UNDERSTANDING THE SEDER: A PASSOVER GUIDE

The imperative of the seder is to tell the story: to explore it, probe it, question it and, thus, to make it brilliantly vivid. The Exodus from Egypt is the formative event of the Jewish people, and the aim of the seder is to see ourselves inside this narrative, to relive the experience in the present. The Haggadah embraces many questions, and there are things each family does differently, all to prod our curiosity and provoke discussions that draw us deeper into the sequence of events that take us from slavery to freedom and then to revelation and redemption. The following commentaries about the seder are offered here as a springboard to explore further and understand the significance of our story.

Before the Haggadah Was Brought Into Being…
By Dr. David M. Posner, *Senior Rabbi*

Before the Haggadah was brought into being there was the Mishnah. The Mishnah is essentially the result of the labors of Rabbi Judah Ha-Nasi, Judah the Prince. Given the year of his death of 323 C.E., it may be surmised that the Mishnah can be dated by this date. The Mishnah is a codification of all Jewish law in existence up to that time, and it consists of six sections or "orders." These six orders are subdivided further into 63 tractates. Among them is tractate P'sachim, which deals with the laws of Passover.

One of the most fascinating things about P'sachim is Chapter 10, which gives us an order of the seder that shares similarities with the order listed in our present-day Haggadah but that significantly eliminates many other aspects of the seder to which we fondly have grown accustomed.

The seder as described in the Mishnah begins — as does our customary seder — with Kadeish, the sanctification over wine (the first cup). It then goes on to karpas (green vegetable), matzah, maror and Shulchan Aruch (the festive meal itself). In the Mishnah, it is at this point that the son asks questions — but only three of them and not four. And, the third one is entirely different from what we expect: "On all other nights we may eat meat that is roasted, stewed or boiled, but on this night we eat only roasted meat." The issue of reclining is not included at all in the Mishnah's seder.

The Magid (narrative section) now begins, ending with Hallel (which we find in our Haggadah) and a second cup of wine. The Birkat HaMazon (Grace After Meals) is then recited, concluding with the third cup of wine, as it does in our seder. The recitation of Hallel Psalms is resumed, ending with the fourth cup. At this point, the Mishnah states, "One does not conclude the seder with the afikoman!" Nevertheless, we, of course, do.

Look what is missing from the seder as described in the Mishnah: ur'chatz (washing); yachatz (the bread of affliction); all the portions of Magid except the Four Questions; the sections that begin with the full narrative of the Exodus story; korech (the Hillel sandwich with charoset); the afikoman search; the final nirtzah; the Four Sons;

"Dayeinu"; the opening the door for Elijah; "Echad Mi Yodei-a" ("Madrigal of Numbers") and "Chad Gadya"…essentially all of the parts that we tend to love! And remember…in the Mishnah, first you eat, and then you tell the story!

So, this is the seder, circa 323 C.E.

But, lo and behold, look at what might be a description of the seder night as described in the New Testament (Matthew 26:26-30 and Mark 14: 22-26, dated anywhere from 50 C.E. to 70 C.E.: Jesus and the disciples eat; Jesus says the Motzi; he says Kiddush and then they sing Psalms (Hallel). In other words, the entire order is Shulchan Aruch, Motzi, Kadeish, Hallel…and it's over!

Seder by the Numbers
By Dr. Mark W. Weisstuch, *Administrative Vice President*

0
Zero references to Moses!

1
One God in heaven and earth.

One *afikoman*.

One kid.

2
Double dipping: Vegetables in water; *maror* in *charoset*.

Breaking the matzah in two.

Two *zuzim*.

3
Three matzot.

Three-word acronym for the 10 plagues: DeTZaKH, ADaSH, B'ACHaB.

Three core symbols of the seder: Paschal lamb, matzah, *maror*.

4
Four cups of wine.

> The rabbis identified each cup of wine with the fourfold promise of redemption: "God spoke to Moses: Tell the children of Israel: I will bring you out… I will

rescue you… I will redeem you… I will take you for me as a people and I will be for you as a God…" (Exodus 6:2-7)

The chronology of the four cups:
#1 Takes us to the start of the story — enslavement in Egypt — 3,500 years ago.
#2 210 years forward — the final night of the Jewish people in Egypt.
#3 7 days later — at the shores of the Sea of Reeds.
#4 6 weeks after that at the foot of Mount Sinai.
[Rabbi Nathan Laufer, *Leading the Passover Journey*, 2005]

Four questions.

