

Earth Day, Passover, and the Climate Crisis

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This year (2008), Passover begins the night of April 19 and includes Earth Day on April 22. And today, the greatest danger of destructive plagues comes from the global climate crisis and the top-down, unaccountable power-structures that are pushing us ever closer to the edge of climate disaster.

So this year, it makes sense to focus on the elements of Passover that call us to free and heal the earth and our society from that danger.

The notes below can be used in your Passover Seder, in congregational newsletter columns, and as teaching points for sermons.

For many other materials on applying religious tradition and thought to the climate crisis, see our Website in the Green Menorah section at [http://www.shalomctr.org/taxonomy menu/1/1](http://www.shalomctr.org/taxonomy/menu/1/1)

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Searching for Chameitz - What is Chameitz in Our Lives Today?

Before Passover begins, we traditionally rid our houses of chameitz in any form. Chameitz, literally, is anything made out of wheat, spelt, barley, rye and oats, that has been mixed with water and allowed to ferment for more than eighteen minutes. It is food that has swelled up. Chasidic teachers, though, saw chameitz metaphorically, as the swelling up of excess in our own lives.

What is metaphorical chameitz in our own day? What is the excess in our lives that we need to rid ourselves of, or that we can at least tone down, to keep it in proper proportion and perspective?

Chameitz, first of all, can be carbon dioxide. It is the one single element most responsible for the global climate crisis. It is the element that we must immediately reduce our spewing of into the atmosphere.

Chameitz can be seen as overconsumption. Is one lesson of Passover this year that we should simplify our lives?

More specifically, is coal-fired electricity a kind of eco-chameitz? Is our addiction to the over-use of oil, coal and gasoline a eco-chameitz?

Seen this way, what then do we need to do in order to sweep eco-chameitz from our lives?

Some answers:

Switching our households and institutions to wind power and other renewable sources of energy;

supporting legislation that supports this switch, as well; getting an energy audit; changing all lightbulbs to CFLs.

Driving less; purchasing fuel-efficient and hybrid cars; supporting public transportation; shopping on-line.

Making green renovations and new buildings. Supporting legislation mandating such measures.

Making these changes is, of course, not easy. Chameitz looks better and it tastes better. Being more puffed-up in size, it tends to attract people and get more attention. And it's not even completely bad, as it's permissible to enjoy chameitz 51 other weeks of the year. What's not alright is to be a slave to it. More about that later.

Shabbat HaGadol - The Great Sabbath

The Shabbat just prior to Passover is called Shabbat HaGadol. This year it falls directly before Passover begins, since the first seder is on Saturday night of April 19, 2008, immediately after Shabbat HaGadol ends.

So while we encourage leaders to keep their sermons mercifully short on Shabbat HaGadol, we do endorse using the tradition of "addressing some topical comments" to focus this year on the global climate crisis.

Shabbat HaGadol gets its name from the haftarah, the prophetic portion that is traditionally read on this day. The context of the haftarah is dramatic: its 25 lines represent the final words of the final prophet, Malachi.

He writes, speaking on behalf of YHWH:

Behold! I will send you Elijah the Prophet before the coming of that great and awesome day of YHWH, so that he will turn the hearts of the parents to the children and the hearts of the children to the parents, lest I come and strike the Earth with utter destruction. (Malachi 3:23-24)

This call from 2500 years ago that the generations must work together to heal the earth from the danger of utter destruction comes alive with new force in our generation. When we invoke Elijah the Prophet on Shabbat HaGadol and during our Passover seders, we must make sure that we are giving voice to our own commitment to take actions in our own day to move this world closer to redemption.

This leads to yet another meaning of "HaGadol," as pointed out in the commentary to this haftarah in the Etz Hayim chumash: "Shabbat ha-Gadol calls attention to an ultimate or "great" accountability that all creatures bear for the resources of the earth...(p. 1296)."

Passover Seder

Early in the Seder, we dip green vegetables -- parsley, mint -- into salt water -- the oceans where all life was nourished. We can pause to celebrate the Source of Life that is now endangered, and

to pledge our help to heal the green and the blue that enrich our planet, lest the salt water become tears as the green plants wither.

Four Questions for Today:

We can sing the first line, and then continue as a wordless melody: Mah nishtanah halailah hazeh mikol haleilot? [Literally: Why is this night different from all other nights?]

Why is this blight different from all other blights?

For other blights we can be concerned only for ourselves, why for this blight must we be concerned for others?

Because the climate crisis affects everyone on Planet Earth, since the atmosphere does not respect the political boundaries that nations erect between themselves.

