

# PASSOVER



## Out of the Narrow Straits



Rita J. Kaplan Jewish Connections Programs  
Jewish Board of Family and Children's Services

### *Out of the Narrow Straits*

Passover is a time of discussion and discovery. As we sit around the table with friends and family, we recount the story of the miraculous redemption from slavery to freedom. We remember G-d's miracles, using the symbols of the Seder plate to tell our story and to use all of our senses in the retelling.

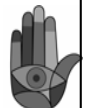
Each year, many also think about the modern implications. In our own lives, how do we move from slavery to freedom? To what are we slaves? What responsibility do we have to help others make the same journey?

Just as we seek to intertwine the Seder with our modern sensibilities and bring the meaning of this ceremony into our contemporary lives, we bring you this resource. Using the themes of Passover, we share with you reflections of individuals who found healing through the holiday as they struggled with life's challenges.

As we sit down for the Seder, we invite you to think of the freedoms that people are still searching for, both individual and communal. We offer you reflections of those dealing with illness, divorce, loss and bereavement, addiction, mental illness, caregiving, leadership in difficult times, and the economic crisis. While each challenge is unique, each story demonstrates the possibility of Passover to help the individual work out of his/her narrow place.

We offer you these words as a way to help yourself or your loved ones to find a way from slavery to freedom – from the narrow place to one of healing.

Warmest wishes,  
*Rita J. Kaplan Jewish Connections Programs*  
*Jewish Board of Family and Children's Services*



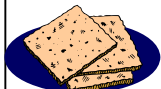
## ***Jellness***

It has been two months since I was first diagnosed. I feel as stripped down and bare as this bone I am roasting. In a few short hours my children will be expecting, hoping and needing me to take my place at the table. How will I find the strength to do it?

As I grate the horseradish my tears are heartfelt. While chopping the sticky sweet mixture of apples and honey for the *charoset*, I realize my family is the sweet cement of my life. They are my foundation and help me to push past my salty tears. I wash the greens for the *karpas*, the sign of renewal and rebirth. I place the cup of Elijah on the table.

Suddenly it strikes me how so many generations have started their Seders/stories with a mixture of tears blended with hope that spring will come again. The bitter and the sweet coexist on the same plate. Currently I may be a weaker link in this chain of strong Jews but the links on either side of me, hope and redemption, keep me attached.

***He brought us out from slavery to freedom, from anguish to joy, from sorrow to festivity, from darkness to light.***



## ***Divorce***

The themes of Passover seemed to echo in my personal story. I had felt burdened and oppressed as I moved from a failed marriage to the trauma of separating. Now, I would be leading my children to an unknown world. I didn't know who would help us or how I would survive emotionally. You might say that I felt myself to be a slave to my emotions and fears. As Spring began to break through the cold, we prepared for the holiday. I became wrapped up in the symbols and rituals. I cried as I swept and cleaned the house, but felt I was cleansing my soul, too.

I set a small Seder table for my two children, my mom and two special friends and we all felt my ex husband's absence. But still, the children and I were surrounded by people we loved and who loved us, too. The Hagaddah guided us to the ancient themes of slavery, endurance, freedom, hope, and renewal. As we prayed for freedom for all those around the world, I felt less lonely. I felt a part of history and of our people. The command to empathize with the suffering of others gave me comfort, too. The children got involved in the four questions, looking for the afikomen and singing all of the songs. We had a shaky start, but at the evening's end, I think we all understood why this beautiful tradition is so enduring. It is festive and triumphant, but sends a message that is deep, enduring and true. It spoke to all of us.

***Let all who are hungry come and eat, all who are in need come and celebrate.***

***This year we are slaves, next year may we be free.***



## ***Of Loss and Liberty***

Loss takes many forms. Loss of job, home, role or independence all significantly impact one's sense of safety and identity. My loss is related to grief. For me, the experience was almost of living outside the bounds of time. Time seemed to stop. It was as if I entered a different dimension. Fortunately, Jewish tradition provides many anchors in time and space that helped me navigate the terrain.

Passover is one such anchor to G-d, Community, and Self. Seder means "order"; as there are stages in mourning so too are there steps in the Passover Seder. Often it is order that helps us stabilize and "re-group." The Seder connects us to a journey that is re-experienced collectively and personally. Following the steps of the Seder move us from a point of transfixion. We re-engage with what's difficult, shake through the shock or inertia. Purposely, the meal of the paschal lamb, part of the original Seder experience in Egypt, was meant to be shared. Alone time can be necessary and healing; re-integrating into community is essential.

While I mourn a little bit each year for the person not at the table, I am buffered in other ways. The Seder places me in a space and time, both past and present, both of which anchor me. In the past, it as if I experienced the exodus. As if I was there, and I left Egypt. But I left Egypt in the company of my community.

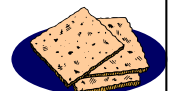
I had to suffer my loss alone. My community though helped me heal. Passover provides that opportunity to acknowledge the presence missing, but also surrounds me with family and friends. It connects me in the present with G-d, community and self.

