Welcoming Remarks for the Seder

I want to welcome all of you and wish you a happy Passover. There are fifteen steps to the Seder. The first is the reciting of Kiddush, the second is washing the hands, and the tenth step is the festive meal which we will reach in about an hour — give or take an hour.

Parts of the Haggadah we’ll read aloud, others quietly. I’ll share insights into some of it, but don’t worry, we will arrive at step 10, the meal, on time-ish.

An elderly rabbi is on a plane diligently studying Talmud. Sitting next to him is a professor of astrophysics. The professor turns to the rabbi and says: “I don’t mean to be disrespectful, but a rabbi your age must have been studying Talmud for decades. Why do you need to study so much? I can summarize all of Judaism in a few words: ‘Don’t do unto others what you don’t want done to you.’”

The rabbi responds: “You know professor, I don’t mean to be disrespectful, but why do you study so much? I could summarize all of astrophysics in a few words.”

The professor says, “Really, you can do that?”

“Yes,” says the rabbi, “‘Twinkle, twinkle little star.’”

Friends, the Seder summarizes the drama and sweep of three thousand years of Jewish history in the most remarkable way. Here’s how.

Many Jewish families throughout the world are blessed with young children able to sit at the Seder table alongside their grandparents. So often, Sedarim span three generations: grandparents, parents, and their children. Being that the average generation gap is thirty years, the typical Seder, therefore, spans sixty years of Jewish history.
However, when grandparents are present at the Seder table they share memories about the Sedarim they experienced as children. They tell us the stories their grandparents told them. Firsthand accounts that stretch back an additional three generations of Jewish history give us 120 years of firsthand Jewish knowledge at our Seder table.

[Pause for a moment]

But if we think about it, it’s even longer than that because the children at the Seder listening to their grandparents tell stories about their grandparents will one day tell these stories to their own grandchildren. So add another 90 years on top of the 120 years, and you get 210 years of firsthand Jewish history linked at the Passover Seder!

_Fifteen such Seder tables takes us back some 3,300 years to that great night when the Israelites ate their matzah in Egypt preparing for the original Exodus!_

[Pause]

What an incredible thing for the link to remain unbroken over so much time. We are here tonight only because of the courage of successive generations of Jews -- our bubbies and zaydies -- who went through crusades and inquisitions, expulsions and ghettos, pogroms, and even the Holocaust, and refused, with every fiber of their being, to surrender their Jewish identity.

Tonight we link our songs and prayers to all those generations of Jews who preceded us, in a vast symphony called the Passover Seder.

As we read the Haggadah we learn about our history and transmit that knowledge to the next generation. But consider this: Given that Jews have such a long and remarkable history, it is all the more surprising that Biblical Hebrew has no word for “history”. When Modern Hebrew linguists needed a word for ‘history’ they were forced to borrow one from others and came up with: “Historiah”.

It’s a paradox, but one of the best ways to understand a culture is to see which words are missing from its language.

For example, what is the word for “civility” in Modern Hebrew? Guess what? You can't say it in Hebrew because we don't have that word. We're still working on it. We have a different word, often found in place of civility, “chutzpah”. How do you say chutzpah in

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2 A project of Chabad on Campus International's Jlearn. For archives, please visit www.chabad.edu/weeklycontent
English? Chutzpah. You see, the English have 94 words for civility but could not come up with one word that comes close to chutzpah, so they borrowed it.

So maybe we can understand why in Hebrew there is no civility, but why don't we have a word for history?

The answer is that Judaism has something other than history. Our key word is memory, “zachor” in Hebrew. The Torah uses the word zachor, “remember,” in one form or another an astonishing 169 times. “Remember the Shabbat…” “Zachor, remember the day you stood at Mount Sinai…. “Zachor, remember that you were slaves in Egypt... Zachor, remember.”

There is a difference between history and memory. History is what happened to someone else. Memory is what happened to me. My experience.

**History is: His-Story**

[Pause]

**Memory is: My-story!**

[Pause]

History is someone else's story. It is about events that happened somewhere else, some other time, to someone else. Memory is my-story. It is the story of which I play a part. I received my-story from my parents who received it from their parents, going all the way back to the dawn of Jewish history.

