

Why Is This Night Different?



A HIAS Passover Seder Supplement for “The Four Questions”

The seder offers one question and four answers that become questions in their own right. This night is different because we do these symbolic acts – but what do they mean and what do they demand of us in our own time?

Ma nishtanah halailah hazeh mikol haleilot?

מה נשתנה הלילה הזה מכל הלילות

Sheb'khol haleilot anu okhlin hametz umatzah; halailah hazeh, kuloh matzah.

שְׁבֹכֶל הַלֵּילוֹת אָנוּ אוֹכְלִין חֶמֶץ וּמַצָּה, הַלֵּילָה הַזֶּה – כָּלוּ
מַצָּה

Sheb'khol haleilot anu okhlin sh'ar y'rakot; halailah hazeh, (kuloh) maror.

שְׁבֹכֶל הַלֵּילוֹת אָנוּ אוֹכְלִין שְׂאֵר יַרְקוֹת – הַלֵּילָה הַזֶּה
(כָּלוּ) מָרֹר

Sheb'khol haleilot ein anu matbilin afilu pa'am ehat; halailah hazeh, shtei f'amim.

שְׁבֹכֶל הַלֵּילוֹת אֵין אָנוּ מְטַבְּלִין אֶפִּילוּ פַּעַם אַחַת –
הַלֵּילָה הַזֶּה שְׁתֵּי פְּעָמִים

Sheb'khol haleilot anu okhlin bein yoshvin uvein m'subin; halailah hazeh, kulanu m'subin.

שְׁבֹכֶל הַלֵּילוֹת אָנוּ אוֹכְלִין בֵּין יוֹשְׁבֵין וּבֵין מְסֻבִּין –
הַלֵּילָה הַזֶּה כָּלָנוּ מְסֻבִּין

Why is this night different from all other nights?

On all other nights we eat leavened products and matzah, and on this night only matzah.

On all other nights we eat all vegetables, and on this night only bitter herbs.

On all other nights, we don't dip our food even once, and on this night we dip twice.

On all other nights we eat sitting or reclining, and on this night we only recline.

Why is this night different from all other nights?

Matzah: Redemption in the Act of Telling Our Story

Maharat Ruth Friedman (Orthodox)

Though central to the seder, we are unsure of the exact significance of matzah. On the one hand, the Torah refers to it as *lechem oni*, or bread of affliction - a flat, unrisen bread that represents the speed with which we had to flee Egypt. On the other hand, matzah is also *lechem cherut*, or the bread that marks the freedom from that very affliction. The Talmud adds another layer of meaning. The sage Shmuel explains that the meaning of *oni* is not affliction, but “answer,” meaning that matzah is the “bread over which one answers matters.” (Pesachim 115b)

What is the significance of matzah being present while we speak answers to questions? The Zohar teaches that while we were slaves in Egypt, our ability to speak meaningfully was in exile. We could utter sounds and produce superficial speech, but we were stripped of our ability to speak about complex matters. Part of our redemption from slavery was the restoration of our speech, and so at the seder we celebrate our ability to answer the deep questions that we have carried for generations.

The ability to tell one's story of redemption is an enormous privilege. As we sit at the seder table this year and celebrate our redemption, we remember those who are suffering now in silence, not yet free to tell their stories to the world.

Bitter Herbs: From Our Tastebuds to Our Hearts

Rabbi Ken Chasen (Reform)

The great Rabban Gamliel instructed that tasting the bitter herb should reacquaint us with the bitterness that overwhelmed the enslaved Israelites in Egypt. The challenge for us, on a night of such joy, is to ensure that our awareness of that bitterness isn't easily washed away by the sensory delights that fill the remainder of this evening.

So long as bondage and oppression persist in our land, so must the bitterness be upon our tongues, compelling us to seek and create the sweetness of liberation for all. At a moment when so many who once looked to our borders as the passageway to their redemption now discover only the hard-heartedness of Pharaoh, the bitter herb sends an urgent call from our tastebuds to our hearts. How will we respond to that call?

Our tradition teaches that the rituals of the *seder* are never to serve as a mere remembrance of what happened long ago; they are to catalyze a re-living of the Exodus story, so that we might experience it ourselves – and bear the responsibility that accompanies it. Let us be among those who take brave action to extinguish the bitterness that plagues those seeking refuge in our time.

Dipping Twice: Enslavement and Redemption

Rabbi Lauren Grabelle Herrmann (Reconstructionist)

Rabeinu Manoach, a 13th century French commentator, teaches that the two dippings in the *seder* are allusions to two dippings in the Exodus story. The first represents when Joseph's brothers dipped his colorful coat into blood to pass off their brother for dead. That action was the catalyst that led Joseph to Egypt and eventually the Israelites to enslavement. The second represents the commandment to the Israelites to take hyssop, dip it into lamb's blood, and place it on their doorposts for God to pass over and set our people on the path toward redemption.

The first dipping reminds us not only of slavery's bitterness but of the tragic consequences when human beings act with contempt. As we speak, politicians pedal in fear and fellow citizens look away as immigrants are ripped from their families, imprisoned and deported. As we dip the first time, we acknowledge the pain and dehumanization engendered by hatred and mistrust of our immigrant neighbors.

In contrast, the second dipping reminds us of the courage of those who chose freedom and envisioned a better world despite all evidence to the contrary. As we dip a second time, we let our ancestors' courage inspire our own so that we advocate, support, and show up for our immigrant neighbors today. We dip, committing to build a future in which all are free and treated with dignity.

Reclining and the Embodiment of Freedom

Rabbi Talia Kaplan (Conservative)

On this night, the haggadah invites us to embody freedom, quite literally leaning into the feeling of liberation. The Rambam's explanation of who is required to recline during the *seder* categorizes different groups of people. It teaches that reclining is, in short, for important people who are not subservient to others. Embedded in the instruction to recline is the understanding that the degree to which we have agency to move our bodies is often political, mediated by larger structures in society.

Many forcibly displaced people in the world are often stripped of control over their own bodies, let alone the choice of whether to sit upright or recline. People seeking refuge can be apprehended, shackled and placed in "non-punitive detention" that is indistinguishable from prison. Their bodies are involuntarily confined – sometimes in conditions quite literally without sufficient space to lie down for sleep.

As we recline at our *seder* tables, we lean into the freedom afforded to us. Allowing our bodies to soften, we affirm the importance of physical agency, especially for those seeking liberation today. We work towards a day when everyone has the freedom to eat as they please, in a place of comfort and security.