

JPPI's Zionist Texts for the Seder

by
Gil Troy



JPPI

המכון למדיניות העם היהודי
THE JEWISH PEOPLE POLICY INSTITUTE

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The picture on the cover:
A Passover Korech – sandwich – using “The Zionist Ideas” to Zionize the Seder,
so prepare to celebrate Israel’s 78th by welcoming some Zionist thinkers to the seder.

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Dear Friends,

This is the updated 2026 version of the supplemental Zionists texts for the Seder I've shared annually since publishing *The Zionist Ideas* to mark Israel's 70th birthday in 2018.

As we approach this year's Seder with – as of this writing – the American-Israeli War with Iran unresolved and Hezbollah bombing Israel regularly from Lebanon, it's easy to make one prediction: Israel and Zionism will be hot topics at most Seder tables worldwide.

Be open to honest conversations and serious questions, that's what the Haggadah is meant to encourage! I humbly offer my recent e-books: [“The Essential Guide to October 7 and its Aftermath”](#) and [“The Essential Guide to Zionism, Anti-Zionism, Antisemitism and Jew-Hatred,”](#) to help you clarify your thoughts before – or after.

But please, please, don't let our enemies win. Avoid a defensive Zionism of the hunched back and the furrowed brow. They want every conversation about us to be about them... meaning about the conflict, the rights and wrongs of Israeli military strategy, etc. – and they want our Zionism to be conditional, contingent on Israel's “good” behavior or whether we like Israel's government at the moment. Few American Jews approach their American identity that way. We remember that a patriot is someone who loves his or her country because of its politicians sometimes... but despite its politics always.

Use these texts to think more broadly – and celebrate. The Haggadah – and these additions – remind us of how central Zionism, Jewish peoplehood, and the Land are to Judaism – for thousands of years, culminating with today’s great adventure in Jewish Statehood. And, beyond appreciating it intellectually, take the opportunity to toast Israel and the Jewish people, highlighting all that we have accomplished in a blink of historical time.

Wishing us all meaningful seders, a genuine peace spawned by victory, and a better world.

Chag Sameach,

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A FRAMING: Secretary of State John Foster Dulles confronts Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion, 1954

Dulles: “Tell me, Mr. Prime Minister — who do you and your state represent? Does it represent the Jews of Poland, perhaps Yemen, Romania, Morocco, Iraq, Russia or perhaps Brazil? After 2,000 years of exile, can you honestly speak about a single nation, a single culture? Can you speak about a single heritage or perhaps a single Jewish tradition?”

Ben-Gurion: “Look, Mr. Secretary of State — approximately 300 years ago, the Mayflower set sail from England and on it were the first settlers who settled in what would become the largest democratic superpower known as the United States of America. Now, do me a favor — go out into the streets and find 10 American children and ask them the following:

- » What was the name of the Captain of the Mayflower?
- » How long did the voyage take?
- » What did the people who were on the ship eat?

I’m sure you would agree with me that there is a good chance that you won’t get a good answer to these questions.”

“Now in contrast — not 300 but more than 3,000 years ago, the Jews left the land of Egypt. I would kindly request from you, Mr. Secretary, that on one of your trips around the world, try and meet 10 Jewish children in different countries. And ask them:

- » What was the name of the leader who took the Jews out of Egypt?
 - » How long did it take them before they got to the land of Israel?
 - » What did they eat when they were wandering in the desert?
 - » And what happened to the sea when they encountered it?
- Once you get the answers to these questions, please carefully reconsider the question that you have just asked me.”

A SECOND FRAMING: Natan Sharansky's Exodus from the Soviet Union, 1986

In February, 1986, after nine years in the Soviet prison system, the Gulag, the Soviet Communists finally freed Natan Sharansky. This passage from Gil Troy and Natan Sharansky, *Never Alone: Prison, Politics, and My People*, invites us to think about whatever exoduses we have experienced in our lives, other exoduses other people's have experienced – and need to experience – and how, we as a people go from focusing on the important yet defensive lesson of Never Again to the more affirmative, eternal lesson, that, when you belong to the Jewish People, you are “Never Alone.”

We landed in East Berlin, the capital of the German Democratic Republic, a city of bridges and that infamous wall dividing East from West. Berlin struck me as an odd place for a Jew to get his freedom.

“You see that car, Anatoly Borisovich? Go straight to it and don't make any turns,” one escort said calmly, expecting to stay out of camera view and in the warm cabin of the plane as I walked out into the February freeze. “Is it agreed?”

“Agreed?” I was still in KGB world, and therefore could not agree. “Since when do I make agreements with the KGB?” I asked. “You know that I never agree with the KGB about anything. If you tell me to go straight, I will go crooked.”

“You see, you are not serious. We cannot deal with you,” he snapped, as the minders mumbled among themselves. As a result, two of them got out of the plane first and flanked me on either side. As promised, I zigzagged across the tarmac, from the Russian airplane to an East German car. As I lurched left, then right, the TV cameras were rolling and the KGB agents were yelling at me to straighten out. One flustered cameraman ended up banging into the window of the waiting car as he filmed.

The next day, in the final stage of my release, I was driven onto the sub-zero, snow-covered Glienicke bridge. I was then escorted to freedom by the tall American ambassador to the Federal Republic of Germany, Richard Burt.

I didn't need to zigzag here. I was no longer in KGB hands. Besides, I had a more pressing worry: those big pants and that flimsy drawstring. I ask Ambassador Burt, "Where is the border, exactly?" He pointed to a four-inch line the Germans had kindly cleared of snow. As I marked my entry to freedom, I jumped with joy—and the string popped. I entered the free world just barely catching my pants before they fell down.

Somewhere in the Frankfurt Airport, I entered some godforsaken room. There, I saw the same girl I had taken to the Moscow airport twelve years ago, a few hours after our wedding. I had promised my new wife we would reunite soon.

Now, trying to control my tears, I said to her in Hebrew, "Silchi li she'icharti kzat"—sorry I'm a little late. I was living inside my dream, and not resisting it. I just kept clutching Avital because I feared the dream would stop. Holding her hand would prevent me from waking up back in the punishment cell.



Kiddush

קידוש

Before Kiddush

Sadly, I am updating something I wrote in 2003, when Palestinian terrorists were targeting Israelis, as they still are today:

Once again, during this year's Seders, we will celebrate our joyous holiday of liberation with heavy hearts. Even as we revel in our freedom, some of our brothers and sisters in Israel, both Jewish and non-Jewish, are in pain. This year, as in previous years, we must reclaim our symbols, remember our losses, reaffirm our commitment to Israel, to the Jewish people, and to a true peace.

Over the years, and in this particular evil surge since October 7, when the Palestinians turned toward violence yet again, too many have died, too many have been injured, and 251 were kidnapped. Too many Seders will have empty chairs: missing husbands, fathers, brothers, sons; missing wives, mothers, sisters, daughters. How agonizing is it to know that they will never come home! How agonizing is to imagine them celebrating the holiday of freedom in captivity, simply because they are Jewish!

The Seder's power comes from its ritualization of memory. It is a primal, sensual, literal service. The Seder plate, evoking the mortar used in building with charoset, and the tears shed by the slaves with salt water, helps us visualize the trauma of slavery.

The physical acts of reclining, of eating special foods, of standing to greet Elijah the prophet, help us feel the joy of Yetziat Mitzrayim, of

leaving Egypt. And, in an affirmation of the importance of peoplehood, we mark this special moment not as individuals but as a community.

In that spirit, we cannot proceed with business as usual during these challenging times. We must improvise a new ritual that marks our present pain, that illustrates our vital connection with Israel and Israelis today.

Let each of us, as we gather at our Seders, intrude on our own celebrations by leaving one setting untouched, by having one empty chair at our table. Let us take a moment to reflect on our losses. And let us take the time to learn the name of at least one victim murdered since last Passover, or one victim murdered years earlier, one Jew who cannot celebrate this year's holiday, one family in mourning, one family with an empty seat at their table and a hole in their hearts.

Let us call out the name of Koby Mandell, age 13, an American immigrant murdered in May, 2001, whose father, Rabbi Seth Mandell, noted the empty seat at his Shabbat table and shared the pain of watching other boys grow up, watching their voices deepen, their shoulders broaden, their gaits quicken, even as his son lay dead.

Let us call out the name of Hadar Goldin, a 23-year-old soldier killed by Hamas in August, 2014 and whose remains Hamas held in a cruel assault on Hadar's family and civilized norms for 4,118 days.

Let us call out the names of Rabbi Eitam and Naama Henkin, ambushed in October, 2015, slaughtered in their car's front seat as their four children sat in the back.

Let us call out the name of Ezra Schwartz, an 18-year-old Boston kid enjoying his yeshiva "gap" year, gunned down at a traffic stop in 2015.

Let us call out the name of Awad Darawshe, 23, an Israeli medic working at the Nova concert festival, who refused to leave, telling friends, "I speak Arabic, I think I can manage." Hamas terrorists killed him as he bandaged a wounded concert-goer.

Let us call out the names of Ben Mizrachi, 22, originally from Vancouver, and Itai Bausi, 22, friends simply attending the Nova concert. As good Zionists and trained Israelis, Ben, who moved to Israel and served as a combat medic, and Itai, who was a Duvdevan commando, plunged into action, trying to save others. Killed in a hail of bullets, both are now buried in their beloved kibbutz, Kvutzat Yavne.

Let us call out the names of Sgt. Eden Alon Levy 19, Cpt. Or Moses, 22, and Lt. Eder Ben-Simon, 20, three Home Front Command soldiers who died saving over 90 recruits when 8 Hamas terrorists stormed their base from the beach.

And let us think for a moment about Yaron and Ilana Moshe, a couple in their 70s, murdered by Iranians while making their way to their safe room this March 18, because the Islamic Republic of Iran unleashed a barrage of missiles against the Jewish State, demonstrating that the intense hate against Jews and anyone in Israel, crosses the 1,157 miles separating Tehran from Jerusalem

As we call out these names, let us commit to some action, to embrace the victims' families. Moreover, let us build a friendship with Israel and Israelis, which is not just about politics and not solely about mourning.

And as we call out these names, unlike our enemies, we don't call for vengeance. Instead, as we mourn, let us hope; as we remember the many lives lost during this crazy, pointless war, let us pray more intensely for a just and lasting peace, and for an end to the global scourge of terrorism afflicting Jews and non-Jews.

“The Fifth Cup”

Immediately after the kiddish, refill the cup of wine, and say: During these crazy, historic times, we acknowledge the many losses - but also Israel’s many victories. As we start the Seder, even as we mark the many empty chairs, and the many holes in our heart, we lift our glasses, our voices, and our spirits. We won! We still have much work to do. But we never imagined we would account for every hostage, alive and dead. And that less than three years after October 7, Hamas would be crushed, Hezbollah would be reeling, Assad’s Syria would be a dark footnote in history, and the evil Iranian regime behind so much of this mayhem and suffering would be fighting for survival. We put politics aside at this moment. We stop mourning for a second. And we pray over this cup of wine, the symbol of our joy, thanking our soldiers, from Israel and America, for protecting us. Thanking all who contributed to the war effort. And appreciating how lucky we are to have witnessed all the victories since October 7 - and not just the horrors of that day. And so, we say the blessing over the wine, followed by that eternal blessing consecrating the miracle of this moment and of our blessed lives.

בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה יי אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם בּוֹרֵא פְּרֵי הַגָּפֶן.

Blessed are You, L-rd our Gd, King of the Universe, Who creates the fruit of the vine.

בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה יי אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם שֶׁהַחַיִּים וְקִיּוּמָנוּ וְהַגִּיעוּנוּ לְזִמְנֵן הַזֶּה.

Blessed are You, L-rd our Gd, King of the Universe, Who has granted us life, sustained us and enabled us to reach this occasion.

Note: Traditionally, a “Fifth Cup” was added before the Great Hallel or when welcoming Elijah the Prophet, those are good places to insert this Fifth Cup symbolizing redemption as well.

Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik

Kol Dodi Dofek, Listen! My Beloved Knocks (1956)

The Kiddush, the prayer blessing the wine, celebrates two nation-defining experiences: the creation of the world and the liberation of the Israelites from Egypt. In 1956, Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik asked about the two recent experiences defining the Jewish people: the Holocaust and the Establishment of the State of Israel. He warned that Jews must not simply be a “camp people” as we were in Egypt and Auschwitz, defined by a shared fate, but must embrace Sinai – and Jerusalem -- which make us a Congregation, *an Edah*, with a mission, a message, a destiny. That challenge of the shared mission of the Jewish people, begins in the Seder Kiddush and resonates throughout the night.

“The mission of the State of Israel is neither to terminate the unique isolation of the Jewish people nor abrogate its unique fate—in this it will not succeed! Rather, the mission is to elevate a Camp-people to the rank of a holy Congregation-nation, transforming shared fate to shared destiny.”

- » What historical moments define us? Why? How do those moments shape our identity?
- » Is it only anti-Semitism that makes us a “camp people” – or do we have other elements of “shared fate” as Jews? What links us in that way?
- » What is our common mission – as Jews? As Zionists? Is there a difference?
- » Does Israel’s creation emphasize our shared fate – making us a camp people – or our shared destiny, our common mission – making us a Holy Congregation nation? (or, perhaps both)?
- » Have events since October 7, changed your understanding of the Jew-glues, what binds us as a nation, and/or our Jew-views, what vision and values we have to guide us?

After Kiddush

David Ben-Gurion

Speech to Mapai's Central Committee on January 16, 1948

This speech by the man who would become Israel's prime minister in May, 1948, shows how Ben-Gurion set priorities when he and the Jewish people faced an existential crisis. With Arab attacks on Jews worsening, his priority was clear: first survive....

“There is now nothing more important than war needs, and nothing equal to war needs. And just as I don't understand the language of 'state' right now, I don't understand the language of aliyah and the language of settlement and the language of culture. There is only one criterion: are these things needed for the war effort or not? If they are needed—let them be done. If they are unnecessary— let them wait until the crisis is past. There are no exceptions, that is the great terror and the great misfortune embedded in every war, that is a cruel and jealous Moloch [god that demands child sacrifice] who knows neither compassion nor compromise.”

“It is necessary that we take up the yoke of war and show a greater will to win than those others. We shall do it, precisely because for us war is not a goal in itself, and we see war as a terrible accursed misfortune, and resort to war only from lack of choice—war and peace are nothing more than means to something else—that 'something' will give us the advantage that our enemies do not have and that is denied to the followers of violence: a vision of life, a vision of national rebirth, of independence, equality and peace—for the Jewish nation and for all peoples of the world.”

- » What other epic events have we experienced in our lifetimes? How about our parents? Our grandparents?
- » How did we/they prioritize then?
- » How does that help us now?

Agam Berger

Celebrating Passover Despite Being a Hostage in Gaza, 2024

In Israel, Judaism and Zionism and Israeliness fuse seamlessly, often unconsciously. Jewish holidays like Passover are national holidays. It makes sense, therefore, that many of Israel's hostage heroes, no matter how "secular," prayed to God in the tunnels, recited Psalms they had never said before, and celebrated Shabbat and holidays, including Passover. Jewish rituals and values helped them find meaning – and resist Hamas. Agam Berger, now 21, held 482 days, and Liri Albag, held 477, were among the female IDF lookouts Hamas kidnapped brutally from the Nahal Oz base on October 7, 2023. This text comes from interviews she gave in Hebrew and was posted on defendjerusalem.com by Rachel Avraham.

Agam Berger: "Liri, who I was with for most of my time in captivity, decided to surprise me, and she prepared a sort of Haggadah with illustrations. She took pages from a notebook that was in the apartment we were held in in Gaza, and drew pictures of Pesach, mostly. She hid it from me so that it would be a surprise, and on the Seder night she gave it to me. I remember when I saw the Haggadah that she made, I really cried..."

"We tried to make the holiday as festive as possible. Liri took a bit of aluminum foil that there was in the house, and placed it on the table. We put napkins. We tried to make sure there was a bit more food than usual. In our house we eat kitniyot (legumes) on Passover, so we ate the rice..."

"After the meal, we went over the booklet that Liri prepared. We hardly had anything to make a blessing on. I think we had just a bit of charoset, which we had managed to prepare from dates. I remember that we placed a chair for Elijah the Prophet at the side of the room. In general, it was a month in which there were a few more vegetables, so we made a salad, potatoes. Whatever we could."

- » What else did you learn from the stories of the hostages – and the global campaign to free them?
- » How do you – and we – balance the fight for physical and spiritual survival?
- » More broadly, what should our Jewish agenda be- individually and communally?
- » What plans do you have to celebrate Israel's 78th birthday?

Ze'ev Jabotinsky

The Fundamentals of the Betarian World Outlook (1934)

During the first round of handwashing, the poet, playwright, philosopher and activist, Ze'ev Jabotinsky, invites us to go personal. “Hadar” essentially means the glory and dignity you bear when you understand Judaism’s depth and breadth.

“The mission of Betar: The duty and aim of Betar is very simple though difficult: to create that type of Jew which the nation needs in order to better and quicker build a Jewish state. In other words, to create a ‘normal,’ ‘healthy’ citizen for the Jewish nation. The greatest difficulty is encountered because, as a nation, the Jews today are neither ‘normal’ nor ‘healthy’ and life in Diaspora affects the intelligent upbringing of normal and healthy citizens. . . .”

“Hadar: Hadar is a Hebrew word which hardly is at all translatable into another language: It combines various conceptions such as outward beauty, respect, self- esteem, politeness, faithfulness. The only suitable ‘translation’ into the language of real life must be the Betari—in all dealings, actions, speech and thought. Naturally, we are all as yet removed from such a state of things, and in one generation cannot be achieved. Nevertheless, Hadar must be the daily goal of each one of us: our every step, gesture, word, action and thought must always be strictly executed from the Hadar viewpoint. Hadar consists of a thousand trifles

which collectively form everyday life. More important is moral Hadar. You must be generous, if no question of principle is involved. Do not bargain about trivialities, you, rather should give something instead of exacting it from somebody else. Every word of yours must be a “word of honor,” and the latter is mightier than steel.”