Four children.

Four separate accounts of the Exodus narrative during the *Magid* section of the seder.

5
Fifth cup of wine: Cup of Elijah.

Five rabbis discussing the Exodus through the night.

7
Seven symbols on the seder plate.

10
Ten Plagues.

Plagues as pairs:
"With a mighty hand"==2 plagues.
"With an outstretched arm"==2 plagues.
"With great fear"== 2 plagues.
"With signs"== 2 plagues.
"And wonders"== 2 plagues.

Rabbi Yehuda Halevi, the 12th century Spanish physician and poet, explained the division of plagues into twos:
Two plagues from the water (blood and frogs from the Nile).
Two plagues from the earth (lice and wild animals).
Two plagues from air-carried infections (plague and boils).
Two plagues from air-carried damages (hailstorms and locusts).
Two plagues from supernatural acts (darkness caused by an eclipse and the plague of the first born).

The calculus of the plagues:
10 plagues in Egypt; 50 plagues at the Red Sea.

Each plague == 4 plagues == 40 plagues in Egypt; 200 plagues at the Red Sea.
Each plague == 5 plagues == 50 plagues in Egypt; 250 plagues at the Red Sea.

1 to 13
"Who knows one?" (etc.): A re-"counting" of Jewish tradition.

14
Fourteen parts of the seder:
Kadeish — Sanctification.
Ur'chatz — Washing hands.
Karpas — Dipping vegetables in water.
Yachatz — Breaking the matzah.
Magid — Telling the story.
Rachatzah — Washing the hands.
Motzi-Matzah — Sharing and eating the matzah.
Maror — Eating the bitter herbs.
Korech — Eating maror and matzah together.
Shulchan Aruch — Eating the meal.
Tzafun — Finishing the meal with the afikoman.
Birkat — Reciting the grace after the meal.
Hallel — Praise and meditation.
Nirtzah — Ending of the ceremony.

Fourteen "Dayeinus."

49
Beginning the "counting of the Omer": The countdown to Shavuot.

Miriam's Cup and the Orange on the Seder Plate
By Elizabeth Stabler, *Temple Librarian*

Everyone I know puts an orange on or next to the seder plate and places a Miriam's cup on her Passover table. At Passover we are enjoined to remember that we were once slaves in Egypt and, further, to be sure to teach this to our children. While specifically created to celebrate the importance of women in Jewish tradition, these two new and beautiful rituals help bring our awareness of the importance freedom into the present. The orange and Miriam's cup remind us to include and to listen to anyone who might be different from us in the tapestry that is the Jewish people.

Miriam's cup (*kos Miryam*) is a paradoxically empty cup placed next to Elijah's cup on the seder table. According to *The Journey Continues: The Ma'yan Passover Haggadah*, Miriam's cup symbolizes Miriam's well, which accompanied the Jews as they wandered in the desert. Miriam's well, with its magical powers, kept our people alive during their 40-year

journey. Immediately following the lighting of the festival candles, Miriam's cup is passed around the table. Each person pours some water from her or his own glass into the cup. Doing so, we concretely experience that we all must participate to achieve a full cup and, by extension, a meaningful seder. This ritual also gives us the opportunity to acknowledge each person's contribution to the holiday celebration.

Already, the tradition of putting an orange on the seder plate has a mythic origin. *The Open Door*, a Haggadah by Sue Levi Elwell (CCAR 2002), explains it as a reaction to a rabbi's pronouncement that lesbians belong in Jewish life as much as bread belongs on a seder plate. Rather than putting forbidden *chameitz* [leavening] on the seder table, an orange is substituted. Instead of a transgressive act shattering tradition, the orange, with its beautiful form and seeds for new growth, symbolizes the possibility of transforming tradition. Another version is that the custom was inspired by a rabbi's dictum that women's participation in synagogue ritual is as appropriate as an orange on a seder plate. No matter the origin, the orange has been adopted widely to protest the silencing and dismissal of women in organized Jewish life.

