



From the Desk of Rabbi Arthur Waskow

Notes toward a Passover Haggadah for the Bloodshed Crisis of 2024

Introduction

Rabbi Arthur Waskow
April 2, 2024

Dear Companions, I am in a quandary. For weeks, I have been struggling to write a Passover Haggadah in the spirit of the Freedom Seder more than 50 years ago, but in a radically new situation.

What is new? What claims to be the Jewish government of what claims to be a Jewish state has killed more than 30,000 Palestinians in Gaza — most of them noncombatant women and children.

Some Jews say that this means the Netanyahu government is wearing Pharaoh's uniform, and that any honest Haggadah must say so.

Some Jews say that this means the Netanyahu government is acting in self-defense after the atrocious attack of October 7, and that any honest Haggadah must say so.

I think the first opinion is much truer, but I am also conscious that for many Jews, the older and younger generations are pitted against each other on

this question. And I am conscious that for many Jews, the Seder is a time for the generations to reconnect in love.

So I am sending you a Haggadah that I hope can bear fruit through respectful argument.

With blessings of heart-hearing, of listening to quandaries, of preparing for a Seder of more questions than answers.

— *Arthur*

Notes toward a Passover Haggadah For the Bloodshed Crisis of 2024

[Notice we are calling this “Notes toward a Haggadah,” not the haggadah itself. We invite you to add or subtract and to let us know what emerges. Thanks!]

When the Freedom Seder was published and actually held as a Seder in 1969, it provoked a serious debate in the American Jewish community: Was Passover reserved for history and midrash about the liberation struggles of the Jewish people alone, or did its teachings and its questions speak to and for other peoples?

Amcha — the people themselves — quickly answered: Thousands, perhaps tens of thousands, of Jews drew on the impulse of the Freedom Seder to write their own Haggadot about other freedom struggles, beginning with their own. Anti-racists. Feminists. GLBTQ folks. Antiwar activists. Vegetarians. And many more.

The Prophet Amos (9: 7), speaking for *YHWH*, the sacred fount of InterBreath that connects all life-forms, said much the same thing, 2700 years ago. Amos heard God’s answer as a question — perhaps what should be the First Question at every Pesach Seder:

הֲלוֹא כְּבָנֵי כְּשִׂיִּים אַתֶּם לִי בְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל נְאֻם־יְהוָה הֲלוֹא אֶת־יִשְׂרָאֵל הִעָלִיתִי
מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם וּפְלִשְׁתִּים מִמִּצְרַיִם וְאֶרֶם מִקִּיר:

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Is it not so?
That to Me,
The Children of The Ethiopians
Are just like The Children of Israel

[The Godwrestling Folk]
— declares YHWH [Yahhhh, InterBreath of life]?

Is it not so?
That I brought Israel up
From the Tight and Narrow Land
[Mitzrayyim, Egypt]
But also The Philistines from Caphtor
And The Arameans from Kir?

Questions we must answer with the Truth.

But even those questions pale before another quandary raised by Amos anciently and events right now: Could a time arise when a government made up of Jews — the government of what is regarded by the world as a Jewish State — act not like runaway slaves pursuing justice but like Pharaoh? And to sharpen the question, could the moment for that question be today?

Could we be facing a moment when two different governments that claim to honor the Exodus act like Pharaoh, marauding and killing the noncombatant civilians of the other people? Each justifying its oppressive actions as a response to oppression by the other?

We turn again to the Prophet Amos (1:3 through 2:15). He takes up the deliberate violation of human decency — “for three deliberate violation-acts — no, for four!” — by each neighboring nation — Damascus, Gaza, Edom, Ashkelon, Tyre, Teman, Ammon, Rabbah, Moab. And finally he turns to the kingdom of Judah and then the kingdom of Israel with his longest and angriest denunciation. Amos can see that the sins of many governments do not justify the sins of his own community. It is of Edom that he cries out:

So says YHWH [Sacred Interbreath of life, Wind of change, Hurricane of transformation.]