- » Who best lives or lived this ideal of “Hadar”?
- » In an age of vulgarity and exhibitionism, how can we keep our sense of “Hadar”: is it more relevant than ever -- or old-fashioned and irrelevant?
- » Is “Hadar” just an individual, moral standard, or can it be injected into political life and communal life too - if so, how?



Yachatz

יחצ'י

As we break the Matzah, and hide it, building toward the “Afikoman” dessert, we ritualize the process of breaking and building, of losing and healing, that is a central part of life – and that has so characterized Israeli life since October 7. To honor, not just the lives lost – but the lives well-lived, even if shortened, read part of the letter Ben Zussman z”l wrote before entering into Gaza with his Combat Engineering unit. And then consider, how his broken-hearted mother Sarit responded to that letter and her 22-year-old son’s sacrifice, thereby helping Israel heal too....

Ben Zussman of Jerusalem wrote:

“I’m writing you this message on the way to the base. If you’re reading this, something must have happened to me. As you know about me, probably no one is happier than me right now. I’m truly on the verge of fulfilling my dream soon. I’m happy and grateful for the honor I have to defend our beautiful country and Am Yisrael, the Jewish people.

Even if something happens to me, I don’t allow you to sink into sorrow. I had the privilege to fulfill my dream and my mission and you can be sure that I’m looking down on you and smiling a huge smile. I will probably sit next to Sabba (Grandpa) and we’ll make up for lost time – we’ll each tell about our experiences and what changed from war to war. Maybe we’ll also talk a little about politics, I’ll ask him what his opinion is.

If God forbid, you're sitting shiva, the traditional seven days of mourning, transform it into a week of friends, family, and fun. There should be food – meat of course – beers, sweet drinks, nuts, tea and of course, Ima's cookies – Mom's cookies. Make jokes, hear stories, and meet all my friends you haven't met yet. I'm jealous of you, I would have liked to sit there and see everyone.

Another very very important point. If God forbid, I fall into captivity, dead or alive, I'm not willing for any soldier or civilian to be injured by some deal to free me. I don't allow you to lead a campaign or anything like that. I'm not willing for terrorists to be freed for me – in any way, shape, or form. Please don't breach my request.

I'll say it again – I left home without even being called up to the reserves. I'm full of pride and a sense of mission. I always said that if I need to die, at least may it happen while defending others and our country.”

Sarit Zussman said: *“He freed us from many doubts. He left with a full heart, out of great love. He strengthened us and asked us to be happy. There is something liberating in this clarity that allows you to breathe. We had the opportunity to meet all his sweet friends, the ones we didn't get to meet and only heard stories about... We will be sad forever, but we will try to enjoy the pleasures of the little things in life.”*

- » From this letter, what do you know about Ben? What kind of a person was he?
- » Zussman makes it clear that he knew what he was willing to die for – and live for – do you?
- » How do you explain his mother Sarit's reaction? Does it make sense to you?
- » What else could she have said?
- » What lessons can we learn from Ben and hundreds of other soldiers who have written similar letters?



Maggid

מגיד

Rabbi Ovadia Yosef

“It is a mitzvah to kiss the stones of the Wall and show affection to its dust...”

As we get to the heart of the story – The Maggid – the retelling, HaRav Ovadia Yosef (1920–2013) helps us realize the interplay in the Seder, in Judaism, in Zionism, in life, between words and actions, the physical and the spiritual. Born in Iraq in 1920, he moved with his family to Mandatory Palestine in 1924. Eventually, he rose to be Israel’s Sephardic Chief Rabbi and the Mizrahi community’s iconic leader. Yosef agreed with Religious Zionists like Abraham Isaac Kook that Zionism, meaning the return to the homeland, was the *atchalta d’geula*, the beginning of the redemption.

In his halachic – legal -- opinions, Rabbi Yosef emphasized how the holiness of the Land of Israel would awaken the people of Israel. In describing the power of visiting the Western Wall, he invites us all – religious and secular -- to think about the body and the soul, the power of place and the power of ideas, and the dance, especially Seder night, that invites us to feel the abstract, the cosmic, through deep prayers and surprisingly simple rituals that could even sanctify dust:

“Thus, the custom of the faithful of Israel, who pray and pour out their pleas and whispers near the Western Wall, which is a remnant of our Temple. The holiness of the place causes those who enter the courtyards of God to awaken with sacred fervor, with sparks of a divine flame, to

pray with devotion, awe, and reverence. And blessed is the one who directs his heart in pure and clear prayer before the Blessed God, for he is assured that his prayer will not return empty, as it is written (Psalms 10): 'You will prepare their heart, You will incline Your ear.' Meaning, if he is helped from the heavens to focus his heart in his prayer, then certainly the ears of God, as it were, listen to his plea. And it is a mitzvah to kiss the stones of the Wall and show affection to its dust, as it is written: 'For Your servants desire her stones and favor her dust.' [Ketubot 112, Yalkut Yosef, Halacha 160 - Synagogue, page 272]."



The Bread of Affliction

הא לחמא עניא

“Now we are slaves, next year may we be free”

Natan Sharansky

Fear No Evil (1988)

As we start contemplating the passage from slavery to freedom, we learn from Soviet Jews who actually made that move. One of them, Natan Sharansky, a recent Israel Prize winner, teaches that learning about Israel, about Judaism, about his identity in 1967, is what propelled him to yearn for freedom – and fight for it, for himself and others. His teaching – and others throughout the night – challenge us to think about the balance between particular national pride or identity and the broader quest for universal human rights and freedoms.

“A basic, eternal truth was returning to the Jews of Russia—that personal freedom wasn’t something you could achieve through assimilation. It was available only by reclaiming your historical roots.”

- » How can you achieve “freedom” by “reclaiming your historical roots”: don’t we usually see our “historical roots” as burdens?
- » Think of three moments in the Seder that reinforce Sharansky’s notion that by drilling into history and identity we truly achieve freedom – and only then can we fight for human rights.
- » Think of three examples in history or your own life that reinforce that teaching.

Mah Nishtana מה נשתנה

Hillel Halkin

Letters to an American Jewish Friend (1977, 2013)

In 1977, a translator, writer, and intellectual who has lived in Zichron Ya'akov since the 1970s, challenged his American Jewish friends to think about Israel's significance to all of us, wherever we live. In this excerpt from his 2013 re-release, he invites us to contemplate the many miracles of Israel – and invites us to be a part of it, somehow....

“A great adventure. I wouldn't have missed it for the world. There's been nothing like it in human history. A small and ancient people loses its land and forgets how to speak its language; wanders defenselessly for hundreds, thousands, of years throughout the world with its God and sacred books; meets with contumely, persecution, violence, dispossession, banishment, mass murder; refuses to give up; refuses to surrender its faith; continues to believe that it will one day be restored to the land it lost; manages in the end, by dint of its own efforts, against all odds, to gather itself from the four corners of the earth and return there; learns again to speak the language of its old books; learns again to bear arms and defend itself; wrests its new-old home from the people that had replaced it; entrenches itself there; builds; fructifies; fortifies; repulses the enemies surrounding it; grows and prospers in the face of all threats. Had it not happened, could it have been imagined? Would anyone have believed it possible? Would anyone believe it possible that one could belong to this people, value one's connection to it, even

construct one's life around it, but have no interest in taking part in such an adventure? Would anyone believe that one could repeatedly declare how much this people means to one but think the adventure is entirely for others?"

- » In celebrating Israel's miracles, this text evokes Dayenu – but it is perhaps more fitting for Mah Nishtanah – with its pointed question: how can we turn away from this great adventure, these great miracles?
- » What is our motivation for joining at the Seder?
- » What pressing questions do we have in general – and particularly this year?



We Were Slaves עבדים היינו

Sir Isaiah Berlin

Jewish Slavery and Emancipation (1953)

It's hard to imagine what Eastern European-born Jews like the great Oxford philosopher Sir Isaiah Berlin experienced watching the Zionist Revolution unfold as – what everyone called it – a modern day Exodus. Thinking not just about Israel as a refuge for European Jews, then for Jews from Arab lands, but thinking about the way having an Israel straightened Jewish backs worldwide, Berlin challenges us to think about the power of freedom, the importance of dignity, the meaning of choice, and the inspiration we all get and can get, wherever we live, from that plucky Jewish democracy in the Middle East.

Israel “has restored to Jews not merely their personal dignity and status as human beings, but what is vastly more important, their right to choose as individuals how they shall live—the basic freedom of choice, the right to live or perish, go to the good or the bad in one’s own way, without which life is a form of slavery, as it has been, indeed, for the Jewish community for almost two thousand years.”

- » How did Israel restore to Jews “personal dignity” outside of Israel? Is that still true today?
- » What’s the difference here between “personal dignity” and “freedom of choice” according to Berlin?
- » How does Israel restore “freedom of choice” in our lives today?



Ma'aseh B'Rabbi Eliezer

מעשה ברבי אליעזר

Rabbi Eliezer sits with his colleagues: A Mini-Zionist Salon

The great danger of the Haggadah is that the text is so rich, our seder plate and agenda is so full, that we will just rush through the experience – or simply mimic the teachings from before. It's important to carve out time in the seder to debate, to talk, to learn actively. So, for Israel's 78th, why not replicate the small "salons" that popped up throughout Eastern Europe more than a century ago, debating three key Zionist ideas: that we are a people as well as a religion; that we have a homeland; and that we, like other nations, have rights to establish a state on that homeland.

