

Hearts beating like drums. Hands grasping at precious objects in the dark. My ancestors fled their oppressors under the cover of night. They packed light, bringing only sustenance for the journey ahead, unrisen cakes of dough. What could not be tied to their backs was etched across their hearts and on their souls: joy and pain, hope and trauma, uncertainty and faith.

Bite by bite, they trusted that the bread of their affliction would become the bread of their liberation.

At the Passover seder, I step back into that experience. I eat the bread of affliction to remember their journey, memories etched across my own heart and soul like the generations before me.

And yet, the journey to liberation is far from over.

Today, more than 70 million souls still wander the earth fleeing violence and persecution. From Syria, South Sudan, Myanmar, Colombia – from every corner of the earth – today's refugees make perilous journeys almost as dangerous as the conflicts they flee.

In the name of our ancestors, let us raise the Jewish community's voice in saying that we want the doors of our country to remain open to refugees and asylum seekers. We will bear witness as they write the next chapter of their stories in safety and with dignity.

- Rabbi Rachel Grant Meyer
Rabbi-in-Residence, HIAS

“Arami Oved Avi” — Why People Leave Home

“And he dwelt there” — This teaches that Jacob our Father did not go down to Egypt to live there permanently but rather to dwell temporarily. As the Torah recounts, “They said to Pharaoh, ‘We have come to dwell in the land, for there is no pasture for your servants’ sheep, for the famine is very heavy in Canaan. And now, please let your servants settle in the land of Goshen.’” (Genesis 47:4)

- Haggadah

At the bottom level [of poverty] are more than one billion people who live on \$1 a day or less... This is life without options... These are families whose children are regularly harvested into slavery... If we compare the level of poverty and the amount of slavery for 193 of the world's countries, the pattern is obvious. The poorest countries have the highest levels of slavery.

- Kevin Bales, *Ending Slavery* (2007), p. 15-17

Some formerly trafficked persons had never planned to live in the United States... [but for others] migration for work was a mobility strategy, a plan to attain long-term economic goals... In short, this is an ambitious and resourceful group, willing to avail themselves of whatever resources are within their reach.

- Denise Brennan, *Life Interrupted* (2014), p. 15

- Bales and Brennan, both respected researchers, present different views of modern slavery, each of which is supported in the anti-trafficking community. How do you respond to their portrayals?
- Which model better describes the biblical Jacob and his sons?

As we sing “*Vehi she’amda*,” we remember that in every generation, people have been held in forced labor, and God has been their support, if not their complete redemption.

וְהִיא שֶׁעָמְדָה לְאַבוֹתֵינוּ וְלָנוּ
שֶׁלֹא אֶחָד בְּלִבָּד עָמַד עָלֵינוּ לְכַלְתֵּינוּ
אֶלָּא שְׁבָכָל דּוֹר וָדוֹר עוֹמְדִים עָלֵינוּ לְכַלְתֵּינוּ
וְהַקְדוֹשׁ בְּרוּךְ הוּא מִצִּילֵינוּ מִיָּדָם.

Vehi she’amda, vehi she’amda la’avoteinu velanu (x2)

Shelo ecbad bil’vad amad aleinu lekhaloteinu

Ela shebekhol dor vador omdim aleinu lekhaloteinu

Vehakadosh Baruch Hu matzileinu miyadam.

**This is the One who stood up for our ancestors and for us.
For not just once did an enemy arise to destroy us,
But in every generation, they arise to destroy us.
And the Holy Blessed One rescues us from their hands.**

In Hebrew, “The One” in the song is feminine. Who is this One? The classical rabbis would probably say the Torah. The Kabbalists invoked *Binah*, a feminine aspect of God. In the spirit of 70 faces of Torah, here is a slightly subversive suggestion: The one who stood up for our ancestors — literally, our fathers — is our mothers. We remember the oft-erased contribution women have played throughout history and celebrate the importance and power of women’s leadership in fighting forced labor today.



Picture drawn by an immigrant child detained at the Tornillo tent city, Tornillo, Tex., January 2019, shortly before the facility was closed. Photograph by Justin Hamel.

Excerpts from “Maror and Maggid: Clearing My Throat”

by Rabbi Mira Rivera, Jewish Emergent Network Fellow, Romemu, NYC

They have reason to worry
because multiply we have
multiplied and we are the Other
African Latinx Asian and in-between
by way of Shanghai Bnei Anusim Cochin Jew Abayudaya
Jewish by way of mother by way of father you challenge
Observant by way of secular parents who may be practicing
Baal Baalat Teshuvah Jew
Jewish by Sefarad to the letter
by way of Yosef Caro
By way of the Rema
Strