

## Confronting Slavery on the Festival of Freedom: Discussion Starters, Activities & Readings to Enhance Your Seders

*These pages are for reading aloud in whole or part to spark conversation at your seder. Next year, may we all be free!*

### As You Read and Chant the Haggadah

The following suggestions are listed in the order of the Passover Haggadah text:

- **Urchatz**– washing hands without a blessing before eating vegetables was a custom among some sages in Talmudic times, to ensure the highest level of ritual purity. We practice that custom at the seder both in order to provoke curiosity and in order to raise our level of holiness and awareness. We want to come to the seder with “clean hands and a pure heart.”
  - Reflecting on the year gone by (or the year ahead), how have you (or could you) come to the seder with “cleaner hands” in relation to the scourge of contemporary slavery. What steps have you (or might you) take(n) to avoid being complicit or actively intervene? For example, do you or might you buy free trade products? Follow the news about contemporary slavery? Donate to organizations that help rescue slaves?
  - To begin the conversation, print out and distribute the “Modern Slavery Fact Sheet” found on the “About Slavery” page at [FreeTheSlaves.net](http://FreeTheSlaves.net). The numbers and graphs are large and simple enough for even young children to understand.
  
- **Karpas** – when you dip the parsley in salt water, dwell on the bitter tears shed over slavery. Read memoirs or testimonials from slaves and abolitionists. Here is one sample from an op-ed by E. Benjamin Skinner, author of *A Crime So Monstrous*:

“Rambho Kumar was born into wilting poverty in Bihar, the poorest state in India, the country with more slaves than any other, according to U.N. estimates. In 2001, desperate to keep him and his five brothers from starving, his mother accepted 700 rupees (\$15) as an advance from a local trafficker, who promised more money once 9-year-old Rambho started working many miles away in India's carpet belt.

“After he received Rambho from the trafficker, the loom owner treated his new acquisition like any other low-value industrial tool. He never allowed Rambho and the other slaves to leave the loom, forcing them to work for 19 hours a day, starting at 4 in the morning. The work itself tore into Rambho's small hands, and when he whimpered in pain, the owner's brother stuck his finger in boiling oil to cauterize the wound -- and then told him to get back to work. When other boys attempted escape or made a mistake in the intricate designs of the rugs, which were destined for Western markets, the owner beat them savagely.

“On July 12, 2005, local police, in coordination with activists supported by Free the Slaves, an organization based in Washington, liberated Rambho and nine other emaciated boys.”

The salt water are the tears of Rambho and all who cry for him. The parsley represents the hope inspired by his release and the renewing of life that is made possible through just law officers, righteous advocates, and conscious consumers.

- **Yachatz.** When we break the matzah, we traditionally save the bigger piece for the Afikomen. This year, would you be willing to save only the smaller piece? Rabbi Zalman Schachter-Shalomi (rzlp.org) teaches that the “big matzah” represents the “big lessons,” which we can only take in and digest through the experience of the seder. Mere head knowledge is the smallest part of understanding liberation. Going through slavery and coming out the other side is the “bigger piece.” This is a gorgeous teaching. However, we haven’t earned it. We obviously didn’t get the larger lesson, or we would not allow slavery in the world today. So, this year, we take the small piece. May we merit the larger piece as our afikomen next year!
- **Ha Lachma Anya.** When you lift up the matzah and recite “This is the Bread of Affliction” lift up a symbol of modern-day slavery at the same time. You might choose Indian-made fabrics (since thousands of child slaves in India work at looms) or you might select a coffee brand that is not fair trade. Raise awareness about buying habits, as you raise those objects.
  - Kevin Bale, author of *Ending Slavery* and the activist behind FreetheSlaves.net wrote: “Stop eating and wearing and driving slavery.”
  - Buy fair-trade goods whenever possible.
  - Inquire into the supply chain of whatever you buy.
  - Support good governance in the countries where you do business.
  - Encourage investment funds to screen out companies that profit from slavery/
  - When agri-businesses, chocolatiers, grocery chains, or mutual funds are persuaded that their consumers want slave-free products, they change the way they operate.
- **Ma Nishtana - The Four Questions.** Add a fifth question: Why is this night exactly the same as every other night?
  - Invite folks around the table to answer that question in their own ways. You will be surprised and delighted by the variety and creativity of the answers.
  - Then share this tragic answer: Because there are slaves in the world – still.
- **Avadim Hayinu.** Follow the example of Rabbi Joshua Levine Grater and sing “Avadim Hayinu” slowly. Observe the example at your seder, and then, if you wish, discuss the following memory:

I recall a Los Angeles Board of Rabbis meeting of about 15 years ago. (There aren’t too many meetings that are that memorable!) Rabbi Joshua Levine Grater discussed modern-day slavery. His words were important; the stories and statistics he cited were moving. But I don’t think I would remember any of it today, had it not been for a simple exercise. Joshua invited everyone present to contemplate slavery – ancient and contemporary, Israelite and gentile – and then to sing these words as a dirge: “*Avadim hayinu lepharoah bemitzrayim. Ata b’nai chorin.*” The translation is: “We were slaves to Pharoah in Egypt. Now we are free.”

