

Rabbis Organizing Rabbis

Immigration Seder Ritual

Pesach 2013/5773

In every generation we are obligated to see ourselves as
though we personally went out from Egypt.
(based on Exodus 13:8)

The Exodus from Egypt occurs in every human being,
in every era, in every year and even on every day.
(Rabbi Nachman of Bratslav)

Rabbis Organizing Rabbis is a joint project of the
Reform Movement: the Justice and Peace
Committee of the Central Conference
of American Rabbis, the Religious Action Center, and
the Union for Reform Judaism's Just Congregations.



The traditional Ha Lachma Anya is found at the beginning of the Maggid, or “storytelling,” section of the Haggadah. This ritual connects both our Exodus story and the Jewish immigrant narrative to the reality of aspiring Americans today.

This is the Bread of Affliction - Ha Lachma Anya

Reader: In America, over 11 million undocumented immigrants live in our midst. We identify with their struggles from our memory as Jews freed from Egyptian servitude, and as Americans living in a country built by immigrants. As we look upon the broken middle matzah before us, this is our story - an immigrant story – in three parts: Memory, Action, Vision.

Memory

[Leader uncovers and raises the matzah.]

All read: Ha lachma anya – This is the bread of poverty and affliction that our ancestors ate in the land of Egypt.

Reader: We remember our ancestors’ fear and bravery in facing the new unknown, filled with dangers and opportunities. Poet Marge Piercy recalls our people’s past emigrations:

...The courage to walk out of the pain that is known
into the pain that cannot be imagined,
mapless, walking into the wilderness, going
barefoot with a canteen into the desert;
stuffed in the stinking hold of a rotting ship
sailing off the map into dragons' mouths.

Cathay, India, Serbia, goldenh medina,
leaving bodies by the way like abandoned treasure.

So they walked out of Egypt. So they bribed their way
out of Russia under loads of straw; so they steamed
out of the bloody smoking charnelhouse of Europe
on overloaded freighters forbidden all ports—
out of pain into death or freedom or a different
painful dignity, into squalor and politics...

“Maggid,” *The Art of Blessing the Day: Poems with a Jewish Theme*. Knopf: September 2000, p. 166-167.

Action

All read: Let all who are hungry come and eat. Let all who are in need, come and share this Pesach meal.

Reader: The Seder demands action! American Jewish poet Emma Lazarus’s words reflected real action when they were engraved on the Statue of Liberty one hundred years ago:

Here at our sea-washed, sunset gates shall stand
A mighty woman with a torch, whose flame
Is the imprisoned lightning, and her name
Mother of Exiles. From her beacon-hand
Glows world-wide welcome; her mild eyes
command

The air-bridged harbor that twin cities frame.
"Keep ancient lands, your storied pomp!" cries she

With silent lips. "Give me your tired, your poor,
Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,
The wretched refuse of your teeming shore.
Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost to me,
I lift my lamp beside the golden door

Vision

All read: *This year we are still here – next year in the Land of Israel. This year we are still slaves – next year free people.*

Reader: *This year undocumented immigrants still live in fear in the shadows of a broken immigration system. Next year may over 11 million aspiring Americans step into the light of freedom and walk the path towards citizenship.*

This year, our eyes are still clouded by the plague of darkness, as the Gerer Rav taught: “The darkness in Egypt was so dense that people could not see one another. This was not a physical darkness, but a spiritual darkness in which people were unable to see the plight and pain of their neighbors.” Next year, may we replace darkness with light and truly see our neighbors and be moved to act with them to fix our broken immigration system.

Discussion: Today, the Reform Jewish Movement is working to help create a common-sense American immigration process. How do your family stories connect to this historic moment?

Think about your family history: What brought your family to this country? What did your family leave behind, and what opportunity did they seek? Does this help you understand today’s immigrants? Why or why not?