

# Readings for your Seder table 5784-2024

For most of us, our mixed emotions as we enter into Pesach will make this year unlike any other in living memory.

There are a variety of creative ways in which families around the world will be using their Sedarim to express their solidarity with the people of Israel and, in particular, the hostages and their families.

Here are a series of readings you may wish to choose from for your Seder table, offering an opportunity to highlight some important themes for Israel and the Jewish people in these challenging times.



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## Reading following *Karpas* - Where it all started...

Pesach is all about the Exodus from Egypt, but how did we get into Egypt in the first place?

It all started with the planned fratricide, when Joseph's brothers initially conspired to kill him. They subsequently changed their minds and instead sold him into slavery in Egypt. Our Sages teach that the dipping of *karpas* recalls the moment when the brothers dipped Joseph's coat into the blood of a goat, so that they could convince Jacob of his death.

That set off the Biblically chronicled chain of events which brought the brothers and then their father Jacob, and the rest of the family to Egypt, leading to a long and tortuous period of slavery. So, what brought us into Egypt was the disunity of our people. Throughout our subsequent history, we have been at our strongest when united and our weakest when divided.

During the Seder we declare that Hashem delivered us with His *yad chazaka* – His strong hand. The secret of the power of unity can be found in a hand, which has 14 joints, three in each finger and two in the thumb. 14 in Hebrew lettering is *yud dalet*, spelling *yad*. When two people shake hands or hold hands, you have *yad* plus *yad*, spelling *yedid*, which means 'friend'. *Yedid* in turn adds up to 28, which in Hebrew lettering is *kaf chet*, spelling *koach*, which means 'strength'.

The greatest source of Jewish strength lies in our capacity to come together like one person with one heart. This has, indeed, been the spirit in which the Jewish world has been united since 7 October.

At this critical turning point for the Jewish people, it is of the utmost importance that we preserve our precious unity. This Pesach, let us not only recall how we left Egypt.

Let us also remember how we got there!



## Reading following *Ha Lachma* - The gift of Freedom

Did we ever imagine that the words we have just read would resonate so painfully as they do this year?

In the *Ha Lachma* passage we declare, *Hashatta avdei, leshanah haba'ah benei chorin* – This year we are slaves, next year may we all be free.

Sadly, some of us this year are quite literally being held in captivity. We celebrate Pesach filled with deep concern for all the hostages. May every single one of them be freed and come speedily home to the embrace of their families.

In our tradition, there are two prime words for freedom, *chofesh* and *cherut*. *Chofesh* means 'freedom from'. Freedom from the control of others; freedom from captivity. This is the type of freedom alluded to by the term *benei chorin*. To celebrate one's *chofesh*, one could be doing absolutely nothing. What's important is that the shackles of captivity have been removed.

On the other hand, *cherut* is 'freedom to'. It is taken from the term *charut*, meaning 'engraved', used by the Torah to describe the words that were engraved on the two tablets of the Ten Commandments, representing our aspirations to live responsibly. We are charged to use our *cherut* by tirelessly striving to make a contribution of great value to our environment and to act in the finest spirit of Jewish values.

Our challenge this year is clear. Let us guarantee that we utilise our *cherut* so that our brothers and sisters held in cruel captivity will finally be granted their *chofesh*. We may not rest nor tire nor be silent, until every single one of us is free – until we are all *benei chorin*!



## Reading before *Ma Nishtana* – The Paradox of Pesach

In his commentary to the Haggadah, Rabbi Don Yitzchak Abarbanel (1437-1508) challenges the notion that there are four questions in Ma Nishtana.

In his view, *Ma Nishtana halayla hazeh* is not a series of questions. Rather, it's a statement: How different this night is from all other nights! On all other nights, we either celebrate or mourn, but tonight we eat matza and maror, which represent suffering, while our dipping and reclining represent the joy of freedom.

In this spirit, mixed feelings and contrasting experiences have always been a feature of Seder night, and none more so than this year. We usher in the festival with traditional joy and festivity, but also with heavy hearts. The war is not over, numerous hostages are still in captivity and innocent civilians continue to suffer.

At the end of October last year, Rabbi Doron Perez gave a remarkable radio interview, in which he described his emotions at the wedding of his son, Yonatan, which took place while his son, Daniel, was missing and presumed to be held captive in Gaza. (It was revealed later on that he had been killed on 7 October).

Rabbi Perez commented on the words of Ecclesiastes 3:4 "A time to weep and a time to laugh; a time to mourn and a time to dance." Our traditional understanding is that either we're weeping or laughing, mourning or dancing. But, at his son's wedding, the family were crying and rejoicing, grieving and dancing at one and the same time.

Following this experience, Rabbi Perez's message was clear: Even in the midst of our grief and deep concern, we should also be able to rejoice in anticipation of a more positive future.

In this spirit, as we sit down to Seder this year with mixed emotions, we pray that our deep worry and anxiety will soon be at an end, and that peace and security will be enjoyed by all.





## Reading following *Ma Nishtana* - What our children see...

“Example isn’t another way to teach, it’s the only way to teach”.

