



Passover *Haggadah* Insert

*In every generation a person is obligated to look at herself
AS IF she had come out of Egypt.*

It's a game of imagination . . .

We are not in Egypt anymore. To even imagine a life of slavery, for most of us, is just a conceit. Yet, the *haggadah* demands this of us, making it a center of the seder experience. Each person is *hayav* (or *hayevet*) – **OBLIGATED** – not simply encouraged – *to imagine that she, herself had come out of Egypt*. We retell the story each year, and each year we are required to place ourselves inside this grand story of the movement of a people – our people – from slavery to liberation. Why? To remember where we came from; to be able to tell our children; to bond us as a people; to open us to the experience of others – **to give us the capacity to imagine . . . to hear, see, feel the objectification and subjugation of others**. These are only some of the reasons we are compelled to play these roles.

How many players does it take to get a people out of Egypt?

A close reading of the beginning of the book of Exodus draws us a picture of how all the players in the story contribute to the resistance against Pharaoh and, ultimately, to the liberation of the Israelites – each in a slightly different way. How can we apply these roles to issues of economic injustice we see in our city today?

1) The Israelite Women and Their Mirrors

As a method of population control, Pharaoh decrees that the Israelite men cannot leave the fields at night when their work is done. Understanding the demoralization that their husbands must be feeling, the women take matters into their own hands. They bring a sumptuous dinner out to their husbands in the field and seduce them using mirrors – ensuring that the Israelites, as a people, endure.

(adapted from *Midrash Tanhuma, Pikudey 9*)

People must first believe in themselves, see themselves as worthy of being saved, if they are to get out of their oppression.

In 1995, a Thai worker escaped a sweatshop in El Monte, California that virtually imprisoned women who were sewing clothing for major clothing manufacturers. In June, her boyfriend wrote a letter detailing the premises of the factory and describing the offenses taking place in it, making it possible for the Department of Industrial Relations to raid the site. 72 women were freed and eventually the owners of the factory were convicted. While the El Monte story ends on a note of justice, sweatshop labor around the world persists. On February 23, 2006, in a story reminiscent of the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory, a fire raged through KTS Textile Industries factory in Chittagong, Bangladesh. The main emergency gate was illegally blocked, and the building lacked fire safety equipment, despite the fact that fires had already occurred in the past. The death toll is still uncertain.

2) Shifra & Puah Defy Pharaoh

The midwives to the Israelites (probably *not* Hebrews themselves) are told by Pharaoh to throw the male children who they deliver into the river. Instead, the midwives have the capacity to look past the authority of Pharaoh and see God – which gives them the strength to defy Pharaoh’s decree.

- adapted from Exodus 1:15-20

Every liberation movement needs allies on the ground – everyday people who are capable of seeing past the prevailing power structures and are willing to do heroic things for the well-being of oppressed people.

When 3,000 Los Angeles hotel workers went out on strike in June 2005, they were not alone. Communities from throughout Los Angeles stood with them at the picket line, urging management to settle a fair union contract. Some of the hotel workers’ strongest allies were members of the California Teachers Association (CTA). These educators, who daily witness their students’ academic performance suffer as a result of poverty, knew that their work needed to go beyond the classroom. They understood that to stand with their students’ parents in their fight for a living wage was a crucial step toward improving their students’ achievement. Like the midwives, the teachers’ proximity to the families gave them the clarity of vision to see oppression and act decisively against it.

3) Yocheved (Moses’ mother)

Along with all of the people of Egypt, Moses’ mother, Yocheved, has received Pharaoh’s decree to throw all of the Hebrew baby boys into the river. She hides her son, but when she can no longer hide him, she is faced with an impossible choice.

Poverty forces families to make impossible choices. Enduring the struggle of navigating these difficult decisions is a daily form of heroism and resistance.

At a non-union hotel in Los Angeles, a hotel housekeeper makes an average of \$8/hour with no employer-provided health insurance. At a *union* hotel in Los Angeles, housekeepers make over \$11/hour and receive full health care coverage for themselves and their families. This was the situation for workers at the Wilshire Plaza hotel just four months ago. Now, these hotel workers are facing an unjust and difficult situation. The new owner of the Wilshire Plaza has discontinued workers’ health benefits and drastically reduced wages to only \$7.55 per hour, which is just 5 cents above minimum wage. This injustice clearly stands in complete violation of the workers’ union contract.

With such a sudden drop in income, Wilshire Plaza hotel workers are now facing increased poverty and the impossible choices that follow. They are struggling to pay their rent and bills, as well as feed their families. Without access to health care, one worker who has been diagnosed with cancer is not able to continue her chemotherapy treatments. The union is seeking legal recourse, but the process will take at least six months. In the meantime, the workers’ situation grows more urgent.

