



The Haggadah of Hope: Bringing Israel and the Hostages into Your Seder this Year

As we sit at our Seder tables this year, we hope our joy will be heightened by news of the return of every hostage and soldier into the loving embrace of family. If not, we will begin this year's Seders differently. We will include a new question.

Why is *this* Passover different than every other Passover?

On every Passover, we enter the season with joy. On this Passover, our happiness is tempered by sadness, pain, loss, and frustration, and we are anxious about an escalation of war. On this Passover, we recall the set tables around the world surrounded by empty chairs to mark each hostage held in Gaza as our own Passover tables fill with family and friends.

We will leave a seat empty at every Seder and place on it the photo of a hostage. We will tell that hostage's story so that our children ask. And when they ask, we will tell them we are adding a new chapter to Jewish history, our collective chronicle of pain and redemption.

We will tell them, when they are old enough to know, that just as Pharaoh oppressed us, terrorists continue to oppress us. They came for our family in Israel on October 7th. They murdered and maimed over 1200 people that day. Over 240 people were abducted. Babies. Grandfathers. Peace-loving kibbutzniks and young men and women with their whole lives ahead of them. They beat the elderly in tunnels. They defiled women and caged children. Like the Amalekites of old, they attacked the most vulnerable. They destroyed houses, kibbutzim, greenhouses, and fields.

To date, over 600 soldiers have been killed in combat, and more than 3,000 soldiers have been wounded. Mothers and fathers, sisters and brothers, grandmothers and grandfathers wept over the devastation as they dug graves for our soldiers and buried our heroes.

Across the world, antisemitism has swept through our cities, confirming that our once ancient story of suffering in Egypt has ongoing tragic resonances throughout our history, every single day.

We will tell our children to pray that God, with a strong hand and an outstretched arm, will bring every hostage and soldier home to fill a seat at next year's Passover Seder and put an end to the hatred of Jews around the world and in institutions of higher learning.

We experience anguish; we cry out, and God liberates us so that we, in turn, can liberate others and bestow kindness upon strangers. We tell the story to the next generation so that this master narrative inspires us yet again to fight against injustice, hatred, and persecution everywhere and anywhere that it exists. Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks reminds us that, "Judaism is a religion of memory. We remember the exodus annually, even daily. But we do so for the sake of the future, not the past." We tell the story so that we remember God's love and are cradled by God's salvific powers and motivated to work for the world's redemption.

We in the diaspora have not been silent. We will not be silent. We have prayed, and we have protested. We have called members of Congress and written letters to local representatives. We have cried, and we are still crying. And we will not stop. No matter how long it takes, we will continue and stay in this fight. Even though this war is the longest in Israel's 75-year history, we will not tire because hostages' families are still fighting for the return of their mothers and daughters, fathers and sons. Our IDF soldiers remain vigilant in their fight to protect Israel. They are not giving up so we cannot give up. We, too, must remain steadfast in our hope and in our efforts. The world does not change because of our will; it changes because of our work.

Rabbi Sacks often made an important distinction between optimism and hope in his writings and teachings. "Optimism," he wrote, "is the belief that the world is changing for the better; hope is the belief that, together, we can make the world better." On Passover we celebrate that hope by partnering with God to be agents of justice.

"It takes a great deal of courage to hope," Rabbi Sacks tells us. He called the Hebrew Bible a testament to hope and the State of Israel a place of our ultimate hope. In *To Heal a Fractured World*, Rabbi Sacks urges us never to lose hope and notes that the State of Israel is a continual reminder of the miraculous nature of the Jewish people, "Israel has taken a tattered, shattered nation and made it live again. Israel is the country whose national anthem, Hatikvah, means hope. Israel is the home of hope."

To make this night different and infuse it with thoughts about our family in Israel, we hope you will include some of these quotes, additions, and questions in your Seder, as we strive to experience freedom this Nissan.

"Nations need identity. Identity needs memory. And memory depends on the story we tell ourselves and our children as to who we are. If you preserve that memory forever, you will preserve that people forever."

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, *The Story We Tell* (Passover video)

Blessing on Fruit Trees in Nissan

This Passover, we weep in the Re'im Forest, in the midst of the trees where young people sang and danced. Next spring, may every tree planted in that forest in memory of each person murdered that day grow stronger and, like saplings, move closer to the light.