These words of Albert Einstein capture the essence of our Seder experience. The book we use is called a *Haggadah*, and the heart of the Seder is known as *Maggid*. Both terms refer to the manner in which we relate the story of the Exodus. Intriguingly, they come from the root *neged*, which means to face.

On Seder night, we ‘face’ the younger people around our table, as they ask us questions. In reply, we demonstrate to them the beauty of our Jewish tradition. Our message is: Do as we do, not as we say. The most essential element of Jewish education is the example we set.

In this context, we commence the Seder by declaring, *Kol dichfin yeitei veyeichol* – let anyone who is hungry come in and eat! We cannot relax at our festive tables knowing that there might be some people who do not have the means for a Seder. And we do this in the presence of our children, with the hope that they will follow our example of empathy and compassion.

In the midst of the current crisis in Israel, this is exactly the tone that is being set in such an extraordinary manner right now. The depth of the altruism we have seen over the last six months, with countless examples of *chesed*, has set an outstanding example to the next generation.

May they never forget that in Jewish tradition: ‘I give therefore I am’.

And may they, in turn, be outstanding role models of kindness for the generations to come.



## Reading following *The Four Sons* - Why all the ones?

The Haggadah has described for us, four types of Jewish children: *Echad chacham* – one who is wise, *ve'echad rasha* – one who is bad, *ve'echad tam* – one who is simple, *ve'echad she'eino yodeah lish'ol* – and one who does not even know what to ask.

A more straightforward approach for the Haggadah would have been to identify the four categories without repetitively identifying that each is 'one'. Why all the ones?

Our tradition demands that we recognise that everyone is *echad*, deserving of our efforts to invest in them. Every life is sacred.

Whether wise or foolish, good or bad, with or without academic prowess, knowledgeable or ignorant – everyone is equally precious.

There is a commonly cited profound reflection that on Pesach we should acknowledge that there is actually a fifth child – the one who, sadly, is not even present at the Seder. Throughout our history, there have been many reasons why this was the case.

This year, for the saddest of reasons, there will be many empty chairs at Seder tables, because there are still hostages being held captive in the cruellest of conditions in Gaza, unable to be with their families.

This year, the fifth person is the hostage.

Every hostage is *echad* in our eyes. They are all precious souls, for whom we pray and for whose lives we shall continue to passionately campaign.

May they all, please God, come home safely soon.





## Reading following *Vehi She'amda* - In every generation...

The hatred of our people did not end with Pharaoh.

This is a powerful truth that we recognise every year during our Seder with the words: *bechol dor vador omdim aleinu lechaloteinu* – in every generation, there are those who seek to annihilate us.

For the saddest of reasons, this statement resonates deeply with us as we celebrate Pesach this year.

However, together with all our concern and all our worry, there is something from which we can draw reassurance in this particular generation.

For thousands of years, when the Jewish people were attacked, we were defenceless.

But today, thank God, we are blessed to have the State of Israel.

Today, we are resilient, we are strong, and we are able to stand together against the challenges that confront us.

And, most significantly of all: *HaKadosh Baruch Hu matzileinu miyadam*.

In the same way as, throughout history, Hashem has guaranteed our continuity against all odds, so too, right now, He is with us to ensure that *Am Yisrael Chai* – the Jewish people will live on in strength!

With that recognition, let us look forward, with the help of Hashem, to a time of peace, security and happiness for all.



## Reading before we hold the matza aloft and say *Matza zo she'anu ochlim* – Why do we eat this matza?

In the Torah, sometimes the word matzot is spelt with a vav and sometimes without. Remarkably, in one and the same passage, both spellings are featured. In Shemot 12:15 the Torah states: "For seven days you shall eat unleavened bread (מצות)". Three verses later (12:18), the Torah continues: "In the first month, on the fourteenth day of the month in the evening (i.e. at the Seder) you shall eat unleavened bread (מצת)".

Rabbi Yisrael Salanter (1810–1883) gave an insightful explanation. The first reference to matzot is the mitzva for them to be available for everyone to eat throughout Pesach, while the second reference is the mitzva for each one of us to eat matza. For one reason or another, we might cut back on the amount we personally eat during the festival, hence a shortened form of the term - מצת in the second verse. However, that is irrelevant to our responsibility to provide for others, which must always be to the maximum, represented by the term מצות in the first verse.

We learn this approach from our Patriarch, Abraham. After a decisive battle in which Abraham and his allies were victorious, the King of Sodom offered him the spoils of battle, which were rightfully his. As a man of deep principle, Abraham refused, declaring, "I will not take even a thread or a shoelace or anything that is yours, lest you claim that you made me rich" (Bereishit 14:23). However, Abraham then went on to declare that those with him would receive the spoils due to them, "Aner, Eshkol and Mamre, they must take their portions!" For his own reasons, Abraham opted out of the spoils of battle, but he demanded that others would receive their full portions.

In similar vein, however we choose to conduct our own Pesach celebrations, we still have a duty to guarantee that all others will be able to celebrate the festival in style.

During these exceptionally challenging times, in the shadow of an ongoing, tragic war, so many people have gone to extraordinary lengths to provide essential practical, emotional and financial support to those who are in need. From Pesach we learn how important it is that these efforts continue in strength for as long as is necessary. What is kosher for Pesach, must be kosher all year round.