After my loss, I felt like a part of me had died. Passover teaches that at our lowest point, we were then in a place of redemption. *"The Israelites said to the Holy One, Blessed Be He, "O Lord of the Universe when will you deliver us?" The Holy One Blessed Be He answered, then you will have reached the lowest depths at that moment I will redeem you."* (Yalkut Hoshea 533)

## ***Addiction***

Sitting at the Seder table, I take a breath and think about what this holiday means. Freedom. Freedom from tyranny, freedom from slavery. I can't help but think back to my own active addiction. There wasn't a minute, no, make that a second of every day when I wasn't ruled by the compulsion to drink or take a pill. I was a slave to my addiction. I never felt free. I never knew what it was to take a deep breath without the weight of my obsession somewhere in my head. I didn't care about who I used or hurt to get what I needed to make it through the day. Yet each day was a struggle. Would I get what I needed to quench the desire inside of myself. From the minute I woke up until the moment I passed out at night all my thoughts were on how to get high. What did I need to do to stop the feelings inside of me? This was my bondage.

Through the grace of my Higher Power I was able to put down alcohol and drugs. It wasn't easy but with each passing day I felt stronger and stronger. I came to rely on my sober community who themselves were learning to live alcohol and drug free, one day at a time. Together we were there for each other during the good and bad times. How many phone calls I made out of desperation I do not know. The only thing I can say is that now, this day, the yoke is no longer around my neck. I can take that deep breath and like the Israelites we read about during the Seder, I have crossed over into a new land. A land where I can be free, but one where I must always remember where I came from and what it was like to be a slave.



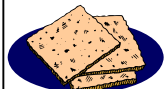
### ***Hesed: Stepping into Freedom through Friendship***

We all have emotional abilities and vulnerabilities. Some of us live with a profound and persistent emotional disability, in which we wrestle with painful states of mind that drain our mental resources and make it difficult, if not impossible, to find balance and equanimity. Our social and communal isolation intensifies our suffering and feelings of helplessness. In these narrow straits we know best the plagues of darkness – we struggle to see and been seen with empathy, concern and connection.

So where do we find the outstretched arm of G-d that our Pesach Haggadah describes as that which lifts us out of this narrow place, this *Mitzryam* (narrow place)? In many places...this describes just one.

The offering of *Hesed* – expansive loving-kindness, openness, the forward flow through friendship, giving beyond one's everyday level – can bring liberation and transformation. I found the outstretched arm of G-d through volunteering in a program that matches those struggling with emotional disability with a friend who visits once a week. For three years, I have been visiting my friend; two years ago he thanked me for my friendship. It is hard to put words on this experience. However, I know this relationship has given me something beyond words. Perhaps it is that feeling that comes from stretching oneself and discovering you have really made a significant difference for another human being.

We are told that we are made *b'tzelem elokim*, “in the image of G-d.” In my showing up for another, beyond my usual capacity, I manifest the transformational power of the outstretched arm – to bring myself and another from the narrows to a wide-open place. Liberation might take forty days or years, but the reward is remarkable nonetheless.



### ***Caregiving***

It has been quite a challenge planning for Passover Seders this year, with my mother so ill. I've been cleaning, shopping, cooking, and organizing guest lists, not even knowing if Mom will be well enough to attend the Seder. If she can't come, I don't know what I will do. How could I not be with her for a Seder at this time, but how could I not be with my children as well? I've done what I can for her: bought special foods that she might be able to eat, arranged for oxygen delivery and a doctor friend will be on call for us. Mom's physical health is so fragile that it affects her thinking some times; I don't want her or our guests to be embarrassed. Sometimes, I find that I am angry and resentful. I don't want Passover to be about her needs or about illness. It is supposed to be a happy time when good memories are added to our family history. It's supposed to be a religious occasion full of complicated rituals and meaningful story telling about slavery, miracles of redemption and the journey to freedom. I feel like a slave right now, physically enslaved to preparation which is hard enough without the caregiving added. I am also emotionally enslaved, caught in a web of sadness, fear and hopelessness. Perhaps if I am experiencing slavery in this narrow place, then there is also reason to look forward. I know that Mom's will is strong and she wants to be with us for the holiday as much as we want her here. That gives me strength and hope. If caregiving is slavery, it is also a journey of redemption which we take together. The love we share is a miracle, a blessing which will always be part of our lives.

Mom and I finally settle into our chairs at the Seder table. They started without us, because it took so long to get her dressed. But we are in time for the first cup, for Kiddush. With tears in my eyes I listen to her recite Shecheyanu- “You have brought us to this season.” In my heart, I sing *dayyenu*. It would have been enough to have her here, but You also gave her the strength to teach me once again about gratitude and the preciousness of life.



### ***Where's Moses? Thoughts about the Absent Spiritual Leader***

Moses' name appears 278 times in the Book of Exodus, reflecting his prominence in the liberation story. But the Haggadah mentions him only twice (once obliquely!). Why?