This is what makes Pesach so special. It is more than history, it is living memory. The Haggadah is more like a family album than a history book. Did you ever go to a history class where the professor pulls out a bitter herb Matzah sandwich? No? That’s because a professor teaches history.

The Seder is memory. The Matzah, Maror and Charoses are family heirlooms, souvenirs of our stay in Egypt. Memory moves us, it inspires us. We cry with the bitter herbs of affliction, we taste the sweet wine of liberation.

**History is information. Memory is identity.** Without memory, identity vanishes. Just as it is with the individual, so it is with a nation. A nation has a strong identity as long as it remembers where it came from and who its ancestors were, and what they stood for.
Each of the four cups we raise tonight is an act of memory and commitment. The story we tell is not yet done. It begins with our ancestors, fifteen Seder tables ago, and it continues with us, here, now.

We remember not out of curiosity or nostalgia, but because it is our turn to add to the story. **My-story!** Come, let us begin the Seder, let us add our own contribution to the destiny of our people.

**הָאֹּ֨ף לַחְמָא עַנְיָא**

**TRANSFORMING PAIN INTO BLESSING**

The Passover Seder narrative begins with these words: “This is the bread of affliction our ancestors ate in Egypt. Let all who are hungry come and eat with us.” The Holiday of Freedom begins when we teach our children to transform our past affliction into concern and sharing with others.

When the Jews were released from Egyptian slavery, the Torah commanded, “You shall not wrong a stranger; for you were strangers in the land of Egypt.” “Because you were oppressed in Egypt, learn from it not to oppress the stranger, the orphan, or the widow.”

The Jews could have derived an entirely different lesson from their slavery experience. Having suffered so much, they could have felt compelled to inflict suffering on others – as has happened many times in history. Their motto could have become: “Do unto others before they do unto you.” But the Seder begins with opposite approach to suffering, calling on us to transcend victimhood! “This is the bread of affliction our ancestors ate in Egypt. Let all who are hungry come and eat with us.” Judaism wants us both as individuals and as a nation to use pain as a springboard for good.

In 1909, a woman in Manhattan named Henrietta Szold learned that the man she loved for years and planned to marry had abruptly gone off and married a younger woman he had just met. Szold was no longer young, and knew she would not find a husband. A lesser woman in her situation might have withdrawn from the world, immersed in self-pity or anger. Instead of wallowing in despair, Szold channeled her unrequited love into good deeds, founding **Hadassah** - the Women's Zionist Organization - which over the course of decades inspired millions of Jewish women to perform great deeds of love –
including saving the lives of children in Nazi-occupied Europe and founding one of the world's leading medical centers in Jerusalem.

Unable to find a man with whom to share her love or heal her wounded soul, and unwilling to see that tremendous love go to waste, she built a worldwide organization to dispense love and healing. When she died, she was buried on the Mount of Olives in Jerusalem; her gravestone reads "Mother of Thousands."

Henrietta tasted the bread of affliction and rejection, but stayed resilient and said, “Kol Dichfin. Whoever is in need, I will help.” I will bring blessing into the world.

אַרְבָּעָה بָּנִים
FOUR SONS INSIDE EACH OF US

The Torah alludes to Four Children: One wise. One wicked. One simple. One who does not know how to ask. One explanation of the four children sees them not as four separate individuals, but as four aspects of each individual’s personality. We Jews are a complex people, both collectively and individually. Woody Allen once said, “I've often been accused of being a self-hating Jew. While it is true I hate myself, it’s not because I'm Jewish.”

We all have complicated personalities. Sometimes we may be intelligent and thoughtful - like the first son. Sometimes we are rebellious, like the second son. At different moments we can feel nobility and baseness, kindness and cruelty, faith and doubt.

So how do we deal with the many different people that live inside each of us? Should we expel the rebellious child from our heart?

That does not turn out well. Do you remember the story of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde? Dr. Jekyll was a distinguished physician, and loved by his friends. Because he was a good person, he was troubled by the angry, aggressive feelings that occasionally welled up inside of him. Where did they come from, he wondered. Are they truly a part of me? Or are they a foreign element within me that can be removed?

