



ICJW Online Study Program

“The Jewish Festivals”

THE PESSACH SEDER

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As we gather around the Seder table for the great festival of freedom, we, as Jewish women, are faced with a poignant and powerful challenge: where are *we* in the Passover story? And more directly – where are we in the Seder itself?

The Jewish women of Kurdistan used to call Passover “the holiday of excruciating labor,” for it fell to them – as to Jewish women throughout the world – to scrub their houses from top to bottom in preparation for the festival, perform the hours upon hours of labor necessary for the preparation of the Seder meal, and then – as the men gathered around the table for the Seder ritual – to sit on the sidelines listening, if indeed, between courses, they had the opportunity to listen or to sit at all! But in our day, women have grown restless with this traditional role. With a new sense of our personal dignity, we want to participate actively in the Seder ritual, and even more: we want to reconceive the Haggadah so that the contribution of women to the powerful Jewish story of freedom is richly recognized.

Even before we open our Haggadot, let’s consider for a moment five women who are pivotal to the biblical story of the journey from slavery to freedom. No sooner does Pharaoh issue an edict to the midwives of Egypt to put all Hebrew newborn males to death, than two brave midwives, *Shifra* and *Puah*, refuse to submit, refuse to be intimidated by even the Pharaoh’s power: “they did not do as the king of Egypt had spoken to them” (Exod. 1:17) because they were true to their own moral and spiritual values. *Yocheved* kept her baby son hidden at home, and then placed him in a little ark guarded by his sister *Miriam* until *Pharaoh’s own daughter* found him. Surely the Princess knew the child in the ark was a Hebrew, but she, too, disregarded her father’s edict and assented to Miriam’s clever suggestion that a Hebrew wetnurse be found for him! The bible is hinting to us that, even under the most dangerous and threatening conditions, women – mothers, sisters, professional women, even women of privilege -- are determined to be the preservers of life, and it is their very courage that can change history. Standing up to an unjust authority, they are the very models of freedom.

In fact, along with the traditional cup of Elijah on the Seder table, families throughout the world have added the “Kos Miriam,” a cup of spring water meant to evoke Miriam’s Well, from which, the midrash teaches us, the Israelites drew life-saving water as they wandered in the desert. A special blessing has even been written for Miriam’s Cup: “You abound in blessings, God, Creator of the Universe, Who sustains us with living water. May we, like the children of Israel leaving Egypt, be guarded and nurtured and kept alive in the wilderness, and may You give us wisdom to understand that the journey itself holds the promise of redemption” (Susan Schnur).

How else can we find *women’s* stories in the Seder ritual itself? Here are some suggestions to think about:



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1. As you search for *hametz* in your homes this year, you might want to think about in what ways our cultures try to “inflate” us as women by placing us on a pedestal – “women are sensitive,” “women are intuitive” -- while at the same time, by doing so, they subtly diminish us. Throughout history, the claim that women were naturally “spiritual” or naturally “intuitive,” for example, was used to bar women from higher education and serious religious education, and from holding demanding (and well-paying!) professional jobs!
2. Each of the four cups of wine that we raise at the Seder signifies another stage in our liberation from Egypt and in our relationship with God. “I will *free you from the burden of the Egyptians*,” God’s tells us (Exod. 6:6); “I will *deliver you from slavery*” (Exod. 6:6); “I will *redeem you*” (Exod. 6:6), and, finally “I will *take you to be My people and I will be your God*” (Exod. 6:7) Each cup may also symbolize a true Woman of Valor in our collective or our personal history, from earliest times to the present. Miriam the Prophet. Deborah the Judge. Henrietta Szold, whose vision and determination transformed health care in pre-state Israel and who helped save hundreds of children during the Holocaust. And last but certainly not least: the individual women in your lives who have helped inspire *you*. Why not dedicate each of the four cups to a Jewish Woman of Valor who has contributed to the liberation of women from oppression of any kind?
3. As we uncover the matzah and announce that this is the “bread of affliction,” let us pause for a moment and imagine the women throughout the centuries who baked the bread, who struggled to feed their families, who nourished us in our hunger.
4. Let us add a fifth question to “The Four Questions” this year: on all other nights, we take our roles as women for granted. On this night, we may ask questions about our roles: how can we as mothers, daughters, sisters, friends, help one another to lead lives of fulfillment, lives in which we carve out for ourselves knowledgeable, meaningful, lives as fully participating Jews?
5. Let us ask ourselves what questions each of the “four children” would ask if they were daughters. What would a woman’s understanding of the “wise,” “wicked,” or “simple” daughter be? What about the daughter “who does not know how to ask”? What, for us as women, is a sign of wisdom, wickedness, or simplicity?
6. What “plagues” have been visited upon Jewish women in particular, and perhaps on all women too? Are *our* “plagues” perhaps the fear of rape, gender discrimination, rabbinical insensitivity to agunot, exclusion from Jewish education?
7. Finally, if women all over the world were truly free, what would our freedom look like?

After “Dayenu,” we sing of Miriam the prophet who took the timbrel in her hand “and all the women went out after her with timbrels and with dances.” May we, as Jewish women, all take the timbrels in our hands at Passover this year, and celebrate a new and promising liberation as we do, so that Passover can become a “holiday of excruciating joy.”