually is the lesson of this pandemic? What actually is the lesson of history in general? And let me introduce this by asking you, does anyone know the verse, the biblical verse that is quoted more than any other in the Haggadah? The answer is the verse vehigadeta levincha bayom hahu, laymor, ba'avor zeh asa Hashem li b'tzayti mimitzrayim, meaning, “And you shall tell your child on that day, “Because of this that God did for me when I left Egypt.”

If you look in the Haggadah you will see [in the section about the Four Children], it's first used as the answer to the Rasha, the wicked one's question, "What does all this mean to you?" And you set his teeth on edge and say, “God did this for me when He brought me out of Egypt”, (but he wouldn't have done it for you).

Secondly, it's used as the answer given to the third child, the one who can't ask. You must quote this verse to teach your child how. As it says, “Teach your child that day”. Number three, the passage in the Haggadah which says Yachol merosh chodesh, meaning perhaps we should read the Haggadah on Rosh Chodesh Nissan, or during daylight hours, on the morning of Pesach, but the same verse is quoted again, “because of this that God did for me”, meaning that you're pointing to something, therefore the Haggadah should be read on Seder night and that's the time when the matzah and maror are set out in front of you.

And finally, the ultimate principle of the Haggadah, the section beginning, Bechol dor vador, chayav adam lirot et aztmo ke'ilu hu yatza mimitzrayim, meaning each of us must see ourselves as if we had personally left Egypt. “As it says, you shall teach your child on that day, saying, ba'avor zeh asa hashem li b'tzayti mimitzrayim. Tell your child this is

what God did for me, when He brought me out of Egypt.” You don't say He brought “my ancestors”. You say “brought me”. So, it is said four times on Seder night. It is the most repeated verse. But what on earth does it mean? It seems simple, but actually it isn't. There are two completely opposite readings of what this verse means.

The first reading is the one given by Rashbam, by Ramban and others. They interpret this verse to mean, ‘The answer to question, ‘Why am I eating matzah and maror?’ is, because God took my ancestors out of Egypt. I am doing this because of something that happened in the past.’ That's Rashbam and it makes eminent sense. However, Rashi says completely the opposite. ‘Why did God take me out of Egypt? In order that I should fulfil these mitzvahs of eating matzah and maror.’ In other words, I'm not doing this because of the past. The past happened so that I would do this, all these centuries later. The Ibn Ezra was a great rationalist. Unsurprisingly, he follows Rashi on this and not Rashbam. Now, on the face of it, Rashi is completely incomprehensible. We went through all that suffering in Egypt just so that we would eat matzah and maror? If so, God could have left out the whole episode of Egypt. We needn't have gone there. We needn't have endured slavery. He could just have told us, ‘For seven days, eat matzah and maror.’ What on earth does Rashi mean? But actually, Rashi is being incredibly profound. Why were our ancestors slaves? Why did God allow it to happen? God wanted us at the beginning of history, of our history, to lose our freedom so that we would never let it be lost again. He wanted us to know what it feels like to be a slave, so that we would become the world's most consistent fighters for freedom.

In fact, that is the explanation for all the difficult passages of suffering in the Torah. Abraham and Sarah had to wait all those years for a child, so that we would appreciate a child is a gift, a miracle, precious, and we would become the most child-oriented faith in the world. We walked as a people through the ‘Valley of the Shadow of Death’ so many times. Why? So that we would never forget the sanctity of life. What you once lose, you never take for granted. We went through slavery, so that we would never settle for less than freedom. The freedom that is today embodied in the state of Israel.

Listen to the depth of this truth and relate to it now. There are two possible things that might happen once this pandemic is over. Possibility one is the very real possibility that the world will simply go back to normal, and nothing will change. It will be as if it never happened. Maybe we'll remember it, once a year. That's all. And then, Hegel will be proved right when he said “the one thing we learn from history is that we learn nothing from history”.

We take exactly the opposite view. Ba'avur zeh: History exists so that we may learn from it. History exists so that we can avoid repeating it. That is what we went through all these sorrows for, so that we would be changed thereby, and that is what has to happen after this terrible pandemic.

So let me suggest the way that I think we should be changed, and let me suggest what I think is the answer to Ishay Ribo's question “Umah ata rotzeh shenilmad mizeh?” (What do you want us to learn from what is happening to humanity?) Let me answer this by

asking you another strange question. I ask you to tell me the biblical word for freedom. I guarantee that 99% of you will answer, “cherut”. After all, we talk about, me’avdut le’cherut, from slavery to freedom, we call Pesach “zman cheruteinu”, the season of our freedom. We say right at the beginning of the Haggadah (at the end of the ha lachma anya paragraph), “leshana haba’ah bnei chorin”. So the Hebrew for freedom is cherut. Well, this answer is, in fact, wrong. The Tanach does not contain a single instance of the word cherut meaning freedom. In fact, only once do those same Hebrew letters appear in Tanach at all, and that's in a completely different context. When Moses takes the tablets from God on Mount Sinai and it says they were written on by God and the writing of God was charut, meaning “engraved” on the tablets (Ex. 32:16). So that's the only time the word appears, punctuated with different vowels and with a completely different meaning. The biblical word for freedom is chofesh. See Exodus 21:2, when a slave is set free, because the word used comes from chofesh. “Yeitze la’chafshi chinam”. Whereas cherut is a rabbinic word (not a biblical one). So I want to ask, why did the Rabbis coin this word? What is the difference between chofesh and cherut?