With no additional text, do what Rabbi Eliezer and his colleagues did, think big - ask:

- » "What's the most inspiring experience you ever had in Israel? Jewishly in general?"
- » "What does having a State of Israel mean for us today?"
- » "What should we be doing to celebrate Israel's 78th?"
- » "Do we seek a closer a relationship with Israel – why or why not?"

Baruch Ha'Makom

ברוך המקום

The power of the seder, the power of each of our family's yitziat mitzrayim, exodus from Egypt, the power of Jewish history, is the Jew-Jitsu – turning the bad into good. Even as Rachel Goldberg crisscrossed the world, trying to find the right people to pressure the Qataris and then Hamas to free her son Hersh Polin- Goldberg, she refused to succumb to despair. The last his parents heard of Hersh, on October 7, part of his arm had been blown off by a Hamas grenade, as Hersh and other party-goers fled the Nova festival. Hamas terrorists murdered him in a tunnel, in late August, 2024.

This is a poem, this courageous mother wrote for her son, barely two months into this searing ordeal. Rachel Goldberg read it while addressing the United Nations, asking for help:

One Tiny Seed by **Rachel Goldberg**

There is a lullaby that says your mother will cry a thousand tears before you grow to be a man.

I have cried a million tears in the last 67 days.

We all have.

*And I know that way over there
there's another woman
who looks just like me
because we are all so very similar
and she has also been crying.*

*All those tears, a sea of tears
they all taste the same.*

*Can we take them
gather them up, remove the salt
and pour them over our desert of despair
and plant one tiny seed.
A seed wrapped in fear,
trauma, pain,
war and hope
and see what grows?
Could it be
that this woman
so very like me
that she and I could be sitting together in 50 years
laughing without teeth
because we have drunk so much sweet tea together
and now we are so very old
and our faces are creased
like worn-out brown paper bags.
And our sons
have their own grandchildren
and our sons have long lives
One of them without an arm
But who needs two arms anyway?
Is it all a dream?
A fantasy? A prophecy?
One tiny seed.*

The Four Sons ארבעה בנים

The Wise One

In this typology, and more broadly, the Wise Child is the one who asks the open-ended question, seeking to learn. Judaism teaches us to be open-minded enough to learn broadly, but not so open-minded our brains fall out, meaning we lose any sense of boundaries, or grounding. Unfortunately, today, too many people are quick to judge, to shut down, to cancel. In the *Jewish Journal* in 2024, one columnist Tabby Refael showed how to be wise, in assuming a questioners' good intentions, and in welcoming us all to broaden our understanding of Judaism and Jewish peoplehood, beyond our particular tribe.

From: Tabby Refael, "[How Ancient Persians Essentially Saved Judaism as We Know It Today](#)," *Jewish Journal*, March 20, 2024

This time of year, many non-Persian Jewish friends remind me that as an Iranian Jew, "my holiday" is just around the corner. It's true that Persian Jews feel a little possessive of Purim. Esther and Mordechai are even said to be buried in a tomb in what is now the city of Hamadan in Western Iran. But several years ago, one of my Ashkenazi friends offered a bold declaration during a Shabbat meal: "Tabby," he announced, "Purim isn't only a Persian Jewish holiday. It belongs to all of us, because all of us were there in Persia with you."

For a moment, a hush fell over the table as guests looked squarely in my direction for any semblance of offense. In an age when wokeism has hijacked much of our mental processing, was this Ashkenazi man, who

had wished me a “Good Shabbos,” and who sat within arms’ reach of a pungent bowl of German-style brined herring, appropriating my history as a Persian Jew?

Could he actually claim such ownership of Purim? And what was next? Ashkenazi Jews chasing one another with scallions during the “Dayenu” recitation of the Passover seder, in true Persian and Afghan Jewish-style? (One can only hope.)

Everyone waited for my reaction. After a few seconds, I smiled, slammed my hand on the table (the herring was a safe distance away) and shouted, “Of course! You were there as well!”

I immediately understood what my friend meant.... every Jew today owes ancient Persian Jewry a debt of gratitude for having essentially saved Judaism and Jewish learning. And... at a time when the regime in Iran has never been more dangerous and provocative against the Jewish state, it was precisely the ancient Persian empire [of Cyrus the Great] that also played a role in saving Judaism [by proclaiming religious freedom throughout his lands and allowing the Jews to return to Jerusalem after the First Exile]....

When you’re Jewish, it’s all in the family. We truly are one big, extended family....Persian Jewish history is rife with paradoxes: For every Haman or rabidly antisemitic Ayatollah, there was a Cyrus....

- » What is the power of true inclusivity, of seeing all of us as sharing our story, rather than getting possessive regarding one ethnic or tribal strain versus another?
- » How do you balance telling your particular family story with the wider story of the Jewish people?
- » How do you explain this duality, this dance between the good and the bad, in Persian Jewish history, in Israel since October 7, in Jewish life, in life?

The Rebel or “Wicked” One:

Berl Katzenelson

“Revolution and Tradition” (1934)

The second of the four children in the famous Passover story has always been seen as wicked. But what if he is actually the creative rebel, the questioner, the challenger, the smasher of idols and the pursuer of truth? A Labor Zionist thinker, Berl Katzenelson, wrote an amazing essay in 1934 warning traditionalists not to be too staid – handcuffed by memory – and rebels not to be too sweeping – addicted to forgetfulness. That’s the key to what Theodor Herzl called “altneuland,” Israel as the old-new land, and that’s what the seder is all about – retaining tradition while still evolving in the modern world.

“A renewing and creative generation does not throw the cultural heritage of ages into the dustbin. It examines and scrutinizes, accepts and rejects..... People are endowed with two faculties—memory and forgetfulness. We cannot live without both. Were only memory to exist, then we would be crushed under its burden. We would become slaves to our memories, to our ancestors. Our physiognomy would then be a mere copy of preceding generations. And were we ruled entirely by forgetfulness, what place would there be for culture, science, self-consciousness, spiritual life?”

- » How does the Seder navigate this tension between memory and forgetfulness, rebellion and tradition?
- » How does Israel/Zionism?
- » How do you in your own life?

One Who Cannot Ask

Anne Roiphe: Generations of Memory (1981)

It's interesting to contemplate whether the "wicked child" is better or worse than the one who cannot ask. If the child is too young to ask, that's one thing but, as this passage about modern American Jewish distance from traditional Judaism suggests, what if you are so distant from all this ritual, all this primitive stuff, that you show up – but don't even try rebelling, don't even try changing, you just sit in silence, drifting away – isn't that worse? And, as the feminist writer and novelist Anne Roiphe suggested back in 1981, perhaps we need to go beyond our rational, universal liberal selves some time, and be passionate, primitive, mystical and mystified.

"... when I think of our traditions of the family, traditions that are eclectic, thin, without magic or destiny of time, I can see that we have made an error. I appreciate our Thanksgiving and Christmas. I know that I will make beautiful weddings for our daughters and that our funerals will serve well enough. But I do believe that the tensions of the ancient ways, the closeness of primitive magic, the patina of the ages and the sense of connection to past and future that are lacking in our lives are serious losses."

- » How important is tradition to you? Is your life "thin" – lacking in commitments and connections -- or "thick," layered, anchored, deep?
- » What's the connection between "primitive magic" and modern "thinness"?
- » How does Zionism bridge the "connection" between "past and future" – does it help avoid the "serious losses" Roiphe fears?
- » Consider also, from 1862, Moses Hess's rejection of assimilation in Rome and Jerusalem (below).
- » What are both Hess and Roiphe saying about the balance between assimilating and belonging? Between universalism and particularism?

Moses Hess

Rome and Jerusalem (1862)

“As long as Jews deny their nationality, as long as they lack the character to acknowledge that they belong to that unfortunate, persecuted, and maligned people, their false position must become ever more intolerable. What purpose does this deception serve? The nations of Europe have always regarded the existence of the Jews in their midst as an anomaly. We shall always remain strangers among the nations. . . .”

“The really dishonorable Jew is not the old-type, pious one who would rather have one’s tongue cut out than utter a word in denial of his nationality, but the modern kind who, like the German outcasts in foreign countries, is ashamed of one’s nationality because the hand of fate is pressing heavily upon one’s people. The beautiful phrases about humanity and enlightenment which these types use so freely to cloak their treason, their fear of being identified with their unfortunate brethren, will ultimately not protect them from the judgment of public opinion.”

“These modern Jews hide in vain behind their geographical and philosophical alibis. You may mask yourself a thousand times over; you may change your name, religion, and character; you may travel through the world incognito, so that people may not recognize the Jew in you; yet every insult to the Jewish name will strike you even more than the honest man who admits his Jewish loyalties and who fights for the honor of the Jewish name. . . .”

“The national character of Judaism does not exclude universalism and modern civilization; on the contrary, these values are the logical effect of our national character. If I nonetheless emphasize the national root of Judaism rather than its universalist blooms, that is because in our time people are all too prone to gather and deck themselves out with the pretty flowers of the cultural heritage rather than to cultivate them in the soil in which they can grow.”