Because he was a chemist, he concocted a formula that would isolate the impulse to evil, hoping to find a way to banish it from his personality, and ultimately change all of humanity for the better. He drank this potion and turned into someone else, a being he
named Edward Hyde. Hyde was ugly in appearance and soul. He was the embodiment of pure evil.

Jekyll had succeeded in splitting himself into two people, one completely good, and the other totally evil. Hyde hated, and beat people. Jekyll had to swallow a second dose of the potion to become himself again. To his shock, he realized that during the time he lived as Hyde, he enjoyed being wicked. He found himself looking forward to becoming Hyde again. To Jekyll's still greater horror, he soon discovered that he was turning into Hyde even without drinking the potion, and that the concoction was losing its power to turn him back; he had to take a double or triple dose. His only escape from this descent into depravity was to bring about his own death.

The story illustrates that the evil impulse is such an intimate part of every one of us, and that we cannot remove it without drastically harming ourselves in the process. It would be like asking a heart surgeon to operate on us and remove the parts of our heart that give rise to the feelings of jealousy without harming the rest.

Two thousand years before the tale of Dr. Jekyll, the Talmudic Sages made a similar point, but without the dark sense of tragedy. The Talmud relates that Ezra and the Men of the Great Assembly wanted to destroy the yetzer ha-ra, the evil inclination, that G-d planted in each of us. But they were warned that expelling the yetzer ha-ra would have catastrophic consequences. They therefore chose to experiment by capturing the yetzer ha-ra and locking it up for three days.

First they celebrated their achievement, saying, “From now on, life will be Paradise. No evil, no lying or stealing.” The next day, however, no one bothered to open his store for business, no one went courting or got married, and no babies were conceived.

In other words, the Sages realized that without a certain element of selfishness and aggression that can be channeled for good, the world could not go on. So, reluctantly, they released the yetzer ha-ra from its captivity, and we’ve been struggling with it daily ever since.

Judaism teaches that we do not eliminate bits of who we are but that we bring the totality of all that we are to the service of G-d. The wise son and the rebel alike. We can even use our negative characteristics to accomplish greater good.

A student once came to a Chasidic Master and complained that he had a terrible character flaw. “I am a liar,” he said. “I always exaggerate everything way out of proportion.”
“Spend more time thinking about the greatness of G-d,” said the Master. “Because however much you embellish, you will still not be exaggerating. In fact, it will be an underestimation. In addition, you’ll be using your particular challenge for sacred meditation.”

At the Seder Table we come together, all of us, to elevate everything we are, as complex and marvelous as G-d has made us.

**וַיָּרֵעוּ אֹתָנוּ הַמִּצְרִים**

**THE FROG-IN-THE-WATER EXPERIMENT**

This phrase וַיָּרֵעוּ is usually translated as: “The Egyptians were cruel to us.” But there’s another interpretation: “The Egyptians befriended us.” 7 Befriended from the Hebrew world “רֵעַ,” “friend,” rather than “רָע,” “cruel.” The idea is that the Egyptian friendship was a sinister trick to enslave the Jewish people. Pharaoh understood that if he imposed slavery gradually, the Jews would become accustomed to it, and not revolt. The Midrash states that initially Pharaoh issued a proclamation calling upon all Egyptians and the Jews, to work for pay. After a while the Egyptians gradually withdrew, leaving the Jews to work alone. Then they stopped paying their wages. Because the liberty of the Israelites was eroded gradually, they never revolted.

This reminds me of the frog-in-the-water experiment. You put a frog in a nice cool pot of water; he's happy and swims around. But if you dump a frog in a hot pot of water, he'll jump right out and live to see another day. On the other hand, if you put a flame underneath the pot and slowly raise the heat, he'll die. Because the temperature increases slowly, there is no “trigger” to signal the danger to the frog, so it takes no action to avoid it.

Similarly the Israelites subjugation continued to grow until they were trapped. The mystics teach that we have an inner Pharaoh that uses the same strategy. The bad habits that threaten us rarely reveal their destructive character at the onset. Quite the contrary, these habits appear to be enjoyable, and only after they have established a firm grip on our lives does their true nature become apparent.

A classic example of this is the development of addiction. In the early phase of addiction — all too often, this starts during college — a person is likely to think that his substance provides him with an excellent form of relaxation. By the time the destructive effects of
his habit are apparent, the individual is entrapped in a personal Egypt by the clutches of a devastating compulsion.

