

Four New Questions to Liberate Your Seder



a jmc passover haggadah insert

The epic Passover narrative of the Jewish people is the story of the Israelites transition from slavery to freedom. After hundreds of years and generations of oppression, the Israelites journey away from Egypt (in Hebrew: Mitzrayim, מצרים, which literally translates to “narrow space”) through the parted Red Sea, into the wilderness for forty years, and finally getting to the land of milk and honey. Throughout their journey, the Israelites found many things to complain about, even crying to return to Egypt! This complaining reflects the natural resistance to the journey into liberation. We can all probably relate to this feeling in our own lives; sometimes even an open door to freedom can be difficult to step through. The holiday of Passover and the ritual of the Seder meal is an opportunity to think about how in our own lives we may struggle with transitions that ultimately bring us to greater freedom.

Some life transitions are planned far in advance, like a new job or school year, and others, like the loss of a loved one, can occur suddenly and without any of our input. In all cases, our reality shifts. Sometimes we are able to recognize the conclusion of one reality and embrace a new one. Other times it can be incredibly difficult to be in the present moment, not spending all of our time remembering the past or imagining the future.

Let's start with finding ourselves in this particular moment.

Invite everyone to close their eyes. Settle into a relaxed and upright position, pay attention to an inhale and an exhale, and reflect on what brought you to this particular place. Review your day, your week, your year, your life. What miracles (maybe more subtle than burning bushes and parting seas) brought you right here, right now?

1. After the ten plagues, Pharaoh finally lets our people go, and the Israelites leave in a big hurry. They pack their bags, gather their children and livestock, toss the unleavened bread on their backs, and begin their journey. It is Pharaoh's change of heart, after refusing so many times to let them go, that allows the Israelites to arrive at this moment of freedom.

***Go around the table and ask each person:
What miracles allowed you to arrive at this moment?
[examples: “public transportation,” “I left work early,” “my body recovered from a sickness,” etc.]***

2. After being freed, the Israelites find themselves between the roaring sea before them and the Egyptian army behind them. They panic and say to Moses, “There weren’t enough graves in Egypt, so you brought us to die in the wilderness? What have you done to us, taking us out of Egypt? It would have been better to stay as slaves than to die here.” We can learn a lot about resistance to transition from the complaints of the Israelites.

Go around the table and each person can answer this second question: What is one situation or pattern you’ve resisted changing even when you know it’s not in service to living the life you want to lead? [examples: “going to sleep super late,” “my unfulfilling job,” “that relationship (you know the one),” etc.]

3. Sometimes in the midst of doubt and fear, it can feel impossible to take that first step forward. A rabbinic Midrash tells the story of Nachshon ben Aminadav, who walked into the sea until the water was above his neck; only after he took this great risk did the waters part for all the Israelites. Passover is our annual invitation to take that first step.

Ask everyone to imagine the moment where they can’t stay in the same place. Go around the table and ask each person to say one word to answer this question: What would you need to act, to move forward, away from constriction and narrowness, toward freedom? [examples: “faith,” “community,” “imagination,” “lightness”, etc]

4. There’s commentary that the post-Exodus forty years of wandering in the desert was the necessary length of time to allow the generation of Israelites raised with a slave mentality to be replaced by a new generation of free people. This means that only those born into freedom were able to enter the Promised Land. We can translate this to our own lives to mean that we have to transition out of fixed mindsets and make space for new ways and paths and directions.

Go around the table and ask each person to reflect on the possibility of freedom in their own lives: What is waiting for you in your own Promised Land? [examples: “love,” “strong and healthy body,” “courage,” etc.]

Remembering our own capacity to enslave and be enslaved, as well as our ability to find freedom in our lives, is one of the most meaningful practices of Passover. May we all be blessed with a Passover of liberation. May our practice be a source of strength as we find paths to freedom, and may our open-heartedness benefit all beings.



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