And There Became a Nation

ויהי שם לגוי

David Ben Gurion “Am Segula” (1970)

What makes any nation a nation – and what makes this particular Jewish nation, a nation? As the Haggadah tells the story of the Jewish people, we encounter a nation like others – but one that embraces a special mission. David Ben-Gurion, Israel’s founding prime minister, didn’t want his new country just to be another post-colonial state. He wanted Israel to be a light unto the nations, tapping what he called, in his excellent phrase, Jews’ “chronic idealism.” Decades later, his protégé Shimon Peres popularized the flip side of that by discussing the Jewish people’s “Dissatisfaction gene,” which Peres – and his mentor – believed – came not from crankiness but from this chronic idealism, from high expectations that Israel would be an Am Segula, a virtuous nation.

“Am Segula implies an extra burden, an added responsibility to perform with a virtue born of conscience and to listen to what Elijah later called ‘the still, small voice.’ . . . I have always been very concerned, secularist though I am, with this country’s spiritual state.... You cannot reach for the higher virtue without being an idealist. The Jews are chronic idealists, which make me humbly glad to belong to this people and to have shared in their noble epic....”

- » Ben-Gurion defined “Am Segula” as a virtuous nation – do you agree that you need to be an “chronic idealist” to achieve his lofty goals?
- » How central is this mission to your understanding of what the Jewish people are all about? To what Israel is all about?
- » How does Israel live about to these ideals? How does it not? How can we – and the Zionist Idea – help Israel reach higher?



And Numerous **ורב**

David Mamet and Anita Shapira

Perhaps the most-compelling Zionist bridge to this year's still Corona-shadowed Seder, can be built via a pithy line by the American playwright David Mamet (b. 1947) – and a longer comment in a 2012 essay by the Israeli historian Anita Shapira (b. 1940). Our mass experience of enforced isolation just a few seders ago, these improvised rules about social distancing, could have spun us further and further away from each other, burrowing ever deeper into our high-tech age of hyper-individuation. Instead, this social deprivation increased our collective craving for collectives. Why???? This Passover, let's contemplate how much richer our lives are by a thick web of associations, commitments, references, rituals. And how much more meaningful life is when played out in plural than alone.

David Mamet writes:

“Real life consists in belonging.”

Anita Shapira writes:

“Zionism has always focused on the collective, its assumption being that national redemption would also promote personal redemption. It is high time that we recapture the sense of togetherness we've lost, the togetherness that was the cohesive power—and gift—of Zionism.”

- » “Numerous” is about size but it’s also about the meaning of collective power – going from the I to the us, the individual to the community. What have we learned about the power of community these last few weeks?
- » How is real life defined by belonging? How is it not?
- » How do we build a cohesive power – as Jews? As citizens?



And the Egyptians abused us and afflicted us

וִירְעוּ אֶתֵנוּ
הַמִּצְרִים
וַיַּעֲנוּנוּ

Since October 7, many of us have confronted Jew-hatred for the first time in our lives.

We need to decide: do we flee or fight, do we dodge confrontation or keep living our lives, as some try to make anything Israel, Zionist, or even Jewish radioactive. On March 7, 2024, David Suissa of the [Jewish Journal](#) warned “We Can’t Allow Fear to Quiet Us Down”:

Instead of caving... our community should push back at every turn. One, we should continue the fight to eliminate the harassment and intimidation of Jews using all legal means at our disposal; and two, stage more and more Jewish events while insisting on better and tougher security.

What shouldn't be an option is to give in to the intimidators. Any time we do so is another victory for the haters. As a friend mentioned recently, Jew haters would love nothing better than to move Jewish and Zionist voices 'underground', perhaps because they know the power of our collective voice.

Indeed, if there is one freedom Jews have valued in our long journey in America it is the freedom to speak freely and without fear. That freedom is priceless not just for Jews but for anyone who understands the soul of our country.

How ironic that haters are now using their own freedom of expression to suffocate ours. It's the cynicism of 'freedom of speech for me, but not for thee.'

It's bad enough that we're forced to confront a troubling rise in antisemitic bullying. The least we can do is make sure we come out of this fight with a louder and more assertive voice, not a quieter one.

And that includes not moving our events to Zoom.”

- » Have you or friends of yours experienced Jew-hatred since October 7? What happened? How did you feel?
- » How do you think your local Jewish community has responded to the upsurge in Jew-hatred? What has been effective – what hasn't worked?
- » Do you agree that the community needs to be more proactive and more proud?
- » What can we do to reach out to our non-Jewish friends – explaining to them that Jew-hatred is actually the disease of the non-Jew, not the problem of the Jew?

An illustration depicting the Ten Plagues of Egypt. The scene is set in a dark, blue-toned landscape. In the background, a city is on fire, with smoke rising into the sky. In the foreground, various animals are shown in distress: a lion, a bull, and a pig. Several people are visible, some appearing to be in pain or mourning. In the middle ground, there are several tombstones with Hebrew inscriptions: 'כָּנִים' (Kanim), 'עָרוֹב' (Arov), 'דָּבָר' (Davar), 'פֶּרֶד' (Pered), and 'אַרְבֵּה' (Arbeh). The overall atmosphere is one of tragedy and suffering.

The Ten Plagues

עשרת המכות

Muki Tsur The Soldiers' Chat (1967)

We express our ethical concerns and try to fulfill our moral mission to the world by never rejoicing in our enemy's sorrow. Spilling wine for each of the ten plagues -- and then some -- teaches that we are all God's creatures. Sometimes, we cannot avoid war, but we must never forget our responsibility to minimize the violence – and acknowledge the mutual suffering. Even in 1967, thousands of years later, when Arab armies sought Israel's destruction, Muki Tsur and his comrades on kibbutz quoted in the famous book *The Seventh Day* -- in Hebrew *The Soldiers' Chat* -- remembered their moral responsibilities – and expressed their regrets. Even in 1967, this new generation of Israelis still felt the pain of Europe, the warnings of Europe, the fear of enjoying their newfound power too much.

“Our feelings are mixed. We swore never to return to the Europe of the Holocaust; yet we refuse to lose that Jewish sense of identifying with victims. We are the ultimate contrast to the ghetto Jew who witnessed the slaughter, felt utterly helpless, heard the cries, yet could only rebel at heart while dreaming about gaining the strength to react, strike back, fight. We do react, strike back, fight, for we have no choice—while dreaming of being able to stop one day, and live in peace.”

- » How does an army balance between “striking back” and “identifying with victims”? Does Israel succeed or fail in striking that balance? How?
- » In what other ways do you sense the desire to “contrast” with the ghetto in Modern Israel?
- » How in Israel – and our own lives -- have we left the ghetto Jew behind? How have we not?
- » In these days of division and confusion, how do you experience Muki Tsur’s challenge to fight – because there’s no choice – without stopping to dream about the day after?

In that context, consider the assessment of John Spencer, an urban warfare expert at West Point: *“The truth is that Israel has painstakingly followed the laws of armed conflict and implemented many steps to prevent civilian casualties, despite enormous challenges. Israel’s military faced over 30,000 Hamas militants in over 400 miles of defensive and offensive tunnels embedded in and under civilian areas, populations and protected sites such as hospitals, mosques, schools, and United Nations facilities across multiple cities.... Ultimately, comparisons with both past and modern cases highlight the fact that there is almost no way to defeat an entrenched enemy defender without destruction, even while implementing all feasible precautions and limits on the use of force required by the laws of war.”*

Newsweek, 12 Feb 2024



A Modern Dayenu Celebrating Israel's 78th Anniversary

After thanking God for the many miracles of the Exodus, the flight from Egypt, let's contemplate the amazing self-generated miracles of the Zionist movement. This was a flight from a latter-day Egypt of Exile, of powerlessness and humiliation, into a movement that helped create a modern state that, for all its challenges, still makes all of us prouder, stronger freer. This year, let's use the Seders not just to start counting the Omer toward Shavuot, but also to count toward the Yom Ha'atzmaut, Israel Independence Day celebrations, even with the fears and challenges of this moment!

How many benefits did we generate for ourselves and the world with the Zionist Leap of Hope—Theodor Herzl's vision that tomorrow will be better than today, and that it is our responsibility to roll up our sleeves and make it happen?

If Zionists had only re-established Jewish sovereignty in the Jewish homeland— Dayenu! That, would have been miraculous enough.

If Zionists had only offered a welcoming Jewish home to Holocaust survivors, refugees from Arab lands, and other oppressed Jews while preserving civil liberties and free immigration for all—Dayenu! That, would have been miraculous enough.

If Zionists had only returned the Jews to history, transforming Jews' image from the world's victims to actors on history's stage, with rights and responsibilities— Dayenu! That, would have been miraculous enough.

If Zionists had only built a western-style capitalist democracy with a strong Jewish flavor—Dayenu! That, would have been miraculous enough.

If Zionists had only created a dynamic old-new Jewish culture making Israel a central force in revitalizing Jewish secular and religious life in the Jewish homeland and abroad while serving as a bastion of Western culture too—Dayenu! That, would have been miraculous enough.

If Zionists had only revived Hebrew, developing “lashon hakodesh,” the Holy Language, into a living language for everyday life reflecting and fueling our national revival—Dayenu! That, would have been miraculous enough.

If Zionists had only strengthened a proud Diaspora, giving all Jews throughout the world more spring in our steps and more inspiring songs in our hearts—Dayenu! That, would have been miraculous enough.

