

PLAGUE IS A VERB

On seder night, we chant or sing or say the list of plagues God inflicted on Egypt to convince Pharaoh to free the Israelites. The earliest plagues seem merely strange or inconvenient but they become increasingly more severe and drastic until they culminate with the death of every Egyptian firstborn. We take a drop from our wine glass with the name of every plague, symbolically reducing our joy in recognition of even our oppressor's pain and sorrow.

One of the glorious paradoxes of Passover is that at the very moment we celebrate our liberation from slavery under Pharaoh, we are invited to pay attention to where there are Pharaohs in our contemporary world, and even to notice the Pharaoh-like tendencies we might harbor in our own hearts. Pharaoh's heart needed to be plagued to the utmost extremity in order to soften enough to let the Jewish people go. What kind of 'plaguing,' advocacy, action or inconvenience might serve to change the policies and practices of today's Pharaohs? What kinds of deliberate discomfort will move us out of self-protection or disinterest so that we can open ourselves to the needs of the most vulnerable people in the world?

Since last fall, the beginning of this Jewish year, tens of thousands of Afghans have been displaced from their homes in Afghanistan. Tens of thousands of asylum seekers from Central and South America and from Haiti have been denied their legal right to claim asylum at the U.S.-Mexico border. And, just since the end of February, war and violence in Ukraine have displaced more than eleven million people from their homes.

If we allow it, stories from each of these crises have the power to productively plague us. It is easy to scroll past the painful picture or turn the page on a tale that feels too terrible to read. But that very moment is an invitation to soften our hearts, to open ourselves to these very real modern-day experiences of Exodus. We can push at our internal walls and stretch the boundaries of our community to hold all those seeking refuge from oppressive Pharaohs – whoever and wherever they are.

Prompts for Further Discussion and Sharing

- After you name the traditional plagues, invite those present to name today's Pharaohs as they understand them. After each Pharaoh is named, the group can suggest plague that could serve to soften that Pharaoh's heart.
- On Passover, we are instructed to open our doors and let '*kol dichfin*/all who are hungry' come and eat. If you have a smaller seder guest list than that, brainstorm together other ways you can support and nourish newcomers and those in need in your community.