4) Miriam confronts Pharaoh

According to a *midrash*, Miriam and her mother come before Pharaoh. Miriam stares Pharaoh directly in the face and says, “God will get you for what you are doing.” Yocheved smoothes it over, explaining to Pharaoh – “She’s a young girl and doesn’t know what she’s talking about.”

- adapted from *Shemot Rabbah 1:17*

Every liberation movement needs stakeholders who are able to speak truth to power.

On March 26, 2006, thousands of Angelenos took to the streets to advocate for comprehensive and humane immigration reform. This new immigration policy would include a clear path to earned legalization for undocumented immigrants already residing in the U.S., strict enforcement of labor law regardless of a worker’s documentation, protection of the human and civil rights of immigrants at the border, and other provisions that would honor the contributions of immigrants to American society. Like Miriam in this *midrash*, the families of the workers who clean our houses and office buildings, pick our food, and take care of our children, have witnessed daily the hardships faced by immigrants. They took to the streets with their allies to make a statement about the dignity and hard work of immigrants in America.

5) Pharaoh’s daughter

In the Torah, Pharaoh’s daughter sees a basket floating in the river and “sends out” her maidservant to fetch it. In a wonderfully playful, yet morally profound midrash, the rabbis reread the word “amata” (her maidservant) as “her arm” – another meaning of the same Hebrew word. In the fanciful version, Pharaoh’s daughter “sends out” her arm, which stretches beyond its natural limits to retrieve the child. She reaches from her position of power to the outcast child, and brings him in.

(adapted from Exodus 2:3)

Every liberation movement needs allies in high places, who, despite their connection with the power structure and their interest in the status quo, are able to reach far past their comfort zones and act on behalf of the oppressed.

In December 2004, clothing-retailer Forever 21 resolved to improve the working conditions of their employees after years of community members refusing to purchase their clothes. On Sunday, June 12, 2005, nine luxury hotels in Los Angeles signed a fair union contract with their workers after a 9-month community boycott. Though we may feel that Pharaoh’s daughter only represents high-profile decision-makers, we must remember that each individual has the power to affect company policy: buying-power. Ethical decisions about where we buy our clothes, which hotels we patronize, or where we purchase our food have the ability to affect the lives of thousands of workers and their families.

What role will you play?

We may think that we are free, but we are – all of us – still bound by the structures of our society that create deep economic disparity. Our lives are bound up with one another's. Rabbi Israel Salanter stated the challenge in this way: “the material needs of my neighbor are spiritual needs for me.” Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. put it in these words: “None of us is free until all of us are free.” Maybe the reason the *haggadah* requires us to imagine ourselves inside of this story is not to remember the slavery, but rather to remember the liberation. To help us imagine – and believe in – the possibility that we can work together to free everyone from these bonds of oppression. As you sit at your seder this Passover, consider what roles you can play over the next year – so that by the time we gather at Pesach again, we can all say, “This year, we are a little closer to the ‘Jerusalem’ of justice.”

Get Involved!

Economic Justice Working Group

PJA's Economic Justice Working Group addresses critical issues affecting the working poor in our city and throughout the country. We are standing with the Wilshire Plaza hotel workers (see *Yocheved*) and will be collecting donations over the next few months that will go directly to the workers, who are struggling to meet their basic needs. Please contact intern@pjalliance.org for more information and updates about how you can get involved.

The Kosher Clothes Campaign: Buy Sweatfree Goods!

Jewish institutions have an opportunity to model a commitment to the fair treatment of workers and use our purchasing power to build the sweatfree movement. There are sweatfree alternatives for organizations buying T-shirts, sweatshirts, or other garments! Please help us spread the word about this campaign – let us know if there are organizations you can talk to about taking the pledge!

The Kosher Clothes Campaign Curriculum: Educate Yourself!

In addition to urging our community to go “kosher” when buying apparel, PJA is writing a Kosher Clothing Campaign curriculum to teach Jewish youth about the important issue of sweatshops. In March, we launched a single lesson plan, a free resource that contains an hour and a half of activities and readings for seventh through twelfth graders. We will launch a full six-lesson version later this year.

For more information about any of these resources and ways to get involved, please contact PJA at office@pjalliance.org or call (323)761-8350. To learn more, please go to our website at www.pjalliance.org.



PJA connects Jews to critical social justice issues through education, advocacy, and organizing. Over the past six years, PJA has created a new model of Jewish community organizing, and has reinvigorated the progressive Jewish landscape in Los Angeles.

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