“For three sins of Edom,
even for four, I will not relent.
Because he pursued his brother with a sword
and slaughtered the women of the land,
because his anger raged continually
and his fury flamed unchecked,
I will send fire on Teman
that will consume the fortresses of Bozrah.”

To some of us, that will sound familiar when applied to two governments today. **Familiar** indeed: lethal tangles in the **family** of Abraham.

Two more Questions among the Four:

Why is there matzah, this flat unrisen bread, upon the Seder plate?

“Now they baked the dough which they had brought out of Narrowland [Mitzrayyim, Egypt] into matzah cakes, for it had not fermented, for they had been driven out of Narrowland, **and were not able to linger.**”
(Exodus 12:30)

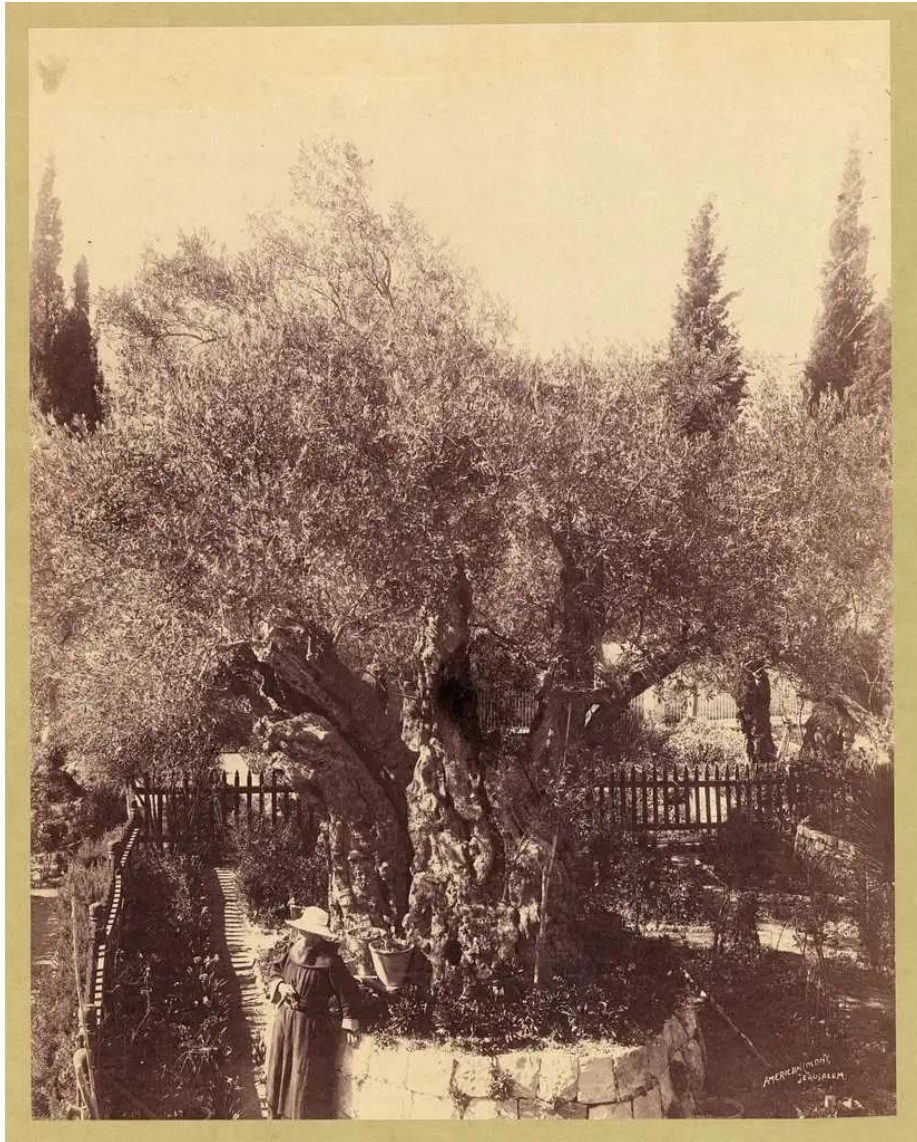
“When machines and computers, profit motives and property rights are considered more important than people, the giant triplets of racism, materialism, and militarism [cannot be] conquered. **We are confronted with the fierce urgency of now.**”

The prophet Martin Luther King, Jr., in his speech “Beyond Vietnam: A Time to Break Silence” — April 4, 1967, exactly one year before he was murdered.