When I knew her, my mother-in-law Sylvia had neither an orange on the seder plate nor a Miriam's cup, although she undoubtedly had earned both. All year long Sylvia secretly saved money for Passover. In spite of my socialist father-in-law's mutterings about those "gonifs" (thieves) — referring to the kosher butcher, baker and owner of the Pesach store — Sylvia heroically and bounteously "made Passover" for her family and for as many relatives and friends as she could fit. Although she worked 60 hours a week in the family's stationery store, Sylvia also managed somehow to clean the house from top to bottom as required for the holiday. But the main focus of her energy was the food. Sylvia made certain that there was more, actually much, much more, than enough for two seders as well for as the rest of eight-day holiday.

Sadly, Sylvia never actually participated in the seder. Born in 1919, she was of a generation that typically sent only boys to Hebrew school. So, Sylvia was silenced at the very seders she had worked so hard to prepare. And, she didn't even roll her eyes when *Avadim hayinu* ("We were slaves in Egypt") was read. It may have been that she didn't hear the text as she ran back and forth from the table to the kitchen to check on the chicken soup and *knaidlach* (matzah balls).

As we remember that we all were slaves in Egypt, let us also remember those among us who are silenced, dismissed and overlooked. Let the orange and the Miriam's cup remind us to free ourselves from our own failures of inclusion.

Yachatz: Breaking the Matzah

By Rabbi Leon A. Morris, *Executive Director, Skirball Center for Adult Jewish Learning at Temple Emanu-El*

One of the least appreciated parts of the Passover seder is the act of *yachatz*, or the breaking the middle of the three matzot on the table. The smaller half is set aside as the *afikoman*, to be recovered by children after the meal and enjoyed by everyone as the last taste of food in our mouths that evening. The larger half is placed back between the two whole matzot on the table to be shared later over the meal. But the breaking of the middle matzah, traditionally considered the fourth step of the "order" of the seder is far more significant than being a means for hiding the *afikoman*. It is the perfect and most fitting prelude to telling the story of the Exodus from Egypt.

As my teacher, Marc-Alain Ouaknin explains, "The words of telling emerge from that break, from the empty place left between the two pieces of matzah." The act of telling the story of the Exodus occurs through an exchange of conversation and ideas. It is difficult (if not impossible) to have an experience of "telling" the story of the Exodus as an isolated individual. We take the one whole matzah and break it in half because discussion and conversation occur when there is a minimum of two — me and the other. The Exodus is experienced in that open space between us, the space where she learns from me and I learn from her. The story is not frozen; it is dynamic. Its relevance for our day is maximized when it is internalized not only by me but by others with whom I am in a relationship. When I hear the story from their perspective, my understanding is enriched and expanded. The Exodus story is freed by this space between the two pieces of matzah, between me and the person who sits across from me. It is liberated from the page of the Haggadah and allowed to soar inward and upward.

Karpas

By Amy B. Ehrlich, *Associate Rabbi*

Spring. New growth. Green things.

The Jewish calendar always ensures that Passover arrives in the spring. *Karpas*, is most often associated with parsley, but it can be any spring vegetable that is not used later for other parts of the seder. The vivid color affirms that the season has arrived.

To create links between holidays, some begin their preparation for Passover by planting parsley seeds on Tu BiSh'vat, which occurs toward the end of winter. The seasons change quickly as one tends the newly sprouted herb until it grows full enough to be featured on a seder plate.

Karpas, like all food, is reason for blessing. To me, it represents the original partnership between us and God. Having been given the fruit of the earth, it is up to us to care for it

and to thank God for such gifts. The responsibility extends to how we care for the environment, as well as planting and harvesting (providing food) for those who cannot get it for themselves.

The original intention of using *karpas* was to create a moment of curiosity. Is this *karpas* instead of a meal or as a prelude to our dinner? Why do we dip twice when on all other nights we don't even do it once? As we dip *karpas* in salt water, we are reminded of earlier "dunks": first of Joseph's tunic dipped in blood, which marked the beginning of the Israelite's journey to Egypt; then of the blood to mark the doorposts, which signaled the conclusion of the Egyptian experience; now in the salt water, emblematic of the tears of slavery and perhaps heralding the tears of joy that will accompany freedom.