Passover is the time to leave our spiritual enslavement, whether one born of addiction or any bad habit. Passover is a time to say: “Enough of me being like a frog on slow boil.” Tonight, G-d helps us extract ourselves from our spiritual prison. It is time to actualize our G-d-given potential.

כָּל הַבֵּן הַיִּלְוֹד הוָלַיְגָרֶה מַשְׁלִיכֻהוּ

WHO WILL BE TODAY’S MIDWIVES?

Pharaoh’s scheme to reduce the population growth of the Israelites through state-imposed enslavement and backbreaking toil did not yield the expected results, as the Torah informs us: “The more they were oppressed, the more they increased.”

In response, the king decided on a more draconian method to achieve his goal. He called the two chief midwives of the Hebrews and instructed them to kill all newborn Israelite males — a slow genocide.

The next verse tells us that the midwives feared G-d and did not do as the king had told them. Instead, they let the boys live.

I find it remarkable that the names of these midwives, Shifra and Puah, are recorded many times in the Torah. By contrast, the all-powerful monarch Pharaoh is never named; he is consistently veiled in anonymity. The name Pharaoh is like Caesar or Rome, or even the president of the USA. That does not tell us who he actually was – it’s a title. What was his name? We don't know.

This is the way the Torah expresses its scale of values. All the power of the mighty Pharaoh, the dazzling splendor of the palaces, his colossal monuments — all are insignificant, nameless. In the ultimate reckoning of history, they will crumble into dust because they rest on immoral foundations.

But slave midwives who defy tyranny and uphold G-d’s moral principles, their names are recorded for eternity: Shifra and Puah. They are of far greater historical importance than the all-powerful king who ruled the greatest empire in the ancient world.

8 A project of Chabad on Campus International’s Jlearn. For archives, please visit www.chabad.edu/weeklycontent
This idea is reflected in the second book of the Bible, the book that records the story of the slavery and liberation of the Jewish people. As we all know, this book is called Exodus in English. But in Judaism the book is called something else: “Shmot” - “the Book of Names.”

This expresses Torah’s perspective. That what moves history is not a grand Exodus, but “Shmot,” the individual names of people who do good deeds! It is the midwives, the Shifras and Puahs, who bring about the Exodus. They are heroines of the spirit, giants in the story of humankind.

דְּצַעַשׁ בְּאַחַב

**TEXTING G-D**

R’ Yehudah abbreviated the ten plagues by composing an acronym: דְּצַעַב

But why did Rabbi Yehudah give the plagues an abbreviation? Because he was texting of course!

Rabbi Yehudah groups the plagues into threes because, with the exception of the last, they occurred in a three-fold pattern attacking three different spheres in Egypt. The first three were blood, frogs and lice; which primarily infiltrated the ground and sea. Wild beasts, pestilence and boils affected those who live upon the land. Hail, locusts and darkness affected the atmosphere. These, you might say, were acting as G-d’s navy, army, and air force.

Before we said that Rabbi Yehudah was texting. The truth is, texting has an honorable place in Judaism. That is, you could view texting G-d as making a connection by means of a short prayer. In the Torah, we find two different forms of prayer. Some are long and complex, like Moses' forty day prayer for forgiveness of the people after the sin of the Golden Calf. But others are brief, and sound like a text between friends. Take Moses' five word prayer for his sister Miriam: אֵל נָא רְפָא נָא לָה — “Please, G-d. Heal her now!”

A Jew is asked to text G-d throughout the day, to thank G-d for the good things in life, to make a short blessing before we eat, to spontaneously ask for His help when we or a friend may need it.
In the morning, the moment when we open our eyes, we say a prayer called *Modeh Ani* which states: “Thank You, G-d, for giving me back my life.” It is a brief prayer with lasting impact. Neuroscientists have found that the thoughts going through our mind the first few minutes after we wake up set the tone for the rest of the day. They call this the “rudder of the day.” Just as a boat’s rudder shifted slightly at the beginning of a voyage can utterly change its ultimate destination, so do our first thoughts set our outlook and attitude for the rest of the day. The *first thing* we are to do immediately upon awakening, while still in bed, is to thank G-d, to appreciate the gift of life, to upload positive thoughts of gratefulness in our mind.