How much more so are the many benefits that Zionism doubled and quadrupled for us, in Israel and throughout the world? Thanks to this movement of Jewish nationalism, rooted in our sense that we are a people, Am Yisrael, with ties to a particular homeland, Eretz Yisrael, and rights to establish a state in that homeland, Medinat Yisrael.

Therefore, in merely 78 years since 1948, we, the Jewish people:

- » *Re-established Jewish sovereignty in the Jewish homeland.*
- » *Welcomed home over three million Jewish refugees.*
- » *Transformed the Jew's image from the world's victim to actors on history's stage.*
- » *Built a western-style capitalist democracy with a strong Jewish flavor.*

- » *Created a dynamic old-new Jewish culture.*
- » *Revived Hebrew.*
- » *Strengthened a proud Diaspora.*

We did all of this while being well-aware that we must keep dreaming, building, improving. Because for all we have achieved, we have not yet fulfilled all our high ideals. Still, at this moment, we celebrate all the good, keep striving for better, continue to escape from our old traumas, our old weaknesses, our perennial powerlessness, our ever-so-draining victimhood, and sing “Dayenu!”

Gil Troy

Follow-up Thoughts:

- » Some might prefer to thank God, others thank the Zionists, still others thank both. Think about it. Did Zionism have to be secular enough to succeed yet Jewish enough to be legitimate -- or Jewish enough to succeed yet secular enough to be legitimate? No matter how secular and person-centered you might be, it was the Jewishness of the state, the longstanding ties to this particular homeland of Israel, that united Jews, mobilized them, and connected them to one another and to Israel. And no matter how religious and God-centered you might be, if you credit God with creating the State, the Zionist movement still had to speak the secular languages of nationalism and national rights and democracy and national institutions, to function in the modern world and be accepted in the community of nations.
- » More simply, this is a chance to ask about the “miracles” of Israel. How do they affect your life? And what is the next miracle we most desperately need in the Promised Land today?



רבן גמליאל Rabban Gamliel

It's a fascinating paradox. Just as the Haggadah reduces this wonderfully complex holiday of Passover to three fundamental symbols – Pesach, Matzah and Maror -- the Paschal sacrifice, the bread of affliction, and bitter herbs – it goes wildly philosophical on us too. “Al Shoom Mah,” it asks – “what’s it all about, what does it mean?” That open question, which inviting debate, helps us understand one of the great paradoxes of Israeli and Jewish history. Most of Israel’s founders, and most of the three million immigrants Israel has absorbed, did not come from democracies. But Israel has a robust democratic culture, because Judaism itself inculcates within its most traditional adherents the democratic ideas that we all have inherent rights and dignity because we are created in God’s image – and that we all have something to say and argue and yell and scream about.

In that spirit, and well-aware of the robust debate occurring in Israel today about what it means to create a modern Jewish democracy, let’s debate what it means for Israel to be the first democracy in world history that is Jewish, and the first polity in Jewish history that is democratic:

- » *“The Land of Israel was the birthplace of the Jewish people. Here their spiritual, religious and political identity was shaped. Here they first attained statehood, created cultural values of national and universal significance and gave to the world the eternal Book of Books.”* **Israel’s Declaration of Independence, 1948**

- » *“My Zionism is a secular nationalism. The Jewish people have a twofold character: We are a nation—Am Yisra’el, the people Israel—and we are what Americans call a “community of faith.” This is not a common combination; it is shaped by the peculiar history of the Jews. But statehood requires separation: the Jewish state should be an expression of the people, not of the faith (which many of our people don’t share, at least not in its Orthodox form).”*

Michael Walzer (b. 1935)

- » *“If you are religious you are supposed to be right-wing. If you are left-wing, you’re supposed to be secular. Now, it’s not just the fault of the religious that have moved so dramatically to the right, I think it’s also the fault of the secular Israelis who have gotten it into their heads that they can do away with their Jewish identity, with their Jewish culture. This is ridiculous. I annoy my secular Israeli friends by telling them from every podium that if they do not see themselves as Jews that means that they are imperialists, colonialists, who have no business being here. They should leave the land to its native people. The indigenous people then are the Palestinians. The reason you are here is because you are a Jew!”*

Leah Shakdiel (b. 1951)

- » *“A fundamental argument divides the Jewish public in Israel: Is the core principle we are called upon to uphold that of human freedom and dignity, the defense of which is the state’s primary objective, or is it the preservation of the Jewish people and Jewish identity? These values may be compared to two carts, which on a broad flat plain can travel side by side in perfect harmony. On a steep and narrow incline, however, when one cart is forced to stand aside to make way for the other, liberals will prefer the cart bearing democratic values while the guardians of tradition will opt for the second cart. I count myself among the second group and the basic unit to which I belong, for better or worse, is that of the Jewish people.”* **Rabbi Ya’akov Medan (b. 1950)**

- » Which texts best represents your position -- how do you balance “Jewish” and “democratic” -- which cart should go first when turning a narrow corner?
- » Do you accept the balance of Israel’s Declaration of Independence, trying to synthesize both positions?
- » More personally, do you define yourself as more of a religious-Jew, more of a peoplehood-Jew, or both? And what do your closest friends and relatives think?



Bitter Herbs מרור

Hayyim Nahman Bialik City of Slaughter (1903)

You taste freedom by remembering unfreedom – the misery in Egypt, the pogroms in Russia, the Holocaust. The seder challenges us to remember what our people suffered thousands of years ago – and subsequently. Feeling the pain in the great poet Hayim Nahman Bialik’s poem, the Jewish Guernica, written after the Kishinev Pogroms in 1903, we wonder, “why anti-Semitism”: why have so many hated the Jews so much? why does it continue, today? And what can we learn from that?

“Arise and go now to the city of slaughter/ Into its courtyard wind thy way;/ There with thine own hand touch, and with the eyes of/ thine head,/ Behold on tree, on stone, on fence, on mural clay,/ The spattered blood and dried brains of the dead....”

- » How central has Jew-hatred been in shaping your understanding of Judaism?
- » How problematic has Jew-hatred been in your own life?
- » How do you balance Katzenelson’s memory and forgetfulness regarding Jew-hatred?
- » How do you feel when Neo-Nazis yell “Jews will not replace us?” and take their hatred of the Jewish people out on individual Jews?

- » How do you feel when some Progressives protesters falsely blame the Israeli army for American police brutality celebrate the rape and murder of October 7 as some kind of victory, and take their hatred of the Jewish state out on individual Jews?
- » Why do we have such a hard time recognizing that Jew-hatred today sometimes comes from the Left and sometimes from the Right?



In Every Generation

בכל דור ודור

Yehudah Amichai

All the Generations Before Me (1968)

We are compelled to tell and retell the story, not just to remember our ancestors' suffering, not just to echo the Zionist line "Never Again," but to learn from the past. The poet Yehudah Amichai wondered what materials, experiences, and yes, values and beliefs, came from his ancestors -- and what kind of obligation that entails -- which is what the Seder and Zionism are all about.

"All the generations before me contributed me/ Little by little so that I will arise here in Jerusalem/ All at once, like a synagogue or a charitable institution/It obligates. My name is my donor's name./It obligates."

- » How did all the generations before you contribute to you?
- » Does it obligate? How? Why?
- » Now, read the late Israeli jurist Ruth Gavison. How does Amichai's sense of rootedness, of obligation, help people be "thick" and not "thin" in their identities? How does this help us understand the balance between Israel as Jewish and democratic, not always choosing between the two?

Statement of Principles Gavison-Medan Covenant (2003)

"I believe that a humanism or liberalism advocating a 'thin person,' limited only to one's self or one's family, is unnecessarily sterile. Affiliations with particular group identities offer individuals central foundational missions in their lives.

Indeed, the human rights tradition recognizes freedom of religion and association along with a people's right to self-determination. There is, then, a general universal demand that individuals or groups be permitted to act on behalf of collective particularistic goals (within the operative constraints of the general humanistic framework). I, therefore, reject the claim that there is a built-in contradiction between the Jewish nationalist movement, Zionism, and human rights, which differs in some essential way from the perennial tension between universal values and a particular culture. It is interesting to note that many of those who insist on this alleged contradiction nevertheless champion other national movements enthusiastically, including Palestinian nationalism...."

Ruth Gavison



When Israel Left Egypt

בצאת ישראל ממצרים

(mini-Hallel in Maggid)

Rabbi Yitz Greenberg, The Jewish Way, 1988

The trauma of exile and of slavery hangs over the Hagaddah, even as we sing songs of Praise, the first Hallel. Rabbi Yitz Greenberg has built his extraordinary career on that classically Jewish seesaw, teaching about the Holocaust, mobilizing to free Soviet Jewry, while delighting in Israel and our newfound freedom. In his epic holiday guide *The Jewish Way*, this theologian and historian turns accountant, showing how Israel Independence Day, then Jerusalem Day, cancel out one day of mourning at a time, adding thanksgiving celebrations in return. This shift challenges us to wonder how much we internalize the historical trauma – and the ongoing hurts of anti-Semitism and anti-Zionism – and to wonder how to move forward to celebrate Israel, to celebrate Jewish life today.