For other blights, we might not really know what's happening, why for this blight are we so sure?

Because there is a scientific consensus that human action is leading to global climate temperatures increasing - can we muster up the will to do something about it?

For other blights, the problem might seem too hard or too distant for us to do anything about it; why for this blight is it possible for us to make a difference?

Because each one of us contributes daily to the crisis - each one of us uses energy, each one of us causes carbon dioxide to be released into the air. And therefore each one of us can daily make a positive change to address the crisis.

For other blights, it can seem impossible to get the attention of politicians. How can we do so for this blight?

Because already, key members of Congress are taking bold leadership to address the global climate crisis. And we need to actively support their efforts. Though the federal government is not moving quickly enough, there's an inspiring move by local and state leaders to put necessary changes into place even while the national government plods along. We must call for and support these initiatives as well.

Avadim Haiyinu - Once We Were Slaves: Passover as a Call for Environmental Justice:

Later in our seder we read, "In every generation, we are obliged to regard ourselves as though we ourselves had actually gone out from Egypt." We are to remember the experience of being slaves, of being disenfranchised, of being the ones with the least power, with the least resources, with the least people looking out for our welfare and our well-being. We are to remember the experience of being valued only for what we can do, what we can do for others, rather than for our inherent value as human beings.

Environmental degradation in the United States most severely harms those people who are already the ones with the least power. All one needs to do is think of the aftermath to Hurricane Katrina. Or look at asthma rates in lower-income neighborhoods, or exposure rates to toxic waste. Similarly, the global climate crisis most severely harms people in those countries that also

have the least.

While we in the United States will be forced to make gradual changes to adapt to a changing climate, people in other countries will face refugee crises and fierce wars over shifting agricultural and water distribution patterns.

And so, on this Passover, we remember avadim haiyinu, that we were slaves.

Avadim haiyinu, haiyinu, atah beney chorin, beney chorin

Avadim haiyinu atah atah beney chorin.

Translation: "Once we were slaves but now we are free"

We remember that we were slaves, doing so in order to remember that our obligation is to help set everyone free. And we don't just sing the words. We commit ourselves to making sure that the moral voice continues to be spoken, ensuring that concern for environmental justice continues to be a part of any public policy.

For example, the Lieberman-Warner "America's Climate Security Act" already includes legislation about environmental justice. As this bill is debated and eventually passed, we commit ourselves to making sure that these sections not only survive deliberations, but also that they are strengthened.

Environmental Plagues Then and Now:

In the Exodus story, nearly all but the final two plagues were environmental in nature. We can see this clearly from the teaching of Rabbi Yehuda Halevi, a 12th century Spanish physician and poet, who explained that the first eight plagues could be divided in a way that made their environmental basis clear: two came from water (blood, frogs from Nile); two came from the earth (lice and wild animals); two were infections carried by the air (plague and boils); and two were things carried by the air that did physical damage (hailstorms and locusts).

In our own day, we face a daunting array of environmental plagues as well.

[Everyone fills up the next glass with wine or grape juice. Leader lifts up kiddush cup and invites everyone else to do likewise. As each environmental plague is said out loud, a drop of wine/grape juice is poured out, or drops are removed by dipping finger into cup]

Leader asks: What are the environmental plagues that are befalling us in our own day?

Answers might include:

undrinkable water in rivers

frogs dying

Great Lakes drying

glaciers melting

polar bears drowning

seacoasts rising

droughts increasing

extreme weather conditions increasing

temperatures rising

unhealthy air quality

changing bird migration
melting of permafrost
spread of infectious diseases
famine
animal and plant extinction

Rabban Gamliel and the Three Elements of Any Passover Seder:

Rabban Gamliel used to say: Whoever does not explain the following three things at the Passover festival has not fulfilled their duty, namely: the Passover sacrifice, Matzah and Maror.

1. Passover Sacrifice:

Point to the shank bone, beet, or Paschal yam, pass it around:

This shank bone/Paschal yam that we put on our seder plate represents idolatry. The ancient Egyptians worshiped the lamb. And so to sacrifice a lamb right under the Egyptians' noses was an act of defiance, one of the first ways that the ancient Israelites began to throw off the shackles of slavery. The shank bone/Paschal yam in our own day represents saying and doing what is right, in defiance of what the Pharaoh's in our own day tell us to say and do.

Who are the Pharaohs in our own day? Who tells us what to do, not because it's right but because they tell us to? (Invite responses from people gathered there).