So add G-d as a contact. Let Him be your first text of the day. Challenge yourself to keep G-d in the top 5 you text all day!

**KEEPING PROMISES**

It was the moment which the Jewish people had been waiting for more than two hundred years. After centuries as slaves in Egypt, they were about to go free. Ten plagues had devastated the country. Pharaoh's resistance had finally broken, and in the middle of the night, he agreed to release the Jews.

They rushed to prepare, not even taking time to bake bread for the journey. The Egyptians gave them gifts of gold, silver and fabrics. And then the narrative in the Bible takes an unexpected turn. We read:

“And Moses took with him the bones of Joseph, who had obtained a promise from the children of Israel on his deathbed, saying 'When G-d takes note of you, you shall carry my remains from here with you.'”

What a scene! All around Moses, people are trying to stuff as much into their suitcases as they can, and Moses is busy with Joseph’s bones.

Why interrupt the extraordinary drama of the Exodus with this detail?
Because this way, the Torah gives us a glimpse into Moses’s personality, showing us his inner strength. Moses chose to keep an ancient promise rather than enrich himself.

One day, each of us, like Moses, will stand at a crossroads in our life when we will have to choose between personal gain and keeping a promise.

There may well be moments when the only way to achieve our dreams requires breaking a promise we had made to someone, or even to ourselves.

The Torah wants us to follow Moses’s example. The foundation of a solid marriage, friendship or business partnership is the trust that people have in each other to live up to the promises they have made.

Those enduring commitments define us: by the choice we make to enter them, and even more so, by the continuing effort we exert to keep them.

Among the most famous lines of Robert Frost are:

“The woods are lovely, dark and deep.
But I have promises to keep.
And miles to go before I sleep!”

Frost was once asked what promises he had in mind when he wrote those lines. He replied, “Oh, promises to myself and promises to my ancestors.”

There are many kinds of promises we make to ourselves: to break a destructive habit, to reconcile with a friend or relative, to come more often to Chabad House, to give more spiritual nourishment to our soul.

But there are other kinds of unspoken promises to ourselves as well. We have each been endowed at birth with splendid potential. There is within us a yearning for idealism, and for nobility, and for G-d. In our youth, we promise to bring these aspirations to life.

And yet so often, as the years pass by, we permit these promises to be enslaved to the Pharaohs of comfort and laziness.

Moses, at the moment of the Exodus, knew he had to make an important decision. His first act as leader of a newly liberated people would set the tone for the image of themselves they would carry with them. Would it be an image of the pursuit of personal
gain, of every man for himself? Or would the pledge to Joseph, an ancestor who had been
dead for years, be their priority?

His decision: I will set the example for my people that we will be a people who keep their
promises. Tonight, there comes a moment of spiritual liberation. We take stock of the
unkept promises. And like Moses we must make an important decision.

What will we answer? We have promises to keep and miles to go before we sleep.

Gratitude—A Prelude to Happiness

A wise mathematician once said “The hardest arithmetic to master is that which enables
us to count our blessings.” In Dayenu we do this kind of arithmetic. Dayenu enumerates
fifteen kindnesses G-d did for the Jews on the journey from slavery to freedom. Each of
the praises ends with the word “Dayenu”, meaning, that just one such kindness would
have been enough — Dayenu.

There is a joke about a boy who never talked. His parents took him to doctors and
specialists and they could never find anything wrong with him, but he never said a word.
Then one morning at breakfast, he looked up and said, “Mom, my oatmeal's cold.”

The parents were overjoyed. He could talk! He was healthy! They danced around the
room. Then they asked him, “Why did you never speak before this?”

He answered, “The oatmeal was always fine till now.”

Sometimes we don’t speak up to give thanks, but we do to complain.

Not only does expressing our gratitude make others feel good, it is also good for us.

Here is why: one of the most fundamental laws in psychology is that it is impossible for a
human mind to think of more than one thing at any given time. You don’t believe it? Go
ahead, try it. Right now, close your eyes, and try, at the same instant, to think of the
Statue of Liberty and of what you plan to do tomorrow evening.