The craft of a good seder is in the questions. Not all of them have answers, but we still are required to ask.

The *Afikoman*
By Howard J. Goldsmith, *Assistant Rabbi*

It turns out that the wonderful game of matzah hide-and-seek that kids look forward to for the whole seder is not all fun and games. In fact, it has some strange and confusing origins.

In the Talmud we read that "One does not finish after the pesach (the sacrificial lamb) with the *afikoman*." And during Temple times, people actually would eat the Passover offering as the main course in their Passover meal. We were commanded not to eat anything after the lamb to ensure that the final taste in our mouth would be that of the Passover offering, but once we stopped making a Passover offering, the command in the Talmud stopped making sense. It is unclear how the evolution occurred, but by the 11th century, Rashi and his grandson the Rashbam declared that one must finish the Passover meal by eating a piece of matzah at least twice the size of an olive. Just as our people used to finish the meal with the taste of the Passover offerings, today our last bite of food is the piece of matzah called the *afikoman*.

So, why do we hide the *afikoman* and send children to find it? It is a teaching tool. By hiding it, we add excitement to the seder. It is a way of reviving the energy of children at the table when it might be flagging half-way through the seder. There are many variations on the game. An adult can hide it, and when a kid finds it, he or she can sell pieces to the adults around the table. A kid can hide it, and when the adults can't find it, the child ransoms the *afikoman* for prizes or money. The matzah can be hidden in a colorful, decorated cloth bag decorated by the kids, or it can be hidden without a cover for maximum camouflage effect. If you can dream up a variation, then you can use it. The main point remains to excite the children about the seder with this great teaching tool.

Here are the traditional rules for the *afikoman* as determined by Daniel Landes in *My People's Passover Haggadah, Volume 2: Traditional Texts, Modern Commentaries*:

The hiding, snatching and ransoming of the *afikoman* by children is part of the mitzvah of education. The idea is to keep the children alert and excited.

The *afikoman* must be eaten at the proper time, generally in the middle of the night's proceedings (but certainly before midnight).

If possible, one should eat a piece of matzah the size of two olives: one olive's worth commemorating the Passover offering, the other commemorating the matzah itself.

For some authorities, the *afikoman* is the essential performance of the mitzvah of eating matzah (as opposed to the matzah we eat at the beginning of the seder).

All present should eat the *afikoman*.

The *afikoman* should be eaten while reclining and all at once, without interruption. People who forget to recline or for whom reclining is too difficult are excused from doing so.

The *afikoman* should be eaten while feeling full.

If one does not have enough *afikoman*, or if it is lost, other matzah may be substituted.

One may [consume] nothing after the *afikoman* other than the remaining two cups of wine and water. Coffee and tea are counted as water.

The Four Questions
By Danny Mishkin, *Director of Youth Activities*

The Four Questions is a very important part of the seder. Wisely, Jewish tradition has asked the youngest child to ask these important questions. But, a closer look at the Four Questions reveals something odd: There aren't four questions; there is only one question and four answers. The one question is, "Why is this night different from all other nights?" The four answers are: 1) We eat only matzah, 2) We eat bitter herbs, 3) We dip twice and 4) We recline.

A fun way to keep children interested in the seder is to tell them that they only asked one question, yet it was a very good question because it had four possible answers. The leader of the seder should then reward children who ask good questions and expect that together all the children will ask three more questions to complete the seder.

Remember, a good question is one that can have at least four answers. Teaching young children, or old children, to ask good questions shows the genius of the Jewish tradition. Only free people get to ask questions. Slaves only say "yes" or "no." Use the seder as an opportunity to encourage your children to express their freedom by asking good questions.

The Four Children
By Robyn W. Cimbol, *Director of Development*

Echoing the recurrent theme of four, the Passover Haggadah describes four varieties of children. The children represent differing levels of theological understanding.