The answer is chofesh is individual freedom. A slave with chofesh is an individual who no longer has a master. A slave who goes to freedom can now do what they like, they have individual freedom. Cherut is different. It means collective freedom. Freedom that we share as a society.

What's the practical difference? Well, imagine a society in which everyone had chofesh, everyone was able to do whatever they liked. Would that be a society? The answer is that it would be anarchy and chaos. That is exactly the situation that Tanach describes in the last verse of the Book of Judges, Bayamim haheim ein melech b'yisrael, ish hayashar b'ainav ya'aseh, meaning “In those days there was no king of Israel. Everyone did whatever they liked” (Judges 21:25). That is anarchy. Real freedom is law-governed liberty. It means caring for others, not just yourself. It means caring not just for self-interest, but for the common good.

Now, the difference between chofesh and cherut could never have been more evident than in the last few weeks, certainly not in my lifetime. We've seen chofesh, individual freedoms being exerted. We've seen people doing what they like. We've seen it in Israel, in the UK, in the USA, elsewhere. People who care only for themselves. They go panic-buying. They hoard food. They fail to follow government guidelines. They don't do social distancing. They don't observe self-imposed isolation. The result is that everyone suffers and people die.

We have also seen the opposite. Cherut. Collective freedom. People caring for the common good. We've seen the heroism of doctors and nurses. We've seen the courage of people who keep our vital services going. We've seen the incredible number of volunteers. We've seen extraordinarily good neighbourliness all over the place, and that is the difference between chofesh and cherut, between caring for “me” and caring for “all of us together”.

Out of all this suffering, we have to become less selfish as individuals, more caring as

societies, more united as humanity, having discovered our collective vulnerability. And if we do that, we will have rescued blessing from this curse. So the Sages said about telling the story on Pesach, “Begin with the shame, end with the praise”. Begin with the story of suffering, and end with the story of redemption.

Well, I think we can fairly say that this year, we have all fulfilled the first part. We have begun with the suffering. May Hashem grant us that we may speedily observe the second likewise, may we witness the chance to end this episode with praise and with redemption. And if you ask me which line of the Seder is going to resonate with me most powerfully this year, more than any other, it will be a line I never even thought about seriously before. It's a line we give to children. It's the very last line of the Haggadah. The last verse of Chad Gadya. When we say the closing words of the evening, “Ve’ata HaKadosh Baruch Hu v’shachat l’malach hamavet”, Let God come and stop the Angel of Death, speedily and soon. Amen. Chag Kasher V’Sameach to all of you, may there be a refua l’chol ha’olam.

[Passover in the Time of Coronavirus by Arnold M. Eisen](http://www.jtsa.edu/passover-in-the-time-of-coronavirus)

<http://www.jtsa.edu/passover-in-the-time-of-coronavirus>

What a difference a year makes—or a week, or a day. Last year at this time, reflecting on a period of rising anti-Semitism in America and Europe, I wrote that “discussion at your seder table will be different from all Passovers past.” This year, many of those discussions will happen virtually, and attendance at physical seder tables will likely be limited to close family or friends. Many people may be sitting at the seder table alone. The plague is upon us, striking every part of the world without regard to national border or religion. The holiday will not be the same, because we are not the same.

It has been my custom for a number of years to speak with students as Passover approaches, in keeping with the message in this week’s haftarah that God will “reconcile parents with children and children with their parents” before the prophet Elijah returns to announce “the coming of the awesome, fearful day of the Lord.” (I encourage you to have similar intergenerational conversations at your seder.) Two List College students shared their thoughts on the meaning of the holiday with me via a Zoom call a couple weeks ago; several others had been scheduled to join us but were busy packing or already on their way home, JTS having announced the closing of its residence hall. My conversation partners expected to get on a plane soon to be with family. That was the aspect of Passover that meant the most to them, and they worried that the risk of infection might prevent grandparents from joining them at the seder table.

The section of the Haggadah dealing with the ten plagues visited upon the Egyptians had always been “a really troubling part of the seder, really powerful,” the students told me. It would be especially so this year. Neither student was comfortable with the notion that God had intervened in nature to bring the ten plagues as punishment for Pharaoh’s refusal to let the Israelites leave Egypt. Their refusal to see the coronavirus pandemic as caused by God in reprisal for human wrongdoing reinforced that view. (Thankfully, I have thus far seen only one rabbinic statement that attributes the plague we are living through

to divine wrath.)