Every Nissan, we make a blessing we only make once a year on a flowering

fruit tree. This year, this blessing takes on a particular urgency. One of the great costs of war is the damage waging battle has on homes, cityscapes, and nature. In the Torah, we are warned that when destroying a tree, we destroy its life-giving benefits in the present and future: "When in your war against a city you have to besiege it a long time in order to capture it, you must not destroy its trees..." (Deut. 20:19)

In the book of Job, we are reminded of the tree's incredible property of regeneration that we pray for *this* spring because the tree is a symbol of



optimism for tomorrow: "There is hope for a tree; if it is cut down it will renew itself; its new growth will not cease" (Job 14:7).

"Blessed are You, Lord our God, King of the universe, Who has withheld nothing from this world and has formed in it beautiful creations and trees for humans to enjoy."

Passover welcomes the spring, a time of the world's renewal, when we are cognizant of the possibility of renewal in the aftermath of war, as Rabbi Shimshon Raphael Hirsch observed, "When spring comes and nature bestirs itself outside our doors, there is a stirring in us too, a stirring among us, a stirring around us. Then the springtime comes to us, then our homes and dwellings come to life."

This spring there is a stirring for peace and consolation. We will plant trees in Israel or outside our own homes to honor the memory of those who stood under the trees in the Re'im Forest.



YU student Joshua Miller on the Sacks-Herenstein Center Solidarity Mission to Israel standing in the Re'im Forest where family members planted trees to honor the memory of the victims.

Karpas

As we dip the karpas in salt water, we think of all the tears we've shed this year.

"I have cried a million tears...We all have...All those tears, our sea of tears. They all taste the same. Can we take them, gather them up, remove the salt and pour them over our desert of despair and plant one tiny seed? A seed wrapped in fear, trauma, pain, war, and hope and see what grows?...One tiny seed."

Rachel Goldberg-Polin at the United Nations (Dec.14, 2023).



Hersh Goldberg-Polin has been held hostage since October 7, 2023.

To be read after *Ha Lahma Anya*

This year we are at war in Israel; our hostages taste the bitterness of captivity and eat only the bread of affliction. Tonight, as we gather in our homes, our soldiers are protecting Israel's borders. Let this, too, be a night of God's

protection: "It was for God a night of vigil to bring them out of the land of Egypt; that same night is God's night, *one of vigil for all Israel throughout the ages*" (Ex.12:42).

On this night, our hostages and our soldiers sit in darkness, and our extended Israeli family sit in uncertainty and anxiety. Next year, may all of our hostages, soldiers, and citizens enjoy the freedom to sit at the Passover table under God's sheltering peace.

If you could hope for one change in your life from this Passover to the next, what would it be?



Jon Polin lead Tehillim with his wife Rachel Goldberg-Polin by his side at YU's Evening of Solidarity, Unity and Song on April 7, 2024

The Fifth Question

Why is this year different than all other years?

On all other years, we celebrate our redemption from Egypt. This year we also pray for Israel's redemption from the hands of terrorists and the forces of hate. May each hostage be freed from bondage, and may the plague of Jew-hatred be eliminated once and for all on this very night.

What question is most on your mind on this Seder night?

The Fifth Child

What does the captive child ask?

When will I be back in the loving hold and shield of my family? "With a mighty hand did God bring us out of Egypt, and an outstretched arm, and awesome power, and with signs and wonders," (Deut. 26:8).

With a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, with awesome power, and with signs and wonders, may God bring every hostage home.

If God were to provide a mighty hand and an outstretched arm to you, what one miracle would you hope for?



Former hostage Louis Har and family celebrating his rescue at the YU Evening of Solidarity, Unity and Song on April 7, 2024.

"To be a Jew is to be an agent of hope. Every ritual, every command, every syllable of the Jewish story is a protest against escapism, resignation and the blind acceptance of fate...The name of the Jewish future is hope."

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, *Future Tense*



Ve'hi She'amda

“That which stood for our ancestors applies to us as well. For it was not only one person who rose up against us to destroy us, but rather in every generation there are those who rise up against us to destroy us, but the blessed Holy One redeems us from their hands.”