“For nineteen hundred years, as the role of Jewish suffering unfolded, the Jewish calendar expanded with days of sadness.... In Israel’s War of Independence an aroused Jewry beat back the invaders by the narrowest of margins. The victory upheld the state, and the celebration of that redemption added Yom Ha’Atzmaut—a happy day—to the calendar. Since Independence Day fell during the Sefirah Period, the modern Exodus reclaimed one day from the ranks of the days of sorrow and added it to the days of joy.... Step by step, victory by victory, the Jewish people are reversing the tide of Jewish history from mourning to celebration, from death to life.”

- » Think of one or two historical periods when your ancestors celebrated the Seder -- compare their tone and content and ours -- what do you imagine was similar? What was different?
- » How can Israel, with all the challenges we read about in the paper, be the 8th happiest country in the world? What does that teach us about Judaism? About Zionism?
- » Does the Jewish calendar need to be shifted in tone, or is the balance just right now? How could that be done?



Blessed are You, ברוך אתה God, Redeemer אדוני, of Israel גאל ישראל

My cousin, Adele Raemer, spent 11 hours in her protected room on Kibbutz Nirim. Miraculously, she and her family survived. But she knows that the problems multiplied after October 7th – so, do, did the opportunities for redemption as [she wrote](#) on March 5, 2024, “My View from the Border: One Hundred and Fifty Days Into Swords of Iron”:

“...October 7th was just the beginning. It triggered a series of challenging events that continue till today. It has led to the indefinite uprooting of residents from our homes, families, places of work, and schools. With no idea of how long we would be hosted in hotels in Eilat, refugees in our own land, uncertainty loomed over when or whether we would ever be able to return home. The sense of displacement and loss is a heavy burden to carry as we grapple with an uncertain future and the daunting task of preserving the fabric of our community and rebuilding our lives from the ground up....

One of the bright lights was that, in our darkest times we received amazing hugs from Am Yisrael – the people of Israel – as well as philanthropic bodies such as the International Fellowship for Christians and Jews and different retailers (Fox Home, Azrieli). They provided generous donations to purchase clothing and other basic items at our darkest time of need, after having left everything behind in a warzone. I will never forget the site that greeted us in the hotel that very first night when we arrived in Eilat, traumatized and weary after surviving the attacks, being awake for most of the previous two days and evacuating

under fire through an active war zone. There, an entire hall of essential items awaited us in the hotel. It was jam-packed with clothing of all sizes, toothpaste, diapers and other basic supplies that had been donated by individuals and retailers, collected already on the 7th and 8th of October by the citizens of the city to help those of us who escaped with nothing but the clothes on our backs. Our homes had been destroyed, but thanks to the people who welcomed us so warmly, our spirits were being protected....

It's hard to believe that this nightmare from which I am still hoping to wake up began 5 months ago, during the swan-song of summer and here we are: fields of red anemones are already making way for the yellow and white chrysanthemums of spring. We haven't yet taken down our traditional Sukkot holiday huts, but Passover is already just around the corner. In the same way that the mantra of the Nova festival survivors is: "We will dance again," my mantra and that of many from my kibbutz and my region is: "We will build again." Bigger. Better. Safer. Stronger. We will again be pioneers, as we were 77 years ago when our veteran members founded our kibbutz in the barren desert, leading the way and inspiring other communities to return and rebuild, as well. For ourselves, and for the young families whom we hope will return, and the new ones we hope will want to join us in the future. Not all of our families will return, I realize that. I can't even say if my daughter will return with my grandchildren. But I will return, because if you allow terror to chase you away, you had better get used to running...."

****Update: Adele and much of Kibbutz Nirim returned this summer!**

- » Did you help give the "amazing hug" Adele and others experienced? What did you do? If not, what can you still do?
- » How does Israel move forward? What should the Day After look like, ideologically, theologically, not just politically?
- » What can the modern pioneering look like in Israel, throughout the Jewish world?



The Meal

שולחן עורך

This year, some may question how we can have a festive Passover at all, with so much death hovering about, with so many threats still not resolved. The Jewish and Zionist response is – how can we not. Israelis keep shouting “Lo Nafseek Lirkod,” We won’t stop dancing! And that is the message of yet another heartbreaking Last Will and Testament, written by a 21-year-old soldier, Staff Sgt. Shachar Fridman, a member of the Paratroopers’ Brigade 101st Battalion, killed while fighting Hamas terrorists in Gaza on November 19. Fridman was interviewed shortly after his unit fought off terrorists on October 7. Still reeling from the fights in Tel Aviv over publicly observing Yom Kippur, he admitted he even considered leaving the country. But he told his interviewers, that after October 7: “I see the nation now, and I see a future for our state... I am ready to fight for a country like this.”

A month later, Israelis were moved by his Ethical Will, which can inspire us – and free us – to enjoy ourselves over this Pesach meal, and holiday:

- ***Be Good People.***
- ***Smile.***
- ***Strive to make every person you meet smile too.***
- *Be open to criticism and always try to improve yourself.*

- *Know that the greatest quality a person can have is the ability to make another person happy.*
- *Open your ears to the needs of others and open your eyes to their pain.*
- *Pay attention to the small people who fall in the corners of the eye.*
- *Appreciate the little things the world has to offer, especially nature and music.*
- ***Love yourselves and the world. When you radiate happiness, a circle of joy will slowly form that will create a better world.***

And most importantly, be good people in your own way. Don't let society dictate to you what makes you good people, just try as hard as you can, and even when you fall, know that that's the road to success.



Song of Ascent שיר המעלות

(before Birkat HaMazon)

Rabbi Ben-Zion Meir Chai Uziel (c. 1950)

You cannot sing Birkat HaMazon, the Grace after Meal, without constantly bumping into the Land of Israel – and Jerusalem. This powerful poetic presence reminds us how central the Land of Israel is to the Torah and People of Israel, and how deeply spiritual the Jewish and Zionist ties are to the land. The first Sephardi Jewish rabbi, Rabbi Uziel, who helped write the Prayer for the State of Israel, captures this by taking a classically Western idea “nationalism” and showing not just its Jewish roots and resonance, but its deep spiritual and moral power.

Navigating all these worlds helps us understand why American Jews fit so well in America. Many of the building blocks of America, of liberal democracy, are equally steeped and shaped by the Bible, by Jewish ideas, and by what really is this parallel Zionist sensibility.

Nationalism is “a worldview committed to improving our human life on earth. It’s about achieving the peak of human consciousness and success, by imparting the truths about goodness and law and morality to our descendants and spreading these spiritual ideas and ethics ‘not by power and not by force’ but with explanations and insights that foster appreciation of these attitudes’ spiritual power and truth, and that cultivate goodness within all those who follow their ways....”

- » Is there a spiritual power to nationalism in general? To Zionism in particular?
- » How can nationalists tap into this positive power Rabbi Uziel addresses, and not the negative power we often see today?
- » Compare the text with the Song of Ascents: what's Zionist about each?

Compare the text with Yuli Tamir's thoughts on nationalism and particularism, when she writes, in *A Jewish and Democratic State* (2000)

"This ideal state of neutrality misconstrues the role of culture in public life. Trying to restrict culture to the private sphere, it empties the state of its symbolic role. The result is a state that can serve all its citizens impartially but cannot be a home to any of them. A home is not an institution, not even a fair and efficient one, but a place to which one is tied emotionally, which reflects one's history, memories, fears, and hopes. A home cannot have merely universal features; it must always be embedded in the particular."

- » How do we have a "home" and not just an "institution" as a nation – what are the advantages and disadvantages?

Pour out Your Wrath

שפך חמתך

Leonard Fein “Days of Awe” 1982

My late grandfather Leon Gerson z”l really did pour out his wrath when chanting this passage, summoning centuries of suffering as his voice quivered and he read these words every seder. The writer and social activist Leonard Fein was well aware of the psychic, moral, and physical costs required to keep alive what he called the “Jewish body,” but he never stopped worrying about the Jewish soul. His charming call for a “nervous breakdown” is that rare acknowledgment -- which flows through the Haggadah -- that life is complex, that there are competing forces and impulses we as humans have to balance, which Fein did for decades as an American Jewish leader – and critic.

“There are two kinds of Zionists in the world: most of us are both. We want to be normal, we want to be special: we want to be a light unto the nations, we want to be a nation like all the others. ... I vastly prefer a people that chooses to risk a collective nervous breakdown, as we do, by endorsing both visions, both versions.”

- » What kind of Zionist are you? Do you want Israel to be normal or special?
- » How is Israel normal? How is it special?
- » What are the benefits of Fein’s “nervous breakdown”?



Hallel

הלל

Golda Meir

“Speech at the UN Marking Israel’s 10th Anniversary” (1958)

Just as the Haggadah ritualizes the giving of thanks, so, too, we should ritualize moments to appreciate the miracle of Israel, its many accomplishments. Thinking back to 1958 – it’s amazing how much had already been done – and equally amazing how much has been done since.

“... our purposes since the establishment of our state have remained unaltered: to rebuild a poor, barren land, to enable the return of an ancient people to its source, to regain our independence and national self-expression, to live in peace with all peoples near and far, and to take our place in the community of free nations.”