I suspect that other responses to the seder may be influenced by the current pandemic as well. Discussing the so-called “wicked child,” one student said she accepts the idea that some people are wicked but disagrees with the response recommended by the Haggadah: in her words, “isolation, or casting away.” The other student, reflecting on aspects of Judaism or the Jewish community that she dislikes singled out “Jewish insularity” and “disengagement.” Asked whether they believe the Exodus from Egypt was a historical event that actually happened in anything like the manner recalled at the seder, they agreed that it might have occurred—but that’s not what matters. “I don’t really care. What makes our narratives special is the values and lessons they teach us, the laws we gain from them . . . the moral takeaways and shared language.” I wonder if this view too may have been reinforced by the current crisis. Some things matter less than they might have only a few short weeks ago. Other things matter far more.

One of my fondest memories of childhood seders was my mother’s consternation—usually turning to laughter—at the passages in the Haggadah where the Rabbis multiplied the number of plagues. The Torah says that Pharaoh’s magicians called the ten plagues “the finger of God,” and that at the Red Sea the Egyptians saw God’s “strong hand”—meaning that the ten need to be multiplied by at least five. And since each plague revealed multiple divine attributes, that number too should be increased. Rabbi Akiba reaches a total of two hundred fifty plagues on the sea, and his arithmetic leads directly to the singing of Dayenu. Even much less, we affirm, “would have been enough for us.”

Though just as Jews are reminded in a famous midrash that God wept over the suffering of God’s Egyptian children (BT Megillah 10b, BT Sanhedrin 39b), so we too should not celebrate their downfall with a full cup of wine or joy, it seems safe to say that we will consider the terror of the plagues differently this year. Our rivers have not turned red with **blood**), but the death toll in overcrowded hospitals is running high. COVID-19 is not carried by **vermin** or transmitted by **animals** or **flying insects**, but invisibly, silently, person to person. The **darkness** it brings on us is symbolic, and the current plague **slays first-born** only in the sense that the virus strikes the elderly with particular virulence. My mind keeps conjuring up the pictures described in the Torah of Egyptians fearing to venture outside because of the hail and unable to “get up from their place” because of the **darkness**. I keep thinking about the scene from Cecil B. DeMille’s *The Ten Commandments* in which an eerie cloud blows the tenth plague through the streets and into Egyptian homes.

Our plague, unlike the ten, does not distinguish among nations or religions. If on the one hand it has caused gates of entry to be shut down at virtually every national border, on the other hand it has strengthened the sense of global connectedness. We are all literally in this together, as members of the human species; we are battling the disease together, using scientific and medical tools that we possess, according to Judaism and other faiths, as creatures fashioned in God’s image. The common struggle to save human lives, at great personal and collective sacrifice, testifies to worldwide respect for human dignity and worth.

From its very first paragraph the Haggadah seeks to expand our sense of the “we” who

are enslaved this year but who next year, we hope, will be free. It urges us to accept responsibilities incumbent on us as part of that greater "we," both when we are trapped in the state of darkness and when we have gone forth into great light. "Not only our ancestors were redeemed, but we with them . . . let us therefore sing before God a new song." Parents turning to children and children to parents is one note of that song; recognizing our participation in larger wholes and greater causes than ourselves or our group is another; thankfulness for the food on the table and other daily blessings—which no one will take for granted this Passover—seems the very first antidote to isolation, the first step toward redemption.

May all our Passover celebrations be meaningful, and as joyful as conditions allow.

(As for connecting virtually, <https://www.rabbinicalassembly.org/story/streaming-seder> from the Conservative Movement.) (*Arnold Eisen is the Chancellor and President of the Faculties and Professor of Jewish Thought at JTS*)

[What is Shabbat Hagadol? By Dr. Joshua Kulp](#)

<http://campaign.r20.constantcontact.com/render?m=1102506082947&ca=a44f927e-087d-4f57-9f2b-b05b38aa99b0>

Leading up to Pesah there are five special Shabbatot: Shekalim, Zakhor, Parah, Hachodesh, and Shabbat Hagadol. Of all of these special Torah readings/Shabbatot, Shabbat Hagadol is the only one not mentioned in the Talmud.

The origins of the term and concept Shabbat Hagadol seem to be in the Middle Ages, probably in France/Germany. It is first mentioned in a work called Sefer HaOreh which is a collection of halakhic rulings issued by Rashi's students (11th century, Germany). There we find:

People are accustomed to call the Shabbat before Pesah "Shabbat Hagadol (the Great Shabbat)," but they don't know why it is greater than any other Shabbat. The reason seems to be that the Israelites left Egypt on the fifth day of the week, which means that they would have set aside their paschal lamb on the tenth of the month, which was the Shabbat before Pesah. They (the Israelites) said "how can we sacrifice that which is an abomination to the Egyptians before their eyes and not have them stone us?" (Exodus 8:22). God responded to them: Now you will see the miracle that I perform for you. They went and set aside a lamb to keep it until the fourteenth of the month.

In the continuation of the midrash, the Egyptians see the Israelites setting aside lambs in order to slaughter them and the Egyptians want to kill the Israelites as an act of revenge. God afflicts the Egyptians with diseases and protects the Israelites. The midrash concludes, "In remembrance of this miracle performed for Israel on the Shabbat before Pesah, the Shabbat before Pesah is called Shabbat Hagadol." In summary, what makes this Shabbat "gadol" - great - is what God has done for us.