See, you couldn’t do it. You could focus on either thought in turn, but never on both
simultaneously.
Well, the same is true in the field of emotions. Gratitude is a positive feeling. Sadness is a negative feeling. The two cannot coexist. We cannot be happy and grateful for something and feel sad and down at the very same time. Simply put, one kind of emotion drives out the other. When we feel grateful, happiness follows.

**THE SCORCHED WEDDING CAKE**

We have just eaten Matzah and Maror separately. Matzah symbolizes freedom. Maror represents bitter slavery. They have different tastes. They are opposite experiences. Each is eaten alone. Now, however, we combine the two and eat them together in the Hillel sandwich.

Here is one lovely explain for why we eat this sandwich.

Once there was a wealthy man who lived in the *shtetl*. When it was time for him to marry, he searched far and wide to find the girl of his dreams, yet it seemed that every young woman he met didn't suit him. No chemistry.

One day, while traveling on business, he stopped at a hotel. While sitting in the dining room he noticed a poor, beautiful Jewish waitress. They started schmoozing. The more he spoke to her, the more impressed he was by her kindness, intelligence and beauty. It was “love at first nosh.”

The man immediately proposed. In the old days, they did business fast. He told her he would take care of her. She would not have to serve people all day. And she agreed. He said, “Let's get married right away. Toss your tattered apron. We'll invite everybody in town and get married tonight.”

She tells him it's a fine idea. “But I can't get married without a wedding cake. Let me run to the kitchen and bake it.” The man says, “Wonderful idea.”

In the meantime, the hotel staff sets up the wedding. People gather for the celebration, but the bride is nowhere to be found.

The groom rushes into the kitchen, to find his bride waiting by the oven. “What are you waiting for?” he asks her.

“Well,” she says, “Our wedding cake is not baked. It will take one more hour.”
“Another hour!” he exclaims, “Who can wait that long? Just throw more wood into the oven.”

“No, you can't do that,” she tells him, “The cake will burn.”

The groom tells her, “Please put more wood on the fire. It will be just fine.” She can't refuse her beloved and places more wood on the fire.

They get married. The wedding cake is later brought out - but it's burned to a crisp. Nevertheless, the bride takes a piece of her burned wedding cake, wraps it up, and puts it away for safekeeping.

Years pass and they have a wonderful marriage. But then one day, as happens even in the best of marriages, an argument breaks out. The husband explodes. “Who do you think gave you the wonderful life you have now? The wealth, the comforts, the beautiful clothing — you used to be a poor waitress!” He runs into his closet and comes back with the tattered apron which his wife had thrown away the day they married. "You forget," he tells her, "that I'm the one who made you what you are today.

“Really,” she says with a mischievous smile, “I have something to show you as well.” She rushes off to her closet and comes back with the piece of charred wedding cake. "My dear husband," she says, “Have you forgotten just how impatient you were to have me as your wife? You couldn’t even take the extra time to allow our wedding cake to bake!” Then they remember how much they really love each other.

This same discussion occurs between the Jewish people and G-d on the Seder night. G-d takes out the maror, saying, “Remember how bitter your lives were before I took you out of Egypt? Without Me, you would still be there!”

We take out the unleavened, burned matzos and say, “G-d, remember the rush You were in to have us as Your people? You couldn't even wait for our bread to bake!”

This is the meaning of the Hillel sandwich. According to Hillel, we take the Matzah and the Morar and blend them together. On Passover, we tell G-d that even though in the past our relationship may have been rocky, tonight we really want to make up. Tonight we remember Your love for us, and in our hearts we feel love towards You. 16
POUR OUT YOUR WRATH

This passage was not part of the earliest *Haggadot*. It was added during the Middle Ages, in response to the Crusades and other persecutions of the age.

It began with the First Crusade in 1096, in which, on their way to the Holy land, the Crusaders stopped to massacre Jewish communities in Mainz, Speyer and Worms, in Germany.

Another recurring event that made Pesach in particular a time of fear for our ancestors were the horrific “blood libels ” that originated in Norwich, England in 1144, and eventually spread throughout Europe.

What is remarkable about this addition to the Haggadah is its restraint. Picture the many beleaguered Jews, particularly in Europe. For centuries, they suffered a series of devastating blows -- massacres, pogroms, forced conversions, inquisitions, confinement to ghettos, punitive taxation, and expulsions. And yet one short paragraph is virtually the only trace left by this experience in the Haggadah.