- » How many of those goals has Israel fulfilled?
- » How many new goals and achievements would you add for a 78th anniversary celebration?
- » What achievements do you hope Israel will be able to celebrate on its 80th?



Next Year in Jerusalem

לשנה הבאה בירושלים

Naomi Shemer Yerushalayim Shel Zahav (1967)

All countries have capitals that house their government buildings, few nations have capital cities that house their people's souls. Think about the many ways Jerusalem functions as a metaphor in the Haggadah – and through Jewish history – of Jewish freedom and of power, of Jewish longing and of spirituality. That one songwriter could capture that so well in 1967 as Naomi Shemer did, especially, then, on the eve of a terrifying yet ultimately transformational war, is one of those cinematic moments come to life you couldn't make convincing in a novel, but the historian records and tries to explain as well as humanly possible.

“Back to the wells and to the fountains/Within the ancient walls/ The sound of horn from Temple mountain/ Loudly and proudly calls...” [or just sing the whole song!!!]

- » What was your first impression of Jerusalem? Why is it such a powerful symbol to Jews? To others?
- » What significance, if any, in your life, does the Jews' return “Back to the wells” have?
- » How do you navigate Jerusalem's poetic and political significance, especially with the ongoing controversy around the US embassy re- location to Jerusalem – which few other countries have followed? Does that typically Zionist fusion lead to inspiration or just confusion?

Rebuild The Temple

אדיר הוא

Theodor Herzl, *Der Judenstaat* (1896)

Theodor Herzl was not the first Zionist, or the first Zionist visionary. He was, however, the founder of the formal Zionist movement and the man thus most responsible for helping modern Jewry leave its Egypt of perma-exile and reach the promised land of a rebuilt and now thriving Jewish state. So as one of the Seder's final songs contemplates the building of the Temple, it's worth contemplating the re-establishment of the Jewish State.

"We shall live at last as free people on our own soil, and die peacefully in our own homes. The world will be liberated by our freedom, enriched by our wealth, magnified by our greatness. And whatever we attempt there to accomplish for our own welfare, will react powerfully and beneficially for the good of humanity."

- » How can one people's return to their "own soil" do "good" for humanity? Are there better and worse forms of nationalism?
- » How has this people's return to their soil helped the world?
- » What do we hope to be liberated from now – personally?
Collectively as a people? Universally in the world?

An illustration of a family of seven people sitting around a dining table, reading a book titled 'CHAD GADYA'. The table is set with plates of food, including bread and meat, and wine glasses. The background features a menorah and a Star of David. The title 'Chad Gadya' is written in large white letters on the left, and 'חג גדיא' is written in large white Hebrew letters on the right. Below the title, the text 'CHAD GADYA - חג גדיא' is visible. A green horizontal line is drawn across the bottom of the illustration.

Chad Gadya חג גדיא

Rachel Sharansky Danziger (2018)

Finally, as Chad Gadya shows us the interconnectedness of it all, we end by looking at ourselves, the Torchbearers. We are the heirs of Moses and his generation. We are the heirs of Herzl and his generation. We are the heirs of Ben- Gurion and Meir and Sharansky and their generations. And we still have work to do, as Rachel Sharansky Danziger, the daughter of Natan and Avital Sharansky, reminds us.

“In Israel, we grow up in the shade of bigger-than-life heroes.... Our parents’ heroism enabled us to establish a living, happy society in Israel. As we participate in civil society, as we interact with each other, as we do our jobs well, we are building Israel from within.”

- » How do you build a country “from within”?
- » What indeed remains to be done in your country? In Israel?
- » How do you personally contribute? How can you?

DESSERT!

20 ZIONIST ONE-LINERS:

These can be linked to multiple passages but also:

They can be shared with Seder-goers, with each person getting one quotation on a small slip of paper and sharing one of three reactions either

- » “Hmm, this is interesting, it explains something about Zionist ideology or history”
- » “Uh-uh I disagree with the quotation”
- » “Wow, this really speaks to me and describes my Zionist vision (or one aspect of it).

Leon Pinsker (1821-1891)

The Jews are ghosts, ethereal, disconnected.... This pathological Judeophobia will haunt Europe until the Jews have a national home like all other nations.

Theodor Herzl (1860-1904)

We are a people – one people... We shall live at last as free people on our own soil, and in our own homes peacefully die.. The world will be liberated by our freedom, enriched by our wealth, magnified by our greatness.

Rachel Bluwstein (1890-1931)

I have not sung you, my country, not brought glory to your name with the great deeds of a hero or the spoils a battle yields. But on the shores of the Jordan my hands have planted a tree, and my feet have made a pathway through your fields.

Ahad Ha'am (1856-1927)

Judaism is fundamentally national, and all the efforts of the 'Reformers' to separate the Jewish religion from its national element have no result except to ruin both the nationalism and the religion.... From this center, the spirit of Judaism will radiate to the great circumference to inspire them with new life and to preserve the over-all unity of our people.

Ze'ev Jabotinsky (1880-1940)

The phenomenon called Zionism may include all kinds of dreams—a 'model community,' Hebrew culture, perhaps even a second edition of the Bible—but all this longing for wonderful toys of velvet and silver is nothing in comparison with that tangible momentum of irresistible distress and need by which we are propelled and borne.

Rav Abraham Yitzhak Kook (1865-1935)

The State of Israel, "is ideal in its foundation . . . the foundation of God's throne in the world." *Eretz Yisra'el* is part of the very essence of our nationhood; it is bound organically to its very life and inner being.

Henrietta Szold (1860-1945)

The Jewish national home will be "... a blessing for all future times redounding to the benefit not only of those who will make use of their sanctuary rights in Palestine, but also those who like ourselves, remaining in a happy, prosperous country, will be free to draw spiritual nourishment from a center dominated wholly by Jewish traditions and the Jewish ideals of universal peace and universal brotherhood."

David Ben-Gurion (1886-1973)

Israel cannot just be a refuge it has to be much, much more.... The new Jew builds *Am Segula*, an enlightened people...There are also Jews in the lands of prosperity who are deeply apprehensive about the growing

assimilation and the fragmentation of the Jewish soul in the Diaspora, who are increasingly aware that only in Israel can a Jew live a full life, both as a Jew and as a human being. . . .

Amos Oz (1939-2018)

I cannot use such words as “the promised land” or “the promised borders,” because I do not believe in the one who made the promise. Happy are those who do: their Zionism is simple and self-evident. Mine is hard and complicated. I am a Zionist in all that concerns the redemption of the Jews, but not when it comes to the redemption of the Holy Land. . . .

Menachem Begin (1912-1992)

The fighting Jew.... whom the world considered dead and buried never to rise again, has arisen.

Abraham Joshua Heschel (1907–1972)

The State of Israel is a spiritual revolution, not a one-time event, but an ongoing revolution.

Letty Cottin Pogrebin (b. 1939)

I am a feminist Zionist.

Zionism is to Jews what feminism is to women. Zionism began as a national liberation movement and has become an ongoing struggle for Jewish solidarity, pride, and unity. Similarly, feminism, which began as a gender-liberation movement, has become an ongoing struggle for women’s solidarity, pride, and unity. . . .

Zionism is simply an affirmative action plan on a national scale.

Eugene Borowitz (1924–2016)

There has been a tremendous positive, constructive, worthwhile impact of the State of Israel on Jews of my persuasion and on myself. That specific impact. . . has been a general sense of positive Jewish self-acceptance and . . . to help the synagogue point to a place where being a Jew is not only real, but visible... In my own case, what has strengthened and deepened has been a very personal existential sense of the particularity of what it is to be a Jew, the specificity of being a Jew as a member of an ethnic community.

Yael “Yuli” Tamir (b. 1954)

A home is not an institution, not even a fair and efficient one, but a place to which one is tied emotionally, which reflects one’s history, memories, fears, and hopes. A home cannot have merely universal features; it must always be embedded in the particular.

Stav Shaffir (b. 1985)

Occupy Zionism!

Don’t preach to us about Zionism, because real Zionism means dividing the budget equally among all the citizens. Real Zionism is taking care of the weak. Real Zionism is solidarity, not only in battle but in everyday life, day to day to watch out for each other. That is Israeliness. That is Zionism....

Benjamin Ish-Shalom (b. 1953)

Outside the land and without sovereignty, each person is responsible only for himself and his dependents. Inside the land with sovereign existence, responsibility becomes a national one, and an individual must choose the good of the collective over his own....

Einat Ramon (b. 1959)

My particularist perspectives: I am a Womanist and a Zionist.

Living in the Land of Israel grants Jews the opportunity to indulge their particularism at its best, expressing Jewishness every moment... We not only celebrate the Sabbath and the holidays on Jewish time and in our Jewish space, but, today, we run Israeli military, agriculture, industry, and economics on Torah time and in the Torah's sacred space.

Jonathan Sacks (1948-2020)

The Israel of continuity must become Jewry's classroom, the Diaspora's ongoing seminar in Jewish identity. Once, Israel saved Jews. In the future, it will save Judaism. . . .

The immediate question is less whether Jews are at home in London or Jerusalem than whether they are *at home in their Jewishness*...

The World Zionist Organization

Zionism, the national liberation movement of the Jewish people . . . views a Jewish, Zionist, democratic and secure State of Israel to be the expression of the common responsibility of the Jewish people.