However, in other sources there is a somewhat different explanation for Shabbat Hagadol. In a work called Sefer Abudraham written in 13th century Spain we find, "It is called Shabbat Hagadol for it was on this Shabbat that the Israelites performed their first mitzvah." Using the same chronology as above, the Israelites left Egypt on Thursday, making the tenth of the month, Shabbat, the day they set aside the lamb that they would eventually sacrifice (see Exodus 12:3). We celebrate Shabbat Hagadol not in

remembrance of what God did for us, but what we did for God by performing our first mitzvah.

These two different explanations for Shabbat Hagadol (God's miracle or first mitzvah) foreshadow the process that we begin on Pesah and complete on Shavuot. The first explanation of Shabbat Hagadol focuses on God. On the Shabbat before Pesah, God performed a miracle for the Israelites, one that allowed them to observe a critical commandment. On Shavuot we accept upon ourselves the mitzvot, which through their performance ensure God's continued presence among the people. This is, indeed, the essence of the covenantal relationship: God manifests God's bond to us by protecting us, and by making God's presence known when we are performing the commandments. The two acts are inseparable, both this week in Shabbat Hagadol, and in the inseparability of Pesah from Shavuot.

Haftarah: Hope from an Unlikely Source by Rabbi Mordechai Silverstein

<http://campaign.r20.constantcontact.com/render?m=1102506082947&ca=a44f927e-087d-4f57-9f2b-b05b38aa99b0>

This is going to be a painful Pesah. We are going to have to celebrate Leil Haseder - the night of the Seder - with few of our family and friends around the table. Family visits during the Hag are unlikely. It is as close to an apocalyptic event for those of us who have never experienced war as any of us can remember. We are stuck in the house with nothing to ponder but fear. Fear for ourselves, fear for our loved ones and fear that life may never get back to normal.

And this is especially troublesome since nothing is more central to Pesah, the festival where we celebrate our people's freedom from Egyptian bondage, than the meeting of generations, the passing on of the stories and traditions of our families, of our people: the Four Questions, the Four Children; the songs and tunes and the key obligation of the evening: "You shall tell your child this day, this is done [the Pesah observance] because of what God did for me when I came out of Egypt" (Exodus 13:8)

The haftarah has an answer for this year's pain. Malachi, the last of the prophets, ends his prophecy with a message of what Eliyahu the prophet, will enact in the future: "Behold I will send you Eliyahu the prophet before the coming of the great and terrible day of the Lord. And he shall turn the heart of parents to the children and the heart of the children to the parents." (3:23-24) Rashi explains that this means that Eliyahu will inspire both the children to bring their parents back to God and the parents to do the same for children. This role is ironic since the biblical Eliyahu is anything but a prophet of comfort. He is an angry prophet, one who fearlessly confronts kings, who takes on idolaters and destroys them. He is severe and dour, a man who inspires fear even in kings. And yet, here he is transformed into a harbinger of hope. It will be he who brings families together again, who restores wholeness to life, who helps restore the telling of the story to the way it should be.

Let us hope that Eliyahu's transformation will inform our future, that the "anger" will be attenuated and that the restoration will come quickly so that we can get back to normal, where children and parents and grandparents can once again share the story of the redemption at one table where Eliyahu will be a welcomed guest.

Tzav: Increasing Gratitude by Rabbi Dr. Tzvi Hersh Weinreb

[https://outorah.org/p/3031?](https://outorah.org/p/3031?spMailingID=32101090&spUserID=MTk3MTk2OTk5NjMyS0&spJobID=1683116590&spReportId=MTY4MzExNjU5MAS2)

[spMailingID=32101090&spUserID=MTk3MTk2OTk5NjMyS0&spJobID=1683116590&spReportId=MTY4MzExNjU5MAS2](https://outorah.org/p/3031?spMailingID=32101090&spUserID=MTk3MTk2OTk5NjMyS0&spJobID=1683116590&spReportId=MTY4MzExNjU5MAS2)

There are certain phrases or expressions that many of us find hard to say. "I love you" is one of them. Another such phrase is "thank you".

Although these words are difficult for us to pronounce, they each reflect powerful emotions and, when finally uttered, have an unbelievable impact upon the person to whom they are addressed. It is wonderful to hear that one is loved, and it is also wonderful to learn that another person is grateful and appreciative of what one has done for him or her.

In our tradition, gratitude is a primary value. Bachya ibn Pakuda, in his renowned medieval book Duties of the Heart, stresses the centrality of gratitude in the religious experience. For him, the worship of God begins with a sense of gratitude for being alive, for being healthy, for having one's needs met.

It is no wonder, then, that as the book of Leviticus enumerates the many types of sacrificial offerings which comprise the ancient Temple service, the korban todah, or thanksgiving offering, is prominently included. In this week's Torah portion, Tzav, in Leviticus 7:11-18, the sacrifice known as the korban shelamim, or peace offering, is described in detail. Generally speaking, when a person makes a vow to offer such a sacrifice, whether in a time of distress or when remembering God's tender mercies, he must bring an animal offering. He brings it to the Temple, the kohen (priest) performs various ritual procedures, and then most of the meat can be consumed by the individual who donated the offering, as long as he finishes it all during the day he brings it, and the following night and day, providing the individual with much more than 24 hours within which to consume the meat.