Not surprisingly, every child aspires to be like the wise child. The Hebrew text in the Haggadah, derived from Deuteronomy 7:20, presents the wise child as asking, "What mean the laws, statutes and customs which the Lord our God has commanded you?" Curiously, this inquiry is not phrased very differently from that of the wicked child. The wise child affirms the existence of God by stating "our God" but is separated from the community by stating "commanded you" rather than "commanded us." Not as wise as we may have expected, for the child possessing true wisdom would have recognized both God's sovereignty as well as a personal obligation to the rituals. The detailed nature of our response to this child assumes that once there is a fuller understanding, the choice will be made to assume the communal responsibilities.

The wicked child is considered so because the form of the question implies a denial of the existence of God as well as an exemption from community. The Haggadah cites Exodus 12:26-27: "And when your children ask you, 'What do you mean by this ceremony?' you shall say…He smote the Egyptians but saved our homes." This child is considered wicked because the abbreviated manner of asking this question also suggests that this child regards the continued observance of Passover as a burden. The response we offer is an affirmation of God's existence and power. This section is the stuff of which nightmares are made because of the statement that this child would not have been redeemed. Hence, no one wants to think of one's self in such a manner.

The third child also lacks a connection to both God and community but is not considered to be responsible. The question "What is this all about?" is raised in such a simplistic manner that this child clearly does not recognize the observance even as a ritual. We are less harsh in our reply to this child and consequently explain with equal simplicity God's responsibility for the Exodus. We provide the simple child with a simple reason to believe.

The last child — the one who does not know how to ask — is given a response that will no doubt lead to additional questions. "This is done because of what the Lord did for me when I came forth from Egypt" is sure to provoke such questions as, "When were you in Egypt?" and "What exactly did the Lord do for you."

The enduring relevance of this section of the Haggadah lies in the fact that each of us contains aspects of each of the four children. We begin unable to ask, progress to simplicity and ultimately to belief. We tell and retell the same story, year after year, but as we mature, our capacity for comprehension and insight increase.

More on the Wicked Child
By Saul Kaiserman, *Director of Lifelong Learning*

What should we think of the wicked child, who challenges all of us gathered around the seder table at Passover with the question, "What does this practice mean to you?"

First, you might not realize that the wicked child is quoting from the Bible — Exodus 12:26, to be precise. In its original context (at the very first Passover celebration on the eve of the Exodus from Egypt), the question was framed as the one that will be asked by future generations, and it receives a straightforward response, an explanation of the meaning of Passover.

The Haggadah, however, sees the question in a less positive light, as is made obvious by labeling the child as "wicked." It indicates that asking what Passover means to "you" signifies the wicked child's hostility to the community. We are instructed to set the child's "teeth on edge" and quote scripture back to the child: "It is because of what God did for ME when I went free from Egypt." (Exodus 13:8) Had you been there, wicked child, you would have been left behind in Egypt.

Two recent books use the wicked child's question as the jumping-off point for treatises on the alienation many contemporary Jews experience from Jewish community.

David Mamet, in his 2006 book *The Wicked Son: Anti-Semitism, Self-Hatred and the Jews* (part of the fabulous NextBook series), begins with the premise that "the world hates the Jews" and so every Jew must choose sides: "In or out" (7). He writes that the "wickedness of the wicked son" is that he "would not stand with those who would stand with him":

He feels free to enjoy his intellectual heritage, the Jewish love of learning, and reverence for accomplishment; he enjoys, aware or not, a heritage of millennia of Jewish Law and values; he enjoys his very life, which would have been denied him and his ancestors in the Europe they suffered to leave; he enjoys the right to protection from the community he disavows and, through it all, parrots, "My parents were Jews, but I do not consider myself a Jew." (128-9)

In his book, Mamet seeks to issue a wake-up call to such Jews, telling all wicked children to cease blaming Jewish community for its shortcomings and to take pride in their heritage as the descendants "of kings and queens, a holy nation and a kingdom of priests." (180)

A very different response is offered by Mitchell Silver in *Respecting the Wicked Child: A Philosophy of Secular Jewish Identity and Education*. He observes that the "sin" of the wicked child is "the expression of alienation from the tradition" while the other children "ask how to celebrate the seder properly or what it is all about." Noting that for liberal and secular Jews, not only is it a challenge "to find reasons to maintain a Jewish identity":