For one brief moment, Jews open their doors to the world and demand that their oppressors be brought to the bench of Divine justice. And yet we do not ask G-d to permit us to pour out our own wrath. Even now, when we are asking for justice, we ask G-d Himself to render judgment.

And the plea is not directed to non-Jewish faiths or nations in general, but only to those who “have devoured Jacob.--כֹּב וְאֵת נָוֵהוּ הֵשַׁמּוכִּי אָכַל אֶת יַעֲקֹב--” That is, to those who have destroyed Jewish lives.17

A Jewish tradesman once came with a horse, cart, and goods to sell to a little village in Russia which was notoriously anti-Semitic. No Jew had ever set foot in that village before. And as he arrived, the villagers came out and shouted, using a derogatory term for a Jewish person, “Zhid! Zhid!”

To their amazement, the man gave them a broad smile, came down from his horse and said, “Thank you for that wonderful welcome! I’ve never heard a welcome like that before.” He got out his little bag, and said, “Please accept from me five rubles each.”

Well, they didn’t know what to make of this, but five rubles is five rubles, so they accepted the money.
The next day, curious to know more about this gentleman, they surrounded his house and started shouting again, “Zhid! Zhid!”

And he came out and smiled again. He said, “Thank you. This is even nicer.” He searched in his pockets and said, “Look, I’m terribly sorry. I don’t have much money left, but I can give you one ruble each.”

Well, one ruble isn’t five, but it’s better than nothing, so they accepted it.

On the third day they surrounded his house and once more they shouted, “Zhid! Zhid!”

He came out and said, “Dear beloved friends, your welcome moves my heart. But I really have so little money left that I can only offer you five kopeks each.”

And all the people of the town said, “For a lousy five kopeks you expect us to shout Zhid, Zhid?” And they never shouted, “Zhid! Zhid!” again.

We do our best to bring peace into the world. Judaism is a religion of love, compassion, forgiveness, and peace. But without justice in history, something fundamental is missing. When tyrants run rampant, peace become impossible.

At this point in the Seder, we ask G-d to bring justice into the world and to protect the Jewish people in Israel and around the world. We pray that one day there will be universal peace for all mankind.

כוס של אליחא הונבייה

Pouring Elijah’s Cup and Opening the Door

Consider the contrast: In a faith, not our own (lehavdil elef alfei havdalos), the guest is forced to enter homes via the chimney and must bribe the residents with gifts if he expects any kindness. In our faith, Elijah the Prophet is welcomed in every home, ushered in through the front door and immediately served a glass of wine!

In 1919, a young man named Walt was hired to work at the Kansas City Star newspaper. But things quickly went bad, and he was fired. Why? Because, his editor said, he “lacked creativity and had no good ideas.”

Refusing to let this setback stop him, Walt decided to start his own company. You may have heard of it: The Walt Disney Company. Among its many accomplishments in the ensuing years, the Walt Disney Company went on to buy the Kansas City Star.
You see, the door that slams in your face one day may be the very door that later swings open to new opportunity.

As we open the door for Elijah this year, we ask G-d that all the closed doors in our life should now open to new opportunity, and new blessing.

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1. See the Rebbe’s Communal letter, 11th Nissan 5718.

2. There is a fine book that analyzes this idea of history and memory by Professor Yosef Chaim Yerushalmi called: "Zakhor: Jewish History and Jewish Memory." Yerushalmi notes: “Only in Israel and nowhere else is the injunction to remember felt as a religious imperative to an entire people.


4. Leviticus 19:33-34.


7. See Sefer HaSichos 5699, p. 324.

8. See the Rebbe’s talk on the 2nd night of Pesach 5714.

9. Exodus 1:12

10. The Egyptians, like many pagan cultures, worshiped a wide range of nature-gods, and attributed to their powers the natural phenomena they saw in the world around them. There was a god of the sun, of the river, of childbirth, of crops and so on. The ten plagues demonstrated G-d's mastery over every facet of nature, land and sea.

11. See Abarbanel.


15 Numbers 9:11.

16 Adapted from Rebbe Yissachar Dov of Belz, the Belzer Rebbe.