But the passage which deals with this offering begins with a subtype of the shelamim – the todah. In this instance, besides bringing an animal sacrifice, the donor must also bring four types of bread, and ten breads of each type, totaling forty loaves. The meat and the accompanying loaves of bread must be consumed by daybreak after the night following the preparation of the sacrifice.

The late 19th century commentator known as the Netziv suggests that the thanksgiving offering, or todah, must be accompanied by a public celebration with many guests invited. Therefore, unlike the ordinary shelamim, the numerous loaves of bread are prescribed so that all the guests can partake of the meal. The time within which the meat and breads can be consumed is limited to much less than 24 hours, necessitating the invitation of numerous guests to share in the thanksgiving celebration.

The Netziv teaches us here that expressions of gratitude should ideally not be kept private. Thankfulness is an emotion to share with others in a public celebration.

Not long ago, I came across an article in an academic journal of psychology. The article was entitled Can Prayer Increase Gratitude? The authors quote numerous research studies which correlate gratitude with mental health. They therefore seek ways to promote the feeling of gratitude to foster increased mental health. One way they tried to instill gratitude in their subjects was to encourage them to engage in prayer.

How consistent their findings were to the teachings of Judaism! They found that when people engaged in prayer, they became more aware not of what they were lacking, but of

the blessings they had to be thankful for. The very act of prayer inculcated an attitude of gratitude.

The sacrifices offered in our ancient Temple were forcibly discontinued two millennia ago. Our sages teach us that our prayers, although they are mere words, substitute for the sacrifices of old. Whereas once upon a time a Jew would express his gratitude by bringing a thanksgiving offering, today he recites a prayer instead.

The article in the psychology journal teaches us that the relationship between prayer and gratitude is a mutual one. Not only does gratitude lead to thankful prayer, but prayer leads to increased thankfulness. Thus, for those of us who come by our sense of gratitude naturally and with ease, these sacrificial offerings, or these days, the appropriate prayers, can help us express that gratitude.

But for those of us whose sense of gratitude is numbed, prayer is one way to free feelings of thankfulness which are otherwise locked up within us. It allows those feelings to well up and to be effectively expressed.

We often hear the admonition to "count our blessings". Many of us, either because of our inborn pessimism, or because of the difficulties of life which seem to overshadow our blessings, find it difficult to acknowledge the positives of our life. Without such acknowledgment, gratitude is impossible.

In this week's Torah portion, we learn not only that gratitude deserves celebration in the holy Temple, but that temple worship can help us feel grateful for what we do have. And we also learn, following the Netziv, of how worthwhile it is to express gratitude in a circle of family and friends.

That gratitude is the most pleasant of human emotions is so well expressed in these lines from the poet Thomas Gray's Ode for Music:

*Sweet is the breath of vernal shower,
The bees collected treasures sweet,
Sweet music's melting fall, but sweeter yet
The still small voice of gratitude.*

The sage advice we can derive from this week's Torah portion is: Express gratitude, and not in a "still small voice," but in a resounding and booming voice for others to hear so that they can share in the emotions of the grateful person, and so that the grateful person can feel those emotions in every fiber of his being. (*Rabbi Dr. Tzvi Hersh Weinreb is Executive Vice President, Emeritus of the Orthodox Union, following more than seven years as Executive Vice President.*)

Dvar Torah by Rabbi Michael Katz

<https://gem.godaddy.com/p/6514801?pact=588842-157709318-11701354334-e6394ebdc7070dd28f731cadbc64a41b85fd9c8d>

It's been another miserable week. Besides the terrible and frightening news about the toll of the virus, it was cold, and rainy, and gray and nasty outside. But that didn't stop me from taking an early morning walk through the neighborhood. And it was then, as the sun rose, that I saw an amazing thing: The trees were beginning to blossom! Against the dreary sky, I saw vivid colors on some of the trees: white, and pink blossoms, and purple and yellow flowers. And then I remembered: It's Nisan (the Hebrew month when spring begins, and Passover falls). And I remembered that there's a special berakhah- a blessing- that one says each year in Nisan when the trees begin to blossom. The

blessing goes like this:

Barukh atah Adonai, Elohaynu Melekh Ha-Olam

sheh-lo khisar ba-olamo davar

u'vara bo beriyot tovot v'ilanot tovim

l'hanot bahem b'nei adam

_Praised are You, Adonai, our God, Master of the world

Who left nothing lacking in His world

Who created wondrous creatures and wonderful trees

for people to enjoy. _

When I came home, I got my Siddur, found the blessing, and stood outside under a blossoming tree and recited the berakhah.

This year, the blessing took on a particular poignancy. It wasn't simply a ritual way of proclaiming: "Isn't God great!" Nor was it merely a Jewish way to stop and take note of the amazing cycles of Nature. This year, saying that blessing during the month of Nisan is a way of affirming the the harsh winter and everything that came in its wake will some time soon be on its way out, and the hope of a new, bright, warm, colorful, life-affirming spring is upon us. -or just around the corner. Next week, during Passover, we read The Song of Songs. And this is among its most beautiful verses:

Behold, the winter is past,

the rains are over and gone,

The blossoms have appeared in the land

Spring heralds Passover; Passover is about freedom- not only from slavery long ago, but from the plagues that have afflicted us today. Don't let the news and your fears stop you from seeing and appreciating the miracle that is happening right in front of your eyes. The trees are in bloom. Say a blessing; soon, our nightmare will be over.