It's a song we usually sing in up-tempo. We treat it as a children's ditty. The text is a pastiche of two readings from the Hagaddah. La, la, we used to be slaves. Yai, deedle, dai, now we're free.

By slowing it down and singing it mournfully, the meaning hit me differently. We were *slaves*. *We*, our entire people, were slaves. I looked around at my fellow escapees, and I observed a few hard-boiled rabbis crying around the table. Everyone felt the weight of the words. Everyone mourned that human beings could do this to one another.

- **Keneged Arba'ah Banim - The Four Sons/Children.** Imagine the four sons/children as four responses to human trafficking today:
  - The wise one is up-to-date on the news and knows all the policy wonk information about slavery. Teach him to apply the information and to act.
  - The wicked one could better be named cynical. "What is all this to you?" He is overloaded and overwhelmed with the suffering of others, and so he distances himself by saying, "why are you so exercised about slavery? It's been with us forever and it's everywhere." Assure him that there is a way to end slavery. 197 countries have agreed that it can be done by 2030! Read from *Ending Slavery* by Kevin Bales at your Seder. After the holiday, log on with him to [generation-freedom.org](http://generation-freedom.org) and sign a petition to fund governmental anti-slavery initiatives.
  - The simple one says, "What's this?" He is just beginning to become aware that there are slaves in the world. He may think that slavery is limited to human trafficking and forced prostitution. Be gentle with him. Guide and educate him to see the full extent of this ongoing (11<sup>th</sup>?) plague.
  - The one who doesn't know how to ask requires that *you* open the conversation. In the grocery aisle, near the free-trade chocolate; at a social event; wherever you encounter someone whom you suspect may be a victim of trafficking<sup>\*</sup>; even at a family Passover seder where everyone is eager to get to the meal – *you* raise the issue, because others may not know how to ask.
- **Tzeh U'Imad Ma Bikesh Lavan/Go Forth And See What Laban** the Aramean tried to do to our forefather, Jacob. In Genesis, Laban tried to steal Jacob's labor. He engaged in bait-and-switch trickery, offering specific compensation for a certain term of service, and then going back on his word. Even after 14 years of labor, Laban tried to cheat Jacob out of fair wages, and only divine intervention prevented Jacob from emerging from servitude with few or no resources. Even after Jacob left, Laban wanted to bring him back and claimed a "debt" was still owed.

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\* To learn about the signs of human trafficking, visit [polarisproject.org](http://polarisproject.org) and click on "human trafficking" and then "recognizing the signs."

- Still today, traffickers use all the tactics Laban employed. We can't count on divine intervention to help every "Jacob" under a "Laban's" thumb. Discuss: What human interventions are possible? Which are you prepared to act upon this year?
  
- **The Ten Plagues.** The American Jewish World Service (ajws.org) shares the following modern-day plagues to consider, in relation to gender-based violence. Gender-based violence is a common and hateful weapon among traffickers, though, of course, it is inflicted on free women, too:
  - As we recite the plague of blood, let us comfort and mourn those women whose blood has been spilled.
  - As we recite the plagues of frogs, lice and locusts, let us quell the swarm of assaults.
  - As we recite the plague of wild animals, let us appeal to all people to act with humanity.
  - As we recite the plague of pestilence, let us pledge to keep women safe from harm.
  - As we recite the plague of boils, let us heal wounds and hearts.
  - As we recite the plague of hail, let us decry the beating of fists against mothers, daughters and sisters.
  - As we recite the plague of darkness, let us vow to bring light to those who bear shame and pain.
  - As we recite the plague of the first born, let us empower the next generation to live free from violence and fear.
  
- **Dayyenu.** "Dayyenu" literally means "it would be enough for us." But what do we mean when we chant: "if God had parted the waters and not brought us across, it would have been enough for us." Are we being giddy? Absurd? Surely, it would not have been sufficient for our liberation if we had been killed in the Sea of Reeds. The Haggadah is suggesting that every step of progress is a miracle unto itself, and you don't have to wait for completion or wholeness to give thanks. When God moves on your behalf, the celebration should begin, even if fruition is not (yet) at hand.

In light of this, talk about the steps and stages of liberation. We obviously will not be satisfied until every slave is free. Discuss: What would be enough of an achievement toward freeing slaves to cause you to pause, notice, and say "thank you"? What is your goal for this year?