Why are there olives on the Seder plate?

A Poem for Land Day: Mahmoud Darwish's 'The Second Olive Tree'

On March 30, 1976, Israeli police shot and killed six Palestinians as they were protesting the Israeli government's expropriation of thousands of acres of Palestinian land. In the years that followed, March 30 has been marked as "Land Day."



"Ancient olive trees cared for by Franciscan monks, Palestine, Jerusalem, Garden of Gethsemane / American Colony".

This poem by Mahmoud Darwish, in translation by Marilyn Hacker, was published to commemorate the day on March 30, 2022.

The Second Olive Tree

By Mahmoud Darwish

Translated by Marilyn Hacker

The olive tree does not weep and does not laugh. The olive tree

Is the hillside's modest lady. Shadow

Covers her single leg, and she will not take her leaves off in front of the storm.

Standing, she is seated, and seated, standing.

She lives as a friendly sister of eternity, neighbor of time

That helps her stock her luminous oil and

Forget the invaders' names, except the Romans, who

Coexisted with her, and borrowed some of her branches

To weave wreaths. They did not treat her as a prisoner of war

But as a venerable grandmother, before whose calm dignity

Swords shatter. In her reticent silver-green

Color hesitates to say what it thinks, and to look at what is behind

The portrait, for the olive tree is neither green nor silver.

The olive tree is the color of peace, if peace needed

A color. No one says to the olive tree: How beautiful you are!

But: How noble and how splendid! And she,
She who teaches soldiers to lay down their rifles
And re-educates them in tenderness and humility: Go home
And light your lamps with my oil! But
These soldiers, these modern soldiers
Besiege her with bulldozers and uproot her from her lineage
Of earth. They vanquished our grandmother who foundered,
Her branches on the ground, her roots in the sky.
She did not weep or cry out. But one of her grandsons
Who witnessed the execution threw a stone
At a soldier, and he was martyred with her.
After the victorious soldiers
Had gone on their way, we buried him there, in that deep
Pit – the grandmother’s cradle. And that is why we were
Sure that he would become, in a little while, an olive
Tree – a thorny olive tree – and green!

Why are there bitter herbs upon the Seder plate?

To remind us of the bitterness of enslavement by others,
and to remind us of the bitterness
of abandoning our own selves,
our own souls.

Each of the following paragraphs is read by a different participant in the Seder:

Rabbi Phyllis Berman teaches: “The true organ of hearing is not the ear but the heart.” In that wisdom we call each other and us all to pour out our compassion to match the blood that has been poured out this last half year.

Tormented by the traumas that afflict two peoples, the children of Avraham/ Ibrahim/ Abraham our Forebear, we seek to create a place of safety and freedom for both peoples. Heirs, both peoples, to teachings of love and justice, we mourn the withering of that inheritance in those who rule one people and attack the other.

In this Seder we open ourselves to hear with our hearts. Jews who have taken hope and pride in the creation of a State that could use its power in pursuit of justice wail when they see its greater power used to deeply wound their cousin people.

[Participants in the Seder speak their own feelings, fears, and dreams. They each speak briefly, and the total time is no more than one hour. A host-facilitator may be necessary]

End of Seder:

The traditional Haggadah teaches:

In every generation, every human being is obligated to affirm, “We ourselves must join the struggle to move from slavery to freedom. The struggle was not for our ancient forebears only.”

Any people, even our own, may choose to become Despot, Pharaoh; and we must choose whether the offering of Pesach is a celebration of freedom for the Jewish people alone or a celebration of justice for all peoples. We look forward to a world where reality, not only a slogan, will speak out –
[All who agree join in saying:]

***TWO peoples safe and free
From the River to the Sea***