It is also hard to overcome reasons against maintaining a Jewish identity. The most powerful arguments for assimilation stem from the liberal Enlightenment vision of a universal common humanity. On this view all that is significantly human is, or ought to be, universal…." (3)

Silver takes a more positive view of the wicked child than Mamet, writing that "among contemporary Jews there are many wicked children, and they merit answers that amount to more than the traditional scornful dismissal." (1)

Silver's fascinating book attempts to provide a philosophical basis for a Jewish identity that doesn't compromise liberal or secular values. His premise is that "the wicked child's question has a certain logical and moral priority" over that of the wise child's, which concerns understanding the details for observing the seder. Once the wicked child is satisfied with a more general understanding of "what it is all about, the desire for details will follow. The transition from wickedness to wisdom, from estrangement to communion, is a natural one." (189)

I'd like to chart a middle-path between Mamet's decrying and Silver's celebrating of the wicked child's question. On the one hand, the question itself is a legitimate one. After all, at the seder we are instructed to invite all who are hungry to join us, and the wicked child might be a guest who is a stranger and — who knows — maybe not Jewish? At least the wicked child is paying attention enough to ask a question!

On the other hand, I want to take the Haggadah seriously in calling the child "wicked." The Haggadah's response only makes sense if we hear in the question not only the voice of an alienated Jew trying to find a place within the community but also the voice of apathy, of hostility, of a challenge to the legitimacy of the Passover seder and to the community of all those present: Prove to me that this is worth doing, that I should consider myself one of you.

Yet, even though the wicked child's question is confrontational, I'd rather have the child at the table — sitting uncomfortably and annoyed, perhaps — than for the child not to be there at all. I would want to thank the wicked child for joining us for the seder, despite having those feelings of alienation and anger.

I would suggest — and here, I think the Haggadah agrees with me — that all four children ought to be present at the table. We should be glad when the wise child doesn't go off to hold a seder composed entirely of other wise children but is willing to suffer

through the questions of the simple child (probably with much eye-rolling). The simple child, too, must find the meticulous questions of the wise child tedious, waiting impatiently through even more details of the laws of the *afikoman*.

Let us not be quick to dismiss the wicked child, any more than we would ignore the silent child or become frustrated with the endless questions of the wise and simple children. All voices — even the silent voice — need to be heard. I'd rather have the seder be a place where the wicked child's question can be asked than leave it go unspoken, with the wicked child refusing sullenly to participate but not explaining why.

Magid: Telling the Story
By Rachel Brumberg, *Assistant Director of Lifelong Learning*

Even if all of us were wise, all of us discerning, all of us veteran scholars, and all of us knowledgeable in Torah, it would still be a mitzvah for us to retell the story of the Exodus from Egypt.

— Passover Haggadah

The bulk of the Passover Haggadah, and therefore the heart of the Passover seder itself, is the telling of the story of Passover, known in Hebrew as *Magid*. The story of Passover is the story of the Exodus of the Israelites from Egypt. It is a story of a group of people leaving a life of slavery and oppression in a foreign land and their journey towards becoming a free community with a relationship with God in their own homeland. All the symbols of Passover — the wine, *charoset*, bitter herbs, matzah — relate back to this story and help reinforce the themes. As indicated in the quote above, no matter our lot in life, we all have an obligation to remember our beginnings; it is our beginning that helps to define who we become. However, looking at the *Magid* itself, you may be inclined to ask: What's going on? If the Passover story is about the Israelites' departure from Egypt, then who are all these rabbis and other random characters? What are they talking about, and how does it relate to us today? Why isn't it good enough to just read the Book of Exodus, eat dinner and be done?