How about those in our own government who for so long denied that there even was a global climate crisis, even while they provided subsidies to the oil industry in Texas and Saudi Arabia? Or the US delegation at the United Nations Climate Talks in Bali, which this past December obstructed progress toward world action to address the global climate crisis?

Or the top officials of the Environmental Protection Agency, which this past December denied California and 18 other states the ability to set greenhouse gas emission standards stricter than federal levels?

How about Senators and Representatives who serve those who pay the most money, at the expense of those who pay the most dearly for short-sighted and self-serving policies?

How about the leaders of the oil and automobile industries, who enrich themselves at the expense of planet Earth? Who devise ever-more ingenious ways to entice us to waste more resources, to deplete more energy reserves, and to burn more carbon into the air, while their own pockets deepen and the global climate worsens?

The hearts of pharaohs too often, as in the Exodus story, become hardened. So that an overwhelming scientific consensus about rising climate temperatures can be ignored. So that a unanimous recommendation by EPA legal and policy advisers can be ignored, as in the case of the denial of California's request to enact stricter carbon emission standards.

But we can't just look outside of ourselves, blaming others. Who buys gas guzzling cars? Who allows politicians to get away with serving the interests of Big Business in the present at the expense of our shared future? Who allows Congress to subsidize the coal industry while allowing alternative sources of renewable energy to be underfunded?

Earlier in this Maggid section of our seder, we read another reason, other than slavery, for our need for redemption: "Mit'chila ovdei avodah zara," "In the beginning, our ancestors were worshipers of idols." Not only the Egyptians worshiped idols. We did, too!

At Passover, we mark the need for liberation not just from external Pharaohs, but from internal ones as well. Passover is a time to ask not just four questions, but hard questions: In what ways are we addicted to oil? To over-consumption? To having the newest and the latest and the most advanced? To comfort and convenience that takes a toll and levies a cost that doesn't get tallied up until some later year, off in some distant murky future? To a lifestyle made possible by the hands of and/or adversely affecting people half a world away, out of sight and too often out of mind?

2. Matzah

[Distribute pieces of matzah to everyone present; leader holds up piece]

We began the Maggid section of the seder by holding up a piece of matzah and saying, "This is the bread of affliction." It represents where our spirits are flat. It represents what happens when we are beaten down, pressed down, and see ourselves as powerless.

But just as matzah literally has two physical sides, so too does it have two sides spiritually. From one perspective it is the bread of affliction, but, when turned over, when seen from the other side, it is also the bread of liberation, of freedom, of power to change our worlds for the better.

How do we make this transformation, from being pressed down to rising up?

To answer this, we must ask: what is the significance of matzah?

Traditionally, we are forbidden to eat or possess chameitz in any form during Passover. Chameitz literally is food with leavening, fermentation, souring, food that swells up. Chasidic teachers, though, saw chameitz metaphorically, as the swelling up of excess in our own lives.

What is metaphorical chameitz in our own day? What is the excess in our lives that we can rid ourselves of, or that we can at least tone down, keep in proper proportion and perspective? [can get responses from gathering]

Chameitz, first of all, can be carbon dioxide. It is the one single element most responsible for the global climate crisis. It is the element that we must immediately reduce our spewing of into the atmosphere.

Chameitz can be seen as overconsumption. Is one lesson of Passover this year that we should simplify our lives?

More specifically, is coal-fired electricity a kind of eco-chameitz? Is our addiction to the over-use of oil, coal and gasoline a eco-chameitz?

Seen this way, what then do we need to do in order to sweep eco-chameitz from our lives? [can get responses from the gathering]

Some answers: switching our households and institutions to wind power and other renewable

sources of energy; supporting legislation that supports this switch, as well; getting an energy audit; changing all lightbulbs to CFLs.

Driving less; purchasing fuel-efficient and hybrid cars; supporting public transportation; shopping on-line.

Making green renovations and new buildings. Supporting legislation mandating such measures.

But before we can transform our matzah from the bread of affliction into the bread of liberation, we must face squarely the challenge that we face:

3. Maror

Maror means bitter herbs. It represents the pain of our slavery in Egypt. It represents the harm of our actions today.

Throughout the past eight years, here is the legacy that has set back the cause of global climate health:

As someone says each action aloud, everyone else can sing the refrain, "Let my people go."

1. Denied California the Clean Air Act waiver, thus blocking 18 other states from enacting the stricter greenhouse gas emissions standards as well.

Sing: "Let my people go."

2. Interfered with climate change science, revising NASA and other agency documents to remove language regarding climate change, and engaged in a systematic effort to mislead policy makers and the public about the dangers of global warming.

