



“Hearkening to the Voice of Gaza”

Seder Readings for Passover 5784

Rabbi Brant Rosen

Kadesh

As we raise the cup to another seder, we must acknowledge that this Passover is radically different from all other Passovers. Before we begin, we are compelled to name this out loud: we gather for seder tonight while genocidal violence is being inflicted on Palestinians in Gaza - by a state that purports to act in the name of the Jewish people. Thus, we come to the very first question of the evening: what does Passover require of us in this tragic and unprecedented moment?

Let us begin our seder by affirming:

- If we fail to give the Palestinian people a voice at our table this evening, we will not have fulfilled the requirements of the Passover seder...**
- If our Passover festival focuses exclusively on Jewish trauma – and not on the ways our trauma is being weaponized to oppress another people, we will not have fulfilled the requirements of the Passover seder...**
- If we read the Passover story as a story of Jewish liberation alone or - God forbid - Jewish liberation at the expense of others, we will not have fulfilled the requirements of the Passover seder...**
- If we celebrate this festival by hardening our hearts to the horrifying stories and images from Gaza that have been crying out to us for the past seven months, we will not have fulfilled the requirements of the Passover seder...**
- If our gathering does not motivate us to do everything in our power to end the genocidal violence Israel is unleashing upon Gaza, we will not have fulfilled the requirements of the Passover seder.**

With these challenges before us, let us begin.

Strawberries (After Karpas)

Strawberries have long been an important crop in Gaza, traditionally harvested in farms in and around the town of Beit Lahia from December to late March. [According to](#) Ali Al-Keelani, president of the Gaza Agricultural Cooperative Society:

God has blessed Beit Lahia's land with fertile soil, a suitable climate, and freshwater — essential elements for cultivating strawberries. This practice has been passed down through generations, shaping the livelihoods of most of the town's residents. They have excelled in strawberry cultivation for decades.

Today, like most of Gaza, Beit Lahia lies in ruins. Along with homes, the Israeli military has destroyed and flattened massive tracts of farmland. We eat strawberries now, in solidarity with the people of Gaza and their historic, sacred relationship to their land. Together with *karpas*, let strawberries be our symbol of new life emerging out of the cold winter. With the eternal promise of spring, let us vow together that new life will emerge for the people of Gaza once more.

Yachatz

As we break this matzah in two, we acknowledge the profound brokenness Israel is inflicting on the Palestinian people. As the Palestinian Christian pastor Rev. Munther Isaac has [powerfully testified](#):

We are broken. The people of Gaza are suffering. They have lost everything except their dignity... Where are they to go? There is no place for them in this world!

What is happening in Gaza is not a war or a conflict, but an annihilation — continuous genocide and ethnic cleansing through death and forced displacement. World political powers are sacrificing the people of Palestine in order to secure their interests in the Middle East; they say our annihilation is needed to keep the people of Israel safe. They offer us as sacrifices on the altar of atonement, as we pay the price for their sins with our lives.

The people of Gaza today want life. They want a night without bombing. They want medicine and surgical operations with anesthesia. They want the simplest of life's necessities: food, clean water, and electricity. They want freedom and life with dignity. Those under bombardment, beatings, and persecution do not want to hear about reconciliation and peace. They want the end of aggression!

Even as we break this matzah now, we declare that it is not enough to merely acknowledge the brokenness. We insist that what is broken *must* be repaired and restored – until there is true and lasting liberation for all who live between the river and the sea.

Ha Lach Manya: “This is the Bread of Affliction...”

As we lift up the matzah this Passover, the words of Palestinian poet [Mosab Abu Toha](#) remind us that for Gazans experiencing forced starvation, *lechem oni* – the bread of affliction - is more than merely symbolic.

Three days later, on social media, (my brother) Hamza posted a photograph of what he was eating that day: a ragged brown morsel, seared black on one side and flecked with grainy bits. “This is the wondrous thing we call ‘bread’—a mixture of rabbit, donkey, and pigeon feed,” Hamza wrote in Arabic. “There is nothing good about it except that it fills our bellies. It is impossible to stuff it with other foods, or even break it except by biting down hard with one’s teeth...”

This past Monday, an ear doctor who treated me in Gaza, Bahaa al-Ashqar, managed to cross into Egypt through the Rafah border. I woke up to a call from him at one o’clock in the morning, and two hours later a taxi dropped him off at our apartment. I was overjoyed that Dr. Bahaa was still alive. We hugged. But, as I stared at him, I saw how thin and weak he looked. This is not the doctor I used to know, I thought. He had lost thirty-seven pounds since the start of the war. In Rafah, he’d survived on canned food... In the morning, Maram cooked tomatoes and fried some eggs. Dr. Bahaa told us that it was his first normal breakfast in months. We dipped bread and feta into the olive oil. It smelled of the trees that grew the olives, and it tasted like Gaza.