Shabbat Shalom! A Zissen Peash (A sweet Passover!) *(Rabbi Michael Katz is the Rabbi at*

Temple Beth Torah in Westbury, NY)

[The Ten Plagues - of blood, frogs, hail and more by Rabbi Jill Jacobs](https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/the-ten-plagues/?utm_source=mjl_maropost&utm_campaign=MJL&utm_medium=email&mpweb=1161-18158-45437)

[https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/the-ten-plagues/?](https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/the-ten-plagues/?utm_source=mjl_maropost&utm_campaign=MJL&utm_medium=email&mpweb=1161-18158-45437)

[utm_source=mjl_maropost&utm_campaign=MJL&utm_medium=email&mpweb=1161-18158-45437](https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/the-ten-plagues/?utm_source=mjl_maropost&utm_campaign=MJL&utm_medium=email&mpweb=1161-18158-45437)

One of the most dramatic moments of the Passover seder comes with the recitation of the 10 plagues that, the Bible says, God brought on the Egyptians to persuade Pharaoh to free the Israelites from slavery. As we recite each plague, we spill a drop of wine in recognition, according to many interpretations, that the process of our liberation caused suffering to the Egyptian people.

Though it's one of the best known details of the Exodus story, the plague narrative raises a number of complicated questions. Given the biblical assumption of God's omnipotence, one might expect God to be able to whisk the Israelites out of Egypt without such dramatic measures. The biblical story also does not explain the significance of the specific set of plagues that God imposes on the Egyptians. And many contemporary Jews are bothered by what seems to be excessive and perhaps needless suffering on the part of the Egyptian population for the sins of its leader.

The Plagues

1. Blood
2. Frogs
3. Lice
4. Flies
5. Pestilence
6. Boils
7. Hail
8. Locusts
9. Darkness
10. Killing of the firstborn

Traditional Interpretations

A number of rabbinic sources describe the plagues as retribution for Pharaoh's rejection of God and for the Egyptians' idol worshipping practices. In explaining the first plague, one midrash comments, "Why were the waters first smitten and with blood? Because Pharaoh and the Egyptians worshipped the Nile, and God said, 'I will smite their god first and then his people.'" (Shemot Rabbah 9:9). Likewise, Ramban, a 12th-century Jewish commentator, suggests that God punishes Pharaoh not primarily for enslaving the Israelite people, but rather for dismissing God and ignoring a divine command (see his comment to Exodus 7:16). The final plague, the killing of the firstborn, targets both the people and their most visible god—Pharaoh—who also loses his oldest son and thus the successor to the throne.

The primary goal of the plagues, according to most rabbinic sources, is the demonstration of God's unparalleled power. Pharaoh's magicians succeed in replicating the first two plagues — blood and frogs — but stumble in their attempts to produce lice. Several commentators explain this failure by noting the use of the word "l'hotzi," "to bring out," in the description of the plague of lice. Producing the plagues of blood or frogs requires only the transformation of an existing substance: God, through Moses and Aaron, changes the water to blood and draws (presumably pre-existing) frogs out of the water. In contrast, God creates the lice. Only the creator of the universe, according to the rabbis, can create something new. These unreplicable plagues persuade Pharaoh and his people of God's power and build faith in God among the people of Israel.

As further evidence of the miraculous nature of the plagues, one midrash notes the biblical description of the plague of hail as a mixture of fire and ice, commenting:

Imagine two fierce legions who were always at war with one another, but when the king needed their services for his own battle, he made peace with them, so that both should carry out the orders of the king. In like manner, fire and hail are hostile to each other, but when the time came to make war with Egypt, God made peace between them and both smote the Egyptians. (Shemot Rabbah 12:4)

The midrash further understands the hail to prefigure the punishment that, according to the Book of Ezekiel, God will bring on Gog and Magog in the war that will precede the coming of the messianic age. In linking the redemption of the Israelites from slavery with the ultimate redemption of the world, the midrash implicitly justifies any violence as a

necessary means of reaching an unambiguously-positive end. Beyond being a punishment to the Egyptians, the plagues are a step in the process of redeeming the world.

Contemporary Interpretations

Many contemporary explanations of the ten plagues attempt to reconcile the presumed suffering of the Egyptians with modern-day conceptions of ethics and treatment of the other. Rabbi David Teutsch, a former president of the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College, for example, suggests that God is not, in fact, the author of the harshest plague — that of the murder of the firstborn of Egypt. Rather, he says, it is human beings who interpret this event as divine:

How can we understand God’s role in the death of the firstborn? One explanation suggests that all who did not defend the Israelite slaves in Egypt are responsible for what Pharaoh imposed. Thus, God’s punishment of the Egyptians was justified. Another explanation holds that only in hindsight did the Israelites see the hand of God in the death of the Egyptians. God does not intervene in human history this way... By this reckoning, what is important is not whether the firstborn died, but whether we can see the power of human redemption in our lives as flowing from the divine.” (Rabbi Joy Levitt and Rabbi Michael Strassfeld, ed., *A Night of Questions*, 61).