YU student Gila Linzer walking at the Nova Music Festival memorial honoring the victims.

They rose up on October 7th to destroy us, as they tried to destroy us before. They planned. They plotted. They schemed. They kidnapped. They murdered. But we have risen up against them in this generation with a State of our own, an army of our own, and a voice of our own in the halls of power. We will not be defeated.

Name an evil or injustice you stood up against this past year.

B'matei Me'at

“...The Lord has made us numerous as the stars.” They try to decimate us, but we continue to grow as numerous and mighty as the stars. We fight this war on the battlefield and in the maternity ward, where tens of thousands of new lives have been born since October 7th, many of them named after hostages and heroes.

What good news this year made you feel Israel's 'star' power?

To be read after “And the Egyptians mistreated us and tormented us” (Deut. 26:6)

“And they afflicted us” (Ex. 1:11)

They afflicted us by crossing borders, sending rockets to destroy our playgrounds, snatching our young and old, giving us hope for family reunions then rescinding it. They afflicted us by reducing homes to rubble and unsettling tens of thousands who waited months and are still waiting to rebuild their lives. We met their affliction with the communal bonds of loving kindness and charity. Across the world, we offered compassion and unprecedented tenderness.

“And we cried out to the Eternal, the God of our ancestors,” (Deut. 2:23), and we are still waiting for the Eternal to hear our voices, our protests, our cries, our late-night prayers, and early morning petitions, our sorrow and our oppression. “And the Lord heard our voice, and saw our affliction, and our toil and our duress” (Deut. 26:7).

What way have you grown as a result of suffering this past year?

Blood, Fire, and Pillars of Smoke

At the Seder, we remember the scars of war: the blood, the fire, and the smoke. We also tend the fire that burns inside for the end of war, and we will not let those fires go out, as we read in the Torah: “A perpetual fire shall be kept burning on the altar; it will not be extinguished” (Lev. 6:3)

Our extended family in Israel are on the altar right now. They have been

making immense sacrifices. And we, we must be the perpetual fire. And the fire will not go out. We will not stop protesting. We will not stop marching. We will not tire of singing. We will not stop reciting *Tehillim*, our psalms of hope.

Every evening on that ancient altar, the ashes of the sacrifices were cleared. Rabbi Shimshon Raphael Hirsch explains that this symbolizes the daily renewal of our hope and our energy. “Fresh,” he writes, “as if nothing had yet been accomplished, does the beginning of every new day call us to go out to our mission with full new devotion and sacrifice, and nothing that has already been done may lessen the energy with which we go to our duty.”

It matters what we did yesterday. It matters what we do today. It matters what we will do tomorrow. We will keep the fires lit each and every day until every one of those precious souls is home for good.

Describe a fire that burns within you that will not be extinguished.

The Plague of Darkness

This year, as we spill a drop of wine for the plague of darkness, we will think of the darkness of the tunnels where our hostages are kept, and hope that it is the darkness that appears just before the light of redemption breaks forth.

What dark part of this war has affected you the most?

Dayenu

Every soul is an entire universe. Until every hostage is out of the bondage of Gaza, it will *not* be enough. It cannot be enough. Bring them all home now.

Maror

These are the bitter herbs that signal the bitterness of our torment and our anger at the world's complacency and indifference. We tire of being alone, with few allies and fewer friends. The after-taste of terror lingers within us and matches the burning salt of our tears.

As you reflect on the events of October 7th and their “after-taste,” what softens the bitterness?

B'kohl Dor Va'dor

In every generation, we relive our past, and we find today's heroes. These are the men and women who have dedicated themselves in these long hours to name evil, to stand up to it, and who gave their very lives to its eradication. Let us pause for a moment of silence to honor these heroes of Jewish continuity and bravery who appear in every generation.

Name a hero of this war and why this person is a hero to you.



A home destroyed by fire in Kibbutz Kfar Aza.



Korekh

With this ritual food, we blend the bitterness with the sweet - the anguish of parents and children who are waiting for the return of hostages and soldiers with the miraculous return of hostages and soldiers who have already come home. On February 12, 2024, Louis Har, at the age of 70, was rescued with Fernando Marmon (60) from the clutches of Hamas in Rafah. His experience was bitter, but he left a message of sweetness to the IDF soldiers who rescued him. “There are no words to describe the feelings of joy that you have brought us home to our grandchildren and great-grandchildren. We felt our nation in your hands,” Har said and offered, “a thousand thank yous.” We, too, offer a thousand thanks for this miracle moment of sweetness.