Magid: Pharaoh’s Decree

As we begin the Passover story, Pharaoh attempts to stem the Israelite birth rate by ordering the Hebrew midwives Shifra and Puah to kill every newborn boy. When they defy his order, Pharaoh orders that every newborn boy be cast into the Nile. In the midst of Israel’s genocidal assault on the people of Gaza, these verses now resonate with unbearable urgency.

UNICEF [has reported](#) that more than 13,000 children have been killed in Gaza since October 7. About 1 in 3 children under age 2 in northern Gaza is now acutely malnourished, as famine looms. According to a [news report](#) earlier this month:

The designated representative for Palestinian territories with the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), said that when he visited Gaza last month, doctors at the Emirati Hospital similarly told him that they were no longer seeing “normal-sized” babies. They reported “more complications around births caused, they’re telling us, by malnutrition and dehydration and from stress,” (he) said. “What they are seeing is an increased number of stillborn babies and neonatal deaths.”

According to the UNFPA, around 155,000 pregnant women and new mothers in Gaza are “struggling to survive. For the 5,500 women who will give birth in the coming month, accessing adequate health care is an unimaginable challenge. Only three maternity hospitals remain in the Gaza Strip, and they are overwhelmed with patients,” it said, adding: “Doctors and midwives — desperate for medicines and supplies — are struggling to provide adequate care to newborns.”

Let us invoke the moral courage and resistance of Shifra and Puah. Let us fight for a world in which *all* children are born into health, safety and collective care.

Magid: The Cry of the Israelites

“The Israelites were groaning under the bondage and cried out; and their cry for help from the bondage rose up to God.” (Exodus 2:23)

Gazan journalist [Omar Ghraieb](#) has written:

I yearn for the world to see us, too — to hear us, and acknowledge our humanity and our right to live in freedom and safety like everyone else. Is there still space for raw humanity and aching hearts amid conversations about power dynamics and political victories? If there were, we would have been free long ago.

The relentless, brutal Israeli military assaults and the oppressive conditions of the blockade of our borders have failed to desensitize me. It’s impossible to forget or ignore that these decades of Israeli military occupation color every facet of our existence and fragment our land and our people.

For many of us, this, however limited, is our greatest power: to dream and to feel pain in a world that seeks to dull our edges and dim our brightest lights. For now, I raise my voice, I continue to read, I continue to write, and I continue to hope.

Does God hearken to the cry of the Palestinian people? The answer, as ever, is up to us all.

Maror

“This maror: why do we eat it? Because Pharaoh embittered the lives of the Israelites in Mitzrayim.”

Gazan journalist Nesma Seyam has [written](#):

I just woke up from a strange and bizarre dream. Today is the 18th day of the war on Gaza. It's 4:00 am, Thursday July 24th, 2014. I found myself sitting at the edge of my bed, trapped in a state between dreams and reality. As I fight to get back to reality, I feel the pull and allure of the dream get stronger and stronger. I caught myself uttering: Candy, Candy, Candy, I want more candy! Just then, a large shadowy hand descended and clasped onto my throat and squeezed...

It was yesterday afternoon when I received the dreadful news. My best friend's brother, Hasan, was now a martyr. He is survived by three little girls. The youngest, not even 2 years old yet. He wasn't given adequate time to be a father to her. To look in her eyes and give unconditional love, to hug her, to spoil her, to raise her. At least let him live just one more year to give his children a proper farewell. Three little angels robbed of their fathers love in an instant, is there a greater crime?

I have finally realized that what I have experienced was truly a dream and why it had occurred that night. My soul was aching, and my lust for sweets was an attempt to sooth the bitterness in my heart. But all the sweets in the world would still not be enough to erase the cruelty, strife, and bitterness in our hearts. In the dream I searched for anything sweet, anything beautiful to comfort myself and my friend. But there was no earthly thing that can ease our pain. The bitter taste remains in our mouths, it was Hasan who found the sweet taste of liberty and joy in heaven.

In the unspeakable bitterness of this moment, we now eat the *maror*.

Hallel

To our traditional Psalms of joy and praise, we add this adaptation of Psalm 46:

*For the people of Gaza,
for the refugees,
for the dispossessed and displaced,
a song:*

We will not look away
we see you everywhere
even as the bombs rain down
even as the earth gives way beneath you,
even as they drive you from your homes.

There is a river whose streams
will one day bring rejoicing back
to your land,
morning will dawn and light
will come streaming into every home.

This nation that rages so mercilessly against you
soon will break under the weight of its own
overwhelming might
and you will find shelter and protection
at long last.

For there is a Power far mightier
than even the mightiest military;
bombs and tanks and drones
will be shattered into dust,
governments held to account
for their crimes against you.

*I will bring you into the stillness
of my embrace
and you will know that I am with you
I will lift you up among the nations
I will return you in dignity and in love.*

The One who abides with you
through this endless night
will accompany you through all harm
and bring you safely home.

(by Rabbi Brant Rosen, from [Jewish Prayers for Gaza](#))

Nirtzah

As we end our seder with words of ancient Jewish yearning, we acknowledge Jerusalem's profound and sacred meaning for Gazans – and for all Palestinians living under occupation.

[“It Took Me Three Decades to Drive One Hour from Gaza to Jerusalem”](#) (by Albier Almasri)

Earlier this year, the Israeli army gave me a permit to leave the 11-by-40-kilometer Gaza Strip for the first time in my life and travel to the United States for work. Last month, I left again – this time, to see the rest of Palestine and Israel. The one-hour trip from the Israel-Gaza crossing to Jerusalem felt like a journey to a distant world.

I have always dreamed of smelling Jerusalem's air and hearing the call to prayer ring from its mosques. When the prospect of traveling there was still a distant dream, I told a colleague, “I just hope to have the chance to pray in al-Aqsa Mosque before I die.”

Al-Aqsa was even more spectacular than I had imagined. I couldn't hold back the tears – both of joy at beholding its beauty, and of sadness that such a majestic place has witnessed a half-century of ugly, abusive military occupation, where soldiers control who can pray there.

I also fell in love with Bethlehem, Nazareth, Jaffa, Acre, and Haifa during my whirlwind tour, snapping pictures everywhere that I could to share with family and friends back home.

I'm now back in Gaza, not sure if I'll ever be able to return. But I remember the sights and smells, and wait for the day that everyone in Gaza can travel freely.

[“My Grandma Finally Got to Visit Jerusalem. Will I Have to Wait Until I'm 60?”](#) (by Ghada Ahmed)

After three weeks of anxiously waiting to get a permit, my grandma finally left her home in Gaza at 4 am May 22, got on a bus full of other older people and began the journey to Jerusalem. They were finally going to be able to pray in Al Aqsa Mosque, the third-holiest site for Muslims worldwide.

The bus drove by some of the original towns from which these elderly Gazans had been expelled in 1948 during the "Nakba" – catastrophe. Grandma described how the air seemed so fresh and the land was covered by a lush green everywhere they looked. In Gaza, there is such a shortage of water, you never see such expanses of green. It was overwhelming. They could almost taste the smell of their land and everyone on the bus was feeling nostalgic. Everything was breathtaking; it was a bittersweet experience for them all.

In addition to religious reasons, all Gazans have personal reasons for wanting to visit Jerusalem. For example, my grandma was desperate to see my uncle—her son—who lives in Ramallah, a city in the West Bank. She had not seen him for 15 years. "I have always wanted the opportunity to see him again," she told us.

Finally, their dream to be reunited came true and my grandma got to see, touch and embrace her eldest son, his wife and their five children. She had tears in her eyes as she recounted hugging them all. This was the first time my cousins got to meet their grandmother. After that, they prayed together in Al-Aqsa Mosque before she had to leave. Their reunion didn't last long simply because Israel doesn't allow Gazans to be there after 2 pm. Throughout their reunion, they were surrounded by Israeli soldiers with guns.

As soon as grandma left Jerusalem, she started counting, not the days, but the years until she can get another permit to visit Jerusalem. Until then – no Jerusalem, no son, no grandchildren. Just constant waiting. She ended her reminiscence of her visit to Jerusalem by saying, "Mararah ya sitty," an Arabic expression of desperate bitterness.

I will have to wait 37 years until I am allowed to visit Jerusalem, which is my own land. But Jerusalem, for you I will wait forever.

["Please Go to My Country and Say Salaam."](#) (by Malak Matar)

For any Gazan, going to Jerusalem is like a dream, and praying at Al-Aqsa Mosque, it's not something easily done. So, I went and for the first time, I saw Jerusalem. I felt that the air is kind of different from the air in Gaza, you know. It was heart-wrenching to see Al-Aqsa Mosque, and how holy it felt to pray there, and even walking in the narrow streets . . . it's really something. It took quite a while for me to understand that Jerusalem is also my country.

As our seder now comes to a close, let our voices now join with the collective voice of the Palestinian people. Let our words reflect our solemn commitment to the true and total liberation of Jerusalem - and the promise it represents to us all.

May this day come in our own lifetimes – and may we do what we must to make it so.

NEXT YEAR IN JERUSALEM!

NEXT YEAR IN AL-QUDS!

L'SHANAH HA'BA'AH B'YERUSHALAYIM!