Rather than justify the plagues, some modern-day commentators instead try to sharpen our awareness of the suffering caused by these plagues in order to help us empathize with others who are oppressed. *The Journey Continues: The Ma’yan Haggadah*, produced by the women’s program of the Jewish Community Center of the Upper West Side of Manhattan, offers the following meditation on the plagues:

As we ate our Pascal lambs that last night in Egypt the darkness was pierced with screams. Our door posts were protected by a sign of blood. But from the windows of the Egyptians rose an anguished cry: the death of the first-born. Yah Sh’chinah [an appeal to God using a term associated with God’s feminine side]soften our hearts and the hearts of our enemies. Help us to dream new paths to freedom.

So that the next sea-opening is not also a drowning; so that our singing is never again their wailing. So that our freedom leaves no one orphaned, childless, gasping for air.” (Tamara Cohen, ed., *The Journey Continues*, 70)

Many Jews update the seder by supplementing the recitation of the biblical plagues with the mention of contemporary “plagues” such as war, hatred, and disease. The Jewish Council on Urban Affairs’ *Immigrant Justice Haggadah* counts as plagues “the detention of immigrants, unwarranted deportations, hate crimes, the denial of drivers’ licenses and other services to undocumented immigrants, hopelessness, apathy, and fear of speaking out.” The *Love and Justice Haggadah* includes in a tongue-in-cheek list of the plagues of contemporary life — “reality TV, muzak, and SUVs.” Feminist Haggadahs add plagues such as sexism and violence against women; environmental Haggadahs mention the destruction of natural resources; and Haggadahs focused on inter-group relations speak of the plagues of prejudice and distrust.

Every modern application of the story of slavery and liberation necessitates the creation

of a new list of “plagues” to be eradicated.

The plague narrative is both an integral part of the Exodus story and one of the most difficult parts of this story to understand. Contemporary readings of the Exodus therefore struggle to reinterpret the plagues to reflect our current consciousness and/or to expand the list of plagues in order to draw attention to all of the parts of the world that remain in need of liberation. (*Rabbi Jill Jacobs is the Executive Director of T'ruah: The Rabbinic Call for Human Rights*)

Counting the Solitude By Rabbi Sharon and Rabbi Hillel Skolnik

<https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/counting-the-solitude/>

Modelled on the Jewish practice of counting the Omer, this prayer is for those counting their days in quarantine or lockdown during the coronavirus pandemic.

During this unprecedented era, many of us find ourselves restricted to our homes, alone or with loved ones, for an indefinite period of time. We might be feeling scared and anxious, stressed, frustrated and even bored. Although these days, weeks and possibly months ahead may seem bleak, the opportunities for gratitude, blessings and joy persist. As two rabbis with three sweet, curious children, we constantly strive to find ways to infuse meaning into both the ordinary and extraordinary, as well as bring comfort and peace to worried young minds and hearts. When the governor of Ohio recently announced a three-week long shut down of all K-12 schools (which we support wholeheartedly), it quickly dawned on us that those three weeks would lead directly into Passover — turning a three-week long hiatus from in-person school, to at least five. Not to mention, having our delightful trio home for Passover preparations (at least we'll have extra hands to carry dishes and pots up from the basement!). Thinking ahead to Passover reminded us of the upcoming counting of the Omer, the day-by-day numbering of the seven-week period leading from the redemption from slavery, commemorated on Passover up to Shavuot's celebration of the receiving of the Torah. Just as we purposely count up those 49 days every year, so too we offer this way of counting up towards the ultimate in-person, regathering of our many communities.

ספירת ההסגר – Counting of the Quarantine

In an effort to focus on the things that make our days meaningful — the moments that make our days count — we choose to end each day by counting the quarantine. We suggest that you gather your loved ones, either in person or virtually. Take a few deep breaths. Have each person share at least one instance of gratitude today. While filled with thoughts of appreciation, recite the following together:

הִנְנִי מוּכָן וּמְזוּמָן לְקַיֵּם מִצְוַת עֲשֵׂה שֶׁל פִּיקוּחַ נֶפֶשׁ כְּמוֹ שֶׁכָּתוּב בְּתוֹרָה “וּבַחֲרַתְּ בְּחַיִּים.”

Hin'ni muchan umzuman l'kayeim mitzvat aseih shel pikuach nefesh, k'mo shekatuv baTorah: “uvacharta bachayim.”

Here I am, actively ready to fulfill the mitzvah of saving lives, as the Torah teaches, “and you shall choose life.”

בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה ה' אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם הַעֹנֶה בְּעֵת צָרָה

Baruch ata Adonai Eloheinu melech ha-olam, ha-oneh b'eit tzarah.

Blessed are You, Adonai our God, Ruler of the Universe, The One who answers us in our times of crisis.