Share a memory of sweetness that has emerged during, and even because of, this current war.

Open the Door for Elijah

As we open this door for Elijah, we think of all the soldiers who opened the doors to their homes after months of fighting and returned to hug children and parents, husbands and wives. We also think of all those who waited and are still waiting for that door of reunification to open.

We open the door for Elijah, and let out the ghosts of antisemitism everywhere, and we let in the prophetic voice of morality in our broken world. We stand with Elijah on an ancient mountain, and we remember that there was a great and mighty wind capable of splitting mountains and shattering rocks. “But God was not in the wind. After the wind—an earthquake; but God was not in the earthquake. After the earthquake—fire; but God was not in the fire. And after the fire, there was a still small voice” (I Kings 19:11-12). We will be that still, small voice of a courageous people committed to lives of purpose, goodness, and meaning.

We will follow the words of Isaiah and stare hard at the darkness so that we can bring the change we want to see in the world. “I God, in My grace, have summoned you, and I have grasped you by the hand. I created you, and appointed you a covenant people, a light of nations — opening eyes deprived of light, rescuing prisoners from confinement, from the dungeon those who sit in darkness” (Is. 42:6-7). May Elijah bring those who sit in tunnels of darkness through the doors of liberation on this night of our freedom.

What specific door would you like to open this year that has remained closed?



Door to home in the Gaza Envelope with IDF markings on walls to indicate death and damage.

Shfokh Hamatekha

With these three Biblical verses, we remember the hatred of the past that has been rekindled in the present. We remind ourselves that antisemitism is, in the words of Rabbi Sacks, a mutating virus that takes on new forms and tropes with every generation. “What is antisemitism? It is less a doctrine or set of beliefs than a series of contradictions. In the past Jews were hated because they were rich and because they were poor, because they were capitalists and because they were communists, because they kept to themselves and because they infiltrated everywhere, because they held tenaciously to a superstitious faith and because they were rootless cosmopolitans who believed nothing” (*Future Tense: Jews, Judaism and Israel in the 21st Century*). They will always find a reason to hate us. And we will find a reason to keep hoping and to keep believing.

We make a small space at every Seder, after the praises of Hallel, to express our anger at the forces of injustice. We allow ourselves these few verses that capture our rage and our fury so that we continue the fight against evil before returning to the Seder's hope in our redemption. To those who hate, we say that love will get the last word.

Name an injustice that you struggle with and how you will fight it.

Next Year in Jerusalem

Rabbi Sacks wrote, “Hope rebuilds the ruins of Jerusalem.” As we sing “Next Year in Jerusalem,” we create an aspiration tied to our sacred city. We nurtured and grew that sacred dream at the end of every Seder in our history, as did our ancestors. As a result, we can now sing and dance in our own Jewish State and in Jerusalem's streets. May we soon gather in Jerusalem with every brave hostage and every valiant soldier to dance in the streets of Jerusalem together as a nation.

We close the Seder by standing for the Hatikva with gratitude that we have our own national anthem that sings of an enduring hope that we will always live freely in our own land. “It is not too much to say,” writes Rabbi Sacks, “that Jews kept hope alive, and hope kept the Jewish people alive.”

Hatikva
Kol od ba'le'vav p'nima, Nefesh yehudi ho'miyah.
U'lefa-atei mizrach kadimah,
Ayin le'Tziyyon tzofiyah.
Od lo avda tikva-teinu,
Ha'tikvah bat sh'not al-payim
Lih-yot am chofshi b'ar-tzeinu
Eretz Tziyyon v'Yerushalayim.

Translation
As long as within our hearts
The Jewish soul sings,
As long as forward to the East
To Zion, looks the eye –
Our hope is not yet lost,
It is two thousand years old,
To be a free people in our land
The land of Zion and Jerusalem.



In Judaism, faith is not acceptance but protest, against the world that is, in the name of the world that is not yet but ought to be.”

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, *To Heal a Fractured World*