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A Passover Haggadah Supplement 2011

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In this year of uprising in Egypt what does the Passover story have to say to us? What would liberation throughout the world mean?

For your Seder, here is a Haggadah supplement -- not a replacement. If you don't normally do a Seder, you can use this supplement as the basis for an interfaith gathering in your home on April 18, the first night of Passover, or on any of the other nights of Passover until it ends on April 26.

As we sit at the Seder table we need to discuss how ancient liberation for the Jews can inspire liberation today for all people. Judaism never separates spiritual and political liberation, and that is one reason why ruling elites through history always found us a troublesome people. Tikkun, the healing of the world, requires BOTH inner spiritual liberation and outer economic, political and social transformation.

And through Jewish history, the Seder became a major occasion for people to strategize struggles against whatever political and economic oppression they were facing. However, in America, as Jews sought to "fit in" and not antagonize the powerful, that tradition has receded. So the Tikkun supplement below raises issues in a way that brings back that dimension into focus.

We do not wish to downplay the importance of connecting to God, whom we at Tikkun understand in part as "The Transformative Power of the Universe, the Force that makes possible the transformation from 'that which IS' to 'that which Ought To Be', the Force that makes it possible to transcend the tendency of human beings to pass on to others the hurt and pain that has been done to us, the Force that permeates every ounce of Being and unites in one transcendent and imminent reality, the ultimate Unity of ALL with All." It is precisely when we become the fullest conscious embodiments of who we actually are (namely, a cell in the totality of All Being, an expression of and manifestation of this God who is the Unity of All with All, of whom we are always a part, but not always conscious of the part of God we are or the part of God that everyone and everything is) that we feel empowered to become part of the liberation story of the universe, of which the Passover celebration is at once a commemoration and a renewal. So we encourage you to always ask at every moment of the Seder, "What part of the transformation that is needed can I participate in?" -- both in terms of personal spiritual and psychological transformation and in terms of social, political and spiritual transformation. In short, we are inviting you to make your Seder not only a wonderful opportunity to be with friends and/or family and/or community, but also a moment to make new personal commitments to be part of the transformation which we celebrate.

Solidarity with Contemporary Egyptians Seeking Democracy

Ever since the victory over the dictator of Tunisia and the subsequent uprising in Egypt, Tikkun's email has been flooded with messages from Jews around the world hoping and praying for the victory of the Egyptian people over their cruel Mubarak regime. And when he was actually toppled, liberal and progressive Jews joined in welcoming the possibility of a democratic and human rights-respecting regime to replace the repression of the past.

It is impossible for Jews to forget our heritage as victims of another Egyptian tyrant -- the Pharaoh whose reliance on brute force was overthrown when the Israelite slaves managed to escape from Egypt some 3,000 years ago. That story of freedom retold each year at our Passover "Seder" celebration, and read in synagogues in the past month, has often predisposed the majority of Jews to side with those struggling for freedom around the world. To watch hundreds of thousands of Egyptians able to throw off the chains of oppression -- and the legacy of a totalitarian regime that consistently jailed, tortured, or murdered its opponents so overtly that most people were cowed into silence -- is to remember that the spark of God continues to flourish, no matter how long oppressive regimes manage to keep themselves in power, and that ultimately the yearning for freedom and democracy cannot be totally stamped out, no matter how cruel and sophisticated the military and financial elites may be.

Many Jews have warned Israel that it is a mistake to ally with these kinds of regimes, just as we've warned the United States to learn the lesson from its failed alliance with the Shah of Iran. We've urged Israel to free the Palestinian people by ending the Occupation of the West Bank and the blockade of Gaza. Israel's long-term security will not be secured through military or economic domination, but rather by acting in a generous and caring way first toward the Palestinian people, and then toward all of its Arab neighbors. Similarly, America's homeland security will best be achieved through a strategy of generosity and caring, manifested through a new Global Marshall Plan (our plan is endorsed in House Res. 157 introduced into the House of Representatives by Congressman Keith Ellison--please get your local Congressperson to co-sponsor it and your local state legislatures and city councils to endorse it -- info here).

