

April 2nd, 2010

The Fein Haggadah

By Leonard Fein

After a decade of working with a Haggadah that was scissored and pasted, the traditional text, poetry by Yehuda Amichai, a Moses story by Anthony Burgess, a selection from Primo Levi, stories of here and there, and a good deal of my own language, I am this year setting all that aside. Giving it — and the assembled — a rest.

But some of the language may find favor in you eyes and work at your Seder table. Herewith, then, several of my own additions to the celebration:

- Each cup we raise this night is an act of memory and of reverence. The story we tell, this year as every year, is not yet done. It begins with *them, then*; it continues with *us, now*. We remember not out of curiosity or nostalgia, but because it is our turn to add to the story.

Our challenge this year, as every year, is to feel the Exodus, to open the gates of time and become one with those who crossed the Red Sea from slavery to freedom.

Our challenge this year, as every year, is to reach out to all those in every land who have yet to make the crossing and help them enter freedomland.

We know some things that others did and do not always know — how arduous is the struggle, how very deep the waters to be crossed and how treacherous their tides, how filled with irony and contradiction and suffering the crossing, then the wandering.

How can we not know such things? Did we ourselves not wander in the desert for 40 years, and have not those 40 years been followed by 25 centuries of struggle and of quest? Heirs to those who struggled and quested, we are old-timers at disappointment, veterans at

sorrow, but always, always, prisoners of hope. “*Hatikvah*” — the hope — is the anthem of our people, and the way of our people.

And for all the reversals and all the stumbling-blocks, for all the blood and all the hurt, hope still dances within us. That is who we are, and that is what this Seder is about.

For the slaves *do* become free, and the tyrants *are* destroyed. Once, it was by miracles; today, it is by defiance and devotion.

• Once, we dedicated this first cup of wine to the Jews of the Soviet Union. Many of them now live in lands of freedom. Once, we at this point called South Africa and apartheid to mind; now South Africa is free. Around the world — in Chile, in Hungary, in nations just yesterday ruled by tyrants — new freedom blossoms. So the dream is not a fantasy, the hope is not a delusion.

Yet this year, as in years past, we scarcely need to be reminded how much work there is yet to do if all are to be free — free from fear, free from abject poverty, free from plague, free from tyranny, free, above all, from fear; how much work there is yet to do, and how frightfully complicated are the decisions that need to be taken along the way. This year, yet again, we see with our own eyes how bloody the struggle can be, and how riddled with doubt. We call especially to mind this year the ongoing genocide in Darfur, and the world’s — and our own country’s — steadfast refusal to put an end to it. And we call to mind, yet again, the endless insult and injury that is both seed and fruit of the bitter conflict between Israel and the Palestinians.

But though the path be brambled and twisted, the goal is clear. So as we raise our first cup of wine, let it be for those who suffer still, in the hope and the prayer that they, too, will know the freedom that is our blessing. And let it be for those in every land who give freedom a face and a name, whose lives nourish the blossoms of freedom around the world and enable us to hope.

Let us give thanks for the freedom that is ours, for family and friends, and let us never ever take that freedom, those friends, our families, for granted. Next year, may all who are today

denied freedom dwell in the Jerusalems of their longing, united with their loved ones, together, at home, at last.

• Imagine: Perhaps it was Moses, perhaps some other. A Jewish slave, the child of slaves, grandchild of slaves. Imagine that one day, hungry, exhausted, whipped by the slavemaster, it came to him to say, “Enough! This is no life, and I will no longer wait passively for a better day, be satisfied with the thin gruel of slavery. This is not what I wish for myself, for my family, for anyone.”

Throughout history, ours and others, but only now and then, there have been those who have found the strength to say, finally, “Enough!” No more chains. No more cruelty. No more oppression. No more degradation. No more war.

So, too, in our own time. We cannot, we dare not, let go of the prospect of peace, as distant as it so often seems, as precarious as are its prospects. Pesach comes to remind us that the dream of redemption is not a fantasy. No, the swords have not yet been put aside, the time of the plowshares and the pruning hooks is yet to come. But we know, and dare not forget, that there are those who are eager to resume the journey, even now.

It is not and will not be an easy journey. Between now and peace, there is work to be done. There is hatred to be unlearned, and dignity to be restored. There is tolerance to be taught, and new understanding to be planted. And there are agreements to be reached, somehow.

True, the edges of our wounds have not yet healed, and memories of sorrow sometimes crowd out our dreams. But if the Children of Israel had not made room for the dream, allowed tomorrow to urge them on, we would still be standing on the wrong side of the waters, no desert to cross, no mountain to climb, no land to reclaim. So even if the seas are reddened with new blood, even if Egypt lingers, unwelcome, in our hearts and in our minds, we dare not be slaves to yesterday. *B'chol dor va'dor*, in every generation — and in ours, too — we must cross to the Promised Land, to the Promised Time.

Until the new possibilities become the new realities.

And oh, what new verses we will add to the *dayenu* when that day dawns.

- Finally: Why do we drink four cups of wine at our Seder?

Perhaps you remember the traditional answers, about freedom reigning in the four corners of the earth, in every season, forever. Tonight, however, we are going to take a different tack. We're going to go for the Top Ten reasons.

- 10) Because the Manischewitz wine merchants were pushing their product.
- 9) One cup for each of the matriarchs.
- 8) One cup for each of the patriarchs plus one for good luck.
- 7) One cup for each horseman of the Apocalypse.
- 6) Because we cannot eat fortune cookies on Pesach.
- 5) Because three would suggest the trinity and five the years of the Five Year Plan.
- 4) One for each time FDR was elected president
- 3) Because $4.5 \times 4 = 18$, or *chai*
- 2) Because more than four would be excessive.
- 1) Because we hope for freedom to reign in the four corners of the earth, in every season, forever.