Sing: "Let my people go."

3. Advocated for more nuclear power plants.

Sing: "Let my people go."

4. Opened public land in the Rocky Mountains and Alaska to oil and gas drilling.

Sing: "Let my people go."

5. Declared carbon dioxide not to be a pollutant.

Sing: "Let my people go."

6. Weakened regulations governing air pollution.

Sing: "Let my people go."

7. Rejected the Kyoto Protocol, withdrawing the United States from the global warming treaty.

Sing: "Let my people go."

Matzah as a Call to Action:

Though mentioned and discussed in response to Rabban Gamliel's assertion that matzah is among three things that must be mentioned in order for the Passover seder to be complete, we don't actually get to eat matzah until after the Maggid section.

So as we finally approach being able to eat a piece of matzah, let's take a moment to examine a key question: How does the bread of affliction transform into the bread of freedom?

Chameitz can only be made from ingredients that can also be matzah. The only difference between matzah and chameitz is what we do with those ingredients. Making chameitz is easy; all you have to do is mix the ingredients together and then do...nothing! The source of the substance forbidden during Passover is simply waiting and not doing anything. Inaction.

Making matzah, on the other hand, is difficult. It takes great determination, swift action, and constantly working toward the goal. When this great effort is made, when we don't let obstacles stand in our way, when we take each step that needs to be taken, with our eyes always on the prize, then the bread of affliction transforms into the bread of liberation.

And One for After the Meal - The Prophetic Promise of Elijah:

On the Shabbat just before Passover, we read the words of the prophet Malachi, who describes God's promise to send Elijah the Prophet to turn the hearts of parents to children and the hearts of children to parents - "lest the earth be utterly destroyed." This call from 2500 years ago that the generations must work together to heal the earth from the danger of utter destruction comes alive with new force in our generation.

When we sing to welcome Elijah, we are giving voice to our own commitment to take actions in our own day to move this world closer to redemption - in our own lives, in our synagogues, offices, and institutions, and by working for changes in public policy.

This is what we mean when we sing of Elijah the Prophet coming to us: Elijah is not a person who comes and changes our world, but is rather the name we give to the change that we ourselves bring about through our determined and inspired action.

Sing:

Eliyahu hanavi, Eliyahu hatishbi
Eliyahu, Eliyahu, Eliyahu hagiladi
Bimherah veyameynu yavo eyleynu
Im mashiach ben David, im mashiach ben David
Elijah the Prophet come speedily to us hailing messianic days.

Second Seder - Counting Toward Sinai:

During the seder on the second night of Passover, we begin counting the 49 days that link freedom from slavery to freedom to enter into a relationship of responsibility and purpose. Our tradition recognizes that big changes don't happen overnight, but rather take careful planning and preparation.

Pulling our world back from the brink of the global climate crisis will require many small and large steps. No single step alone will solve the problem. But we can ensure, with each step, that we are at least moving in the right direction.

Just as our tradition gives us a 49 day period to spiritually prepare ourselves to stand at Sinai, the second seder is a good time to begin making a plan for what steps each individual, family and community will take toward addressing the crisis we face.

Third Day of Passover is Also Earth Day!

This year, Passover converges with Earth Day. And it does so at a time when the global climate crisis can no longer be ignored, calling for us to take bold action.

Let's make our voices heard at congressional offices, visiting our Senators and Representatives to say that legislation such as the Lieberman-Warner "America's Climate Security Act" matters greatly to us, and that we insist that it be strengthened and that it eventually actually become the law of the land.

And let's do so in a way that is not only a protest, but also a celebration, a re-affirmation, of our power to free ourselves from limitations both external and internal. At Passover, we invoke Elijah the Prophet, as the harbinger of a world redeemed through the actions that we take.

Seventh Day of Passover - Crossing the Sea:

Traditionally, the seventh day of Passover is associated with the Israelites crossing through the Sea of Reeds to escape the pursuing Egyptian army.

In a midrash from the Babylonia Talmud (Sotah 36), Rabbi Yehuda described how "Each tribe said: "I am not going into the water first." During the endless debates, Nachshon from the tribe of Judah jumped into the sea. He was on the point of drowning when God suddenly divided the waters.

In other words, the miracle of the splitting of the sea wasn't simply a divine intervention. And it wasn't brought about by one strong central leader. Rather, one single person, a member of the crowd, took action that was so bold and so inspired and so filled with faith that the miracle then was activated.

What a powerful counter-balance to all the words associated with Passover! Time to stop talking; time to do!

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