In normal times, when the forces of repression seem to be winning, this kind of thinking is dismissed as "utopian" by the "realists" who shape public political discourse. But when events like the uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt occur, for a moment the politicians and media are stunned enough to allow a different kind of thinking to emerge, the kind of thinking that acknowledged that underneath all the "business as usual" behavior of the world's peoples, the yearning for a world based on solidarity, caring for each other, freedom, self-determination, justice, nonviolence, and even love and generosity remains a potent and unquenchable thirst that may be temporarily repressed but never fully extinguished.

Liberation Today in Israel/Palestine

Unfortunately, we in the Jewish world have another major challenge. We have to face the set of distortions that have accompanied a blind and idolatrous worship of the State of Israel -- distortions that are apparent whenever Jews close their eyes to the suffering of our brothers and sisters, the Palestinians.

Go into most synagogues or Jewish institutions in Canada, the United States, Israel, the United Kingdom, Australia, or France, and you'll find that you can denounce God, question the Torah, or refuse to follow various Jewish ritual practices, and you are likely to be met with a "ho-hum" response. But dare to question Israel and its policies, and you'll find yourself being denounced as a traitor, a self-hating Jew, an anti-Semite, or "an accomplice of Hitler."

The blind worship of Israel has become the only contemporary religion of too many of the Jewish people, a people still so traumatized by our long history of oppression and so angry at God for not intervening during the Holocaust that we've come to believe in the religion of our enemies, the religion that says that we can only trust in our power, our army, and our ability to wipe out our enemies.

Yet we also have to approach these issues with a high degree of compassion, both for Israelis and for Palestinians. Both peoples have co-created the current mess. As Jews, we have a special responsibility for Israel's role as long as we allow Israel to claim to be "the State of the Jewish people." But we believe that a fuller account would point to horrific acts of violence and human rights violations by Palestinians as well. Nor should we accept attempts by others to make Israel the sole villain in this story, without acknowledging the ways that Palestinians, surrounding Arab states, and the entire world have acted irresponsibly and sometimes cruelly toward the Jewish people, and how that has contributed to the political intransigence and self-destructive and immoral policies of the government of Israel

Both peoples need healing, and that can only happen when there is both a genuine peace accord that brings justice to the Palestinian people and also a fundamental change in the dominant paradigm of thought so that our people become the embodiment of Torah values of love, generosity, repentance, and forgiveness. We must escape the "blame game" of who did what to whom and focus on how we can embody more loving and compassion for both sides of this struggle.

Four Questions: The Adult Version

Discuss as a group or in pairs at the Seder table:

1. Egypt, "mitzrayim" in Hebrew, comes from the word "tzar": the "narrow place," the constricted place. In what way are you personally still constricted? Are you able to see yourself as part of the unity of all being, a manifestation of God's love on earth? Are you able to overcome the ego issues that separate us from each other? Can you see the big picture, or do you get so caught in the narrow places and limited struggles of your own life that it's hard to see the big picture? What concrete steps could you take to change that?
2. Do you believe that we can eventually eradicate wars, poverty, and starvation? Or do you believe that no one really cares about anyone but themselves, and that we will always be stuck in some version of the current mess? Or do you think that such a belief is, itself, part of what keeps us in this mess? If so, how would you suggest we spread a more hopeful message and deal with the cynicism and self-doubt that always accompanies us when we start talking about changing the world?
3. What experiences have you had that give you hope? Tell about some struggle to change something -- a struggle that you personally were involved in -- that worked. What did you learn from that?
4. When the Israelites approached the Sea of Reeds, the waters did not split. It took a few brave souls to jump into the water. Even then, the waters rose up to their very noses, and only then, when these brave souls showed that they really believed in the Force of Healing and Transformation (YHVH), did the waters split and the Israelites walk through them. Would you be willing to jump into those waters today -- for example by becoming an advocate for nonviolence or for the strategy of generosity and the Global Marshall Plan or for the ESRA -- Environmental and Social Responsibility Amendment to the U.S. Constitution? Would you go to speak about this to your elected representatives? To your neighbors? To your coworkers? To your family? If not, what do you think holds you back, makes you pessimistic, or makes you feel embarrassed to talk to others about transforming our world?