הַיּוֹם יוֹם אֶחָד לַהֲסָגֵר

Hayom yom echad lahesger.

Today is the first day of the quarantine.

After the blessing has been recited and the day counted, choose a physical reminder of the completed day, such as:

- A sticker on a calendar

- Marbles in a jar
- **Coins in a tzedakah box (see-through preferred)**
- Jumping jacks corresponding to the days
- Find something in your house that you have the same number of

Although none of us yet knows when this time of quarantine will end, we hope and pray that it will be soon, that God will hear our prayers for healing, and will bring us and our children back to a time where can all be normally social, instead of socially-distant.

Ensuing Days

The intention is to count in a similar way that we will be counting the Omer. First we count the days, then the weeks, noting that each is important and matters equally. Below are some more examples of how to count the days and weeks — each person should feel free to choose whether to count in Hebrew, English or both.

Day Two

היום שני ימים להסגר

Hayom sh'nei yamim lahesger.

Today is the second day of the quarantine.

Day Seven

היום שבועה ימים, ששה שבוע אחד להסגר

Hayom shiv'ah yamim, sheheim shavu'ah echad lahesger.

Today is the seventh day, which is one week of the quarantine.

Day Seventeen

היום שבועה-עשר יום, ששה שני שבועות ושלושה ימים להסגר

Hayom shiv'ah asar yom, sheheim sh'nei shavu'ot u'shloshah yamim lahesger.

Today is the seventeenth day, which is two weeks and three days of the quarantine.

(Rabbi Sharon Barr Skolnik is the program director of the Wexner Service Corps in Columbus, Ohio. Rabbi Hillel Skolnik is the senior rabbi of Congregation Tifereth Israel in Columbus, Ohio.)

6 Tips for Hosting a Solo Passover Seder (Or with a small group)

<https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/six-tips-for-hosting-a-solo-seder/>

Passover is among the most celebrated of Jewish festivities, a time when families typically gather together from wherever they may be dispersed to engage in the ritual retelling of the exodus from Egypt.

Circumstances don't always allow for large gatherings, yet Jewish tradition tells us that we are still obliged to retell the story of our ancestors' liberation. According to Maimonides, even if one is alone on the Seder night, he must ask himself the question: Why is this night different?

At a time when many people may be celebrating the holiday of freedom alone or in small groups, here are six tips for hosting a solo seder.

Get ready in advance: You might not have family and friends with you in person, but they can join you in spirit. For each of the 15 steps of the Seder, invite your loved ones to contribute something in writing — a thought, a wish, a teaching — and send it to you by mail (or email and then print it out). When you arrive at each step in the Seder, open the corresponding message. This can function as its own family commentary on the Haggadah, a virtual “conversation” you can hold at your table.

Share rituals from afar: Most of us have favored holiday rituals that we cherish. What are the rituals that are most important to you? It might not be a perfect substitute, but consider connecting with friends and family with whom you have shared the holiday in the past and agree to do a few things at the same time. Maybe everybody sings Dayenu in funny voices or makes a matzah sandwich with jam or beats each other with green onions in the Persian Jewish style. Agree that everyone will do these rituals at a particular hour. It may not quite be the togetherness we prefer, but it's togetherness of a sort.

What's for dinner?: Food prep is easily one of the most stressful parts of Passover, but you're dining alone this year, so take it easy. Jewish law permits cooking on Passover, so you can make scrambled eggs for dinner and call it a day if you like. Of course there's nothing wrong with preparing a sumptuous meal for one if you have the energy and the desire. But there are also plenty of pared down dishes you can make that won't stress you out.

Lean into it: One of the central customs of the Passover Seder is to recline in one's chair as a sign of our comfort and freedom. At a crowded table, this often requires an awkward dance and participants contort themselves uncomfortably in their chairs. With a small crowd, you can really (ahem) lean into this tradition. You can even get up from the table and sprawl across the floor or on a pile of pillows stacked by on the floor.

No Haggadah Loyalty: With a seemingly ever expanding crop of Haggadahs on the market choosing one for your holiday table can be overwhelming. This year, you can embrace the chaos and use them all. Just stack them on the table before you begin and go for it. You can even use a different Haggadah for different sections of the Seder.

Hide and seek for one: One of the highlights of the Seder is the afikomen, the piece of matzah that is traditionally hidden by the children, leading to a house-wide search (and sometimes extortionary bargaining). How do you do that solo? Try hiding it before the holiday — you'll probably forget where you put it by the time you need it. Or get some empty boxes, place the afikomen in one, then hide them all. Searching for the afikoman will be a bit more engaging as you won't know when and where you'll find it.

(Adapted from *A Different Pesach: Ideas for Solo and Small Sedarim*, a collaboration between Marc Fein, Temim Fruchter, Jael Goldstein, Adina Gerver, Talya Housman, Rabbi Louis Polisson, Rabbanit Dasi Fruchter, Stephanie Hoffman, Hadassah Wendl, and Rachel Woolf. For the full guide, [click here](#):

<https://docs.google.com/document/d/1jtPnU8a55zz0RRH8EuMOCCyIBtg8IGJApX6F5Di2wGs/edit?ts=5e78bfc1#> .