

## A Seder of Strength & Struggle

Prior to Purim, I listened to a podcast called [Wondering Jews](#) with Mijal Bitton and Noam Weissman. With Noam traveling that week, Bitton had invited Tanya White, a Holocaust theologian, to reflect on questions of evil. White, who now lives in Israel, recalled the seder celebrations of her youth while growing up in England. Her grandfather, a Holocaust survivor, led the family seder. White tells us he was an extremely placid man, who never got angry. But every seder, he started yelling, really screaming. She recalled the moment in the seder when they read the *piyyut*, a Hebrew poem, [V'hi sheamda](#), where we say “God stood by us in every generation and keeps God’s promise, God doesn’t allow us to be destroyed.” It was then that he started screaming, “It’s not true, it’s not true. God didn’t save us.” White’s mother and sisters - all named for her grandfather’s three sisters who perished in the Holocaust - would say to him, “Look, look at your children, your grandchildren...” but he could not accept it.

In some ways this *piyyut* is quite paradoxical. For the Holocaust survivor, how could they not look at the world around them with such vivid memories that some survivors tried to blot out, and others tried to share, and not think about what could have been. What could it mean that God did not allow the enemy to rise up against them. The number on their arms and the scars on their souls are a testimony to the atrocities of their lived experiences. And yet, White and her sisters are also right, God did not destroy the Jewish people. They, and us as well, are the living testimony that the Nazis failed, and Jewish life continues to grow and thrive.

The Passover seder reflects the totality of the Jewish experience. It is one of pain and resilience, faith and fracture, disunity, and peoplehood. The Haggadah recalls God’s mighty hand that brought us up from Egypt on eagle’s wings and reminds us that Joseph’s bones were dug up and carried with the people to be laid to rest in the land of our ancestors. Just as this sacred night recalls our history, the seder reflects our present moment when we know the enemies in our midst call for our demise. And yet, the Passover seder speaks of our resilience and our hope when the prophet Elijah enters our homes and prays for a time when we will all know peace.

This is the essence of what it means to be a Jew. To know that the wounds that live in our soul have been passed on from one generation to the next; but, wounds and scars lead to more than pain, they lead to strength. Just as the human body builds muscle and the muscle grows stronger, the human soul builds resilience from wounds inflicted over time.

As we sit around our seder table this year, let us hold all the pain and strife from history as well as the present moment. But let us carry with us the notion that we are still here; we have endured; we will continue to grow stronger as a people. Wherever you celebrate your s’darim, I hope that even amid sadness, when there are hostages, Jewish souls that remain in captivity, we too can have the strength to say, “Let My People Go!”

## Journeying Together

I have always been struck by Michael Walzer’s words in our prayerbook, *Mishkan Tefilah*, which I often read before we sing the *Mi Chamocha*.

Standing on the parted shores of history

we still believe what we were taught  
before ever we stood on Sinai's foot;

that wherever we go, it is eternally Egypt  
that there is a better place, a promised land;  
that the winding way to that promise  
passes through the wilderness.

That there is no way to get from here to there  
except by joining hands, marching  
together.

Walzer is a leading American political thinker who has written about political theory and moral philosophy. This text is excerpted from his book entitled *Exodus and Revolution* in which he reflects on the real power of the Exodus story.

These words can be challenging as we read the idea that “wherever we go, it is eternally Egypt.” The notion of being stuck in a narrow place, suffering hardships, and an eternal metaphorical darkness might lead us to moments of despair. The next line reminds us that there is a better place, a promised land, and the road to get there may be winding. As we read these words, we reflect on our journey. Out on the horizon lies a vision of a better tomorrow. Jewish tradition teaches us about creating a world as it ought to be. Our initial reaction when we think about such a notion is that this describes the work of *tikkun olam*. That is, of course, true. However, might it also be possible that such words invite us to think about our personal day-to-day journeys? Surely, we all face challenging times, whether we encounter illness, obstacles along the way, or people who have harmed us. These words echo the ebb and flow of life, reminding us that we travel an unknown path from darkness to light, back to darkness, and—God willing—to light once more.

Walzer teaches us that there is only one path to get from the darkness we are in, to the light we hope to find. He notes that it is not the path; but the people with whom we travel that path. Whether the person with whom we travel is a trusted friend, a family member, a teacher, therapist, coach, or rabbi, we need people to share the journey with us.

I am reminded of a story in which a person is lost wandering in a forest. She doesn't know the way out. Finally, she encounters someone else, and says, “I am looking for the way out of the forest, I have walked in all these directions and have not yet found the way out. Do you know how to get out?” Her new travel partner replied, “Well, I have walked in all these directions, and they were not the way. Let's walk together and we will find the way out with each other.”

The story teaches us that, to find the way out, we have to travel with a trusted friend. This is the story of Passover. It is the message of our *People*, that we marched out of Egypt together, side-by-side. As I reflect on our world today, I am still reminded of the power of the Jewish people to come together to support one another in these continued times of crisis. Passover is the story of our people; it unites us in hope knowing that we build a better world and strengthen our people by journeying together.

As we do the final preparations for our seder gatherings this week, let us remember the sacred power of partnership and peoplehood.