We can look to the Haggadah itself to answer these questions: "The more and the longer one expands and embellishes the story, the more commendable." By including conversations of the rabbis and other lessons, the *Magid* is showing us how past generations have expounded on the text so that they can make it their own and understand the Exodus as if it were their own personal journey. There is clearly a lesson to be learned from the Haggadah. To continue to make the Passover story, and therefore the seder itself, relevant today, we need to find our own connections to the Exodus story. To that end, we can start asking a serious of questions: What story can each of us tell to reinterpret the Passover story as our own? What events from more recent history can be discussed to help us understand this holiday in a new context? What is "enslaving" us, and what are our own personal paths to freedom? And what is the connection between

our stories past and present so that we can come together as a community to celebrate our freedom as a people? Beginning to answer these types of questions as you sit around the seder table is in itself a way to connect to our tradition. Furthermore, entering this conversation allows us to participate actively in the mitzvah of retelling the story of the Exodus from Egypt; the longer the conversation the more commendable the action.

Egypt
By Dr. David M. Posner, *Senior Rabbi*

While it has become fashionable as of late to point out that there is not one shred of archaeological evidence that the ancient Hebrews were ever slaves in Egypt, the Bible itself is so replete with references to the period of Israelite enslavement that the burden of proof belongs squarely on the shoulders of those who maintain its questionability. Further, it would do us all well to remember that absence of evidence does not necessarily mean evidence of absence.

The Ten Plagues
By Sherry Nehmer, *Assistant Temple Administrator*

And the LORD said to Moses, "Say unto Aaron, Take thy rod, and stretch out thine hand upon the waters of Egypt, upon their streams, upon their rivers, and upon their ponds and upon all their pools of water, that they may become blood…" (Exodus 7:19)

And thus, water turned to blood, the first of the Ten Plagues to fall upon the land of Egypt before Pharaoh would allow the Israelites to leave. In due course, there followed *Frogs, Gnats, Swarms of Flies* or *Wild Beasts in the Streets, Pestilence to Livestock, Boils, Hail Mixed With Fire, Locusts, Darkness* and, the most devastating of all, *Death of the First Born*. Ultimately, Pharaoh got the hint.

It's hard to imagine being pelted by frogs or by hail mixed with fire. And for those of us who are the first born, it's preferable not to dwell on the entire list. But there are modern plagues that have befallen us or, rather, that we have caused to fall upon ourselves. Perhaps it's worthwhile to consider them this Passover:

1. Water supplies turned to chemical poison by pollution. Other waters dry up, creating drought, while ocean waters rise and threaten us — both the result of global warming.

2. Instead of a surplus of one species, the threat of extinction for many.

3. Those gnats buzzing in our ears as the plague of noise: the incessant blare of infomercials, pointless gossip, confrontational talk shows, political mudslinging, biased

news reports, invented crises; the noise of others over-sharing personal information on too-loud cellphone calls, phones ringing in inappropriate places, music shouting sexist and racist lyrics. Everything assaults us, eternally buzzing, buzzing, buzzing in our ears.

4. The swarming in the streets of groups of uneducated youths with no guidance, no goals and dim futures.

5. "Orphan diseases" for which funding dwindles, the growth of drug-resistant bacteria, the unnerving threat of pandemics that would decimate the world's population. And even greater and more insidious than these is the plague of poverty that already affects so many lives.

6. No plague of boils but an alarming increase among children of dangerous food allergies and disabilities such as autism, both of which have been linked to environmental factors.

7. No hail and fire but acid rain that scorches us; trees and habitats — those of man and animal — swept away by rampant wildfires caused by drought.

8. No locusts but an overuse of pesticides to control insect populations, resulting in further pollution to the land and water.

9. Darkness still covers us: the darkness of ignorance, of intolerance and of hatred of those not like us.

10. And finally, death of the first born, and of his brothers and sisters, through war and violence in its many forms.

The good news? In most cases, we don't have to look for divine intervention for solutions. We can lead ourselves out of bondage.

Welcoming Elijah
By Robyn W. Cimbol, *Director of Development*

Following the third cup of wine, we welcome the prophet Elijah to our homes by pouring a glass of wine in his honor and throwing open our doors for his entrance. This appears out of context at our seder. One would expect that if we were to invoke the presence of a special guest it would be Moses. Why Elijah?

The prophet Elijah is thought to appear at threshold moments in our Jewish lives. He holds the baby at a bris, he is invoked during *Havdalah*, and in the Grace After Meals we refer to Elijah as the one "who will bring us good tidings, salvation and comfort." Seen in

this context, the presence of Elijah becomes somewhat more logical. His arrival will foreshadow the messianic era of redemption.