One classic explanation observes that on the first Passover, there was only one family whose children did not experience the miraculous redemption – Moses'! His sons were in Midian with their mother, so Moses had to fulfill the *mitzvah* of recounting the story. In doing so, Moses, the 'most humble of all men,' downplayed his role to ensure that credit for the Exodus went to the Almighty, absenting himself from the narrative.

Another explanation relates to the role of the *Tzaddik*, the Righteous One. Jews believe that humans can relate to their Creator without intermediaries, and yet connection to a *Tzaddik* can be a vital part of one's spiritual journey. Since the Haggadah is for everyone, Moses' name was virtually omitted, taking into account those who are limited in their understanding of the *Tzaddik*.

Finally, Moses' primary role was in shepherding Israel in physical liberation, but at Sinai, in receiving the Torah, all of us acquired *from G-d* a profound dimension of *spiritual* deliverance. In various contexts, in differing ways, we Jews have been physically persecuted and oppressed, but our spiritual freedom has endured, even soared. On Pesach we celebrate our spiritual emancipation – G-d's gift – and focus less on the physical – Moses' part.

One more idea: *Our leaders need a break!* After all, the Haggadah also 'neglects' Aaron and Miriam, critical parts of the Exodus team. Perhaps the Haggadah is giving them 'time off,' to be, as it were, with their family, to engage in spiritual self-care!

The Exodus we are to experience is *now*, not *then* -- every year. Though we need great, inspiring leaders, we must also assume our responsibilities, and show how we can be, together, a great, inspiring people.

### ***Economic Crisis***

This year, as I clean out the *hametz* (leavened food) from my apartment, I am aware of the differences from previous years. This year, I am home, while my husband is the only one working. This year, I have time to think about the cleaning process and the deeper meanings behind it. As I clean my house, is there a similar soul searching that I can do?

Many friends have lost their jobs in recent weeks. It feels as if no one is "safe." Passover, a holiday that has themes of freedom, redemption and miracles, almost seems to come at the wrong time for me this year. What freedom am I celebrating? What miracles can I hope for in my life?

As I anticipate the Seder, I already think about freedom differently. In past years, we talked about the need to be free from materialism. This year, however, this freedom has been imposed on us by the situation – by my company or by the economy. This year, I do not have a choice to be free from material goods. I *have* to be free of them. I am more concerned now about the conversations relating to how we spend our free time, where we will go on vacation, even *if* we go on vacation.

As I continue to clean, I continue to think about *hametz*. Food that had risen was something our ancestors didn't have time to wait for. I wonder – if the flight from Egypt/*Mitzrayim* can be interpreted as moving from a narrow place to a more open state, am I then entering a more narrow place than I have been in the past with this cleaning? Can I emerge into a wider one?

As I clean, I accept more willingly this temporary placement into my current narrow strait. I realize that this place does provide me some relief – to examine my life and to think about freedom in a different way than in years past. I will enter the Seder this year looking at each symbol on the seder plate with more nuance. Certain foods will be saltier, but I will also connect with certain prayers with greater meaning and hopefulness.

The Rita J. Kaplan Jewish Connections Programs  
**Resource List**  
[www.jcprograms.org](http://www.jcprograms.org) 212 399-2685

Doulas to Accompany and Comfort 212 664-1632 ext. 4  
Volunteer training program to visit patients near the end of life

Genesis Project 212 399-2685 ext. 219  
Variety of support groups and programs for divorced and single parent families

JACS 212 397-4197  
Groups, retreats and programs by and for Jewish Alcoholics, Chemically dependent persons and Significant others

Jewish Bereavement Support Program 212 399-2320 ext. 211  
Support groups and special programs for bereaved Jews

National Center for Jewish Healing 212 399-2320 ext. 209  
Jewish spiritual resources, publications, program consultation, training on issues related to illness and loss

New York Jewish Healing Center 212 399-2320 ext. 215  
Jewish spiritual counseling, support groups and consultation regarding illness, trauma and bereavement.

Rabbi Isaac N. Trainin Bikur Cholim Coordinating Council  
212 399-2685 ext. 212  
Resource materials, consultation and training for those visiting the sick

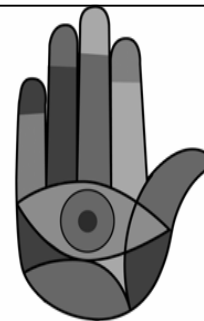
Shira Ruskay Center 212 664-1632  
For individuals and families living with serious illness or bereavement

Under the Same Tent 212 399-2685 ext 219  
Support programs for racially and ethnically diverse Jews.

**Other Helpful Resources**

JBFCFS NYC Self-Help Center 212 586-5770  
Referral to mutual support groups in NYC and group consultation

UJA-Federation of NY Resource Line 212 753-2288  
Information and referral to Jewish community services



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***Rita J. Kaplan Jewish Connections Programs***

Helping individuals, families and institutions find resources to meet difficult life challenges such as illness, loss, divorce and addiction, through programs that draw on spiritual, psychological and concrete support.

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