However, we summon Elijah with among the harshest words we utter at the seder, beginning with the recitation of verses 6 and 7 from Psalm 79: "Pour out Thy wrath upon the nations that know Thee not, and upon the kingdoms that call not upon Thy name; for they have consumed Jacob and laid waste his habitation." We continue with Psalm 69, verse 25: "Pour out Thy rage upon them, and let Thy fury overtake them." We conclude with verse 66 from Lamentations 3: "Pursue them in anger and destroy them from under the heavens of the Lord."

It is accepted widely that this section was added to the Haggadah during the Crusades as an expression of frustration and a prayer for redemption by a powerless, oppressed people. The Elijah section, thus, may be seen as an affirmation of belief that the past redemption is a guarantee of a coming redemption. Today this section often is omitted because it clearly is not "politically correct." However, by linking these words to the arrival of the prophet Elijah, we are reminded that redemption remains incomplete. With our doors open, we see clearly that the world outside has not yet been redeemed. We close our doors and continue our prayers for redemption.

"Chad Gadya"
By Robyn W. Cimbol, *Director of Development*

Despite its melodic similarity to a children's nursery rhyme, "Chad Gadya" conveys a very serious message. It belongs to a quintet of songs added to the seder in the 15th century. The presence of an *alef* at the end of the word (as opposed to a *hei*) was intended to imply that this is in Aramaic rather than Hebrew.

"Chad Gadya" can be seen as a powerful midrash on the progression of Jewish history. The "goat" or "kid," depending upon translation, represents the Jewish people. Each successive verse reflects another oppressor in our history, each of which is destroyed in turn.

The most provocative and powerful verse of "Chad Gadya" is the conclusion:
Then came the Holy One, blessed be He,
And slew the Angel of Death…

This is a clear statement of the power of God. One might have anticipated that the appearance of the Angel of Death would signal the end of this song. Death is ordinarily an end. However, in "Chad Gadya," we affirm that God is more powerful than the Angel of Death. In slaying the Angel of Death, God affirms life.

Perhaps the most familiar biblical "resurrection" inference is to be found in Ezekiel 37, in the vision of the valley of dry bones. This is interpreted generally not as the physical resurrection of dead people but as a metaphor for the political resurrection of the Jewish people as a nation and a message of hope to a demoralized people that the exile will not last forever. Both Daniel and Isaiah include specific references to God's power to resurrect the dead. In Daniel 12:2 we are told, "Many of them that sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake…," and in Isaiah 26:19 it is prophesied that "Thy dead shall live, my dead bodies shall arise — awake and sing, ye that dwell in the dust…" These passages justify the inclusion of the concluding verse of "Chad Gadya."

"Chad Gadya," thus, may be seen as an expression of faith in the redemptive power of God. For only when the power of the Angel of Death is neutralized can we achieve eternal life.

Next Year in Jerusalem!
By Lori A. Corrsin, *Cantor*

These words end every seder, giving us hope that next year the world will be at peace.

The name Jerusalem means "City of Peace." It is a vision of our dreams of a world redeemed and our own personal redemption.

The seder gives us the opportunity to look at our lives in the sweep of our people's history. Jews always have longed for a *Yerushalayim Shel Malah*, a heavenly Jerusalem of safety, peace and freedom.

The seder is not just a retelling of the Exodus from Egypt; it is a journey from entrapment and degradation to freedom. But even when we achieve physical freedom, it is not enough. We all need both the purpose and the freedom to realize our individual possibilities. We need to have the opportunity to grow as Jews, reflecting on our beliefs and values. A thoughtful journey through the seder story can give us such insight. It is no accident that we must design our own seder in our own home. The synagogue does not do it for us; we must decide its meaning for ourselves. If we each take the time and energy to search for meaning in this, one of our faith's most important ceremonies, we can derive great personal rewards. We can come closer to the dream of Jerusalem — not the physical city but the heavenly city.

What is your dream of Jerusalem? For me, it is a place of completeness within myself and in the world.

For whatever we each are searching, may we find it by the time we return to the seder next year. May we all find our own personal Jerusalem, place of peace.
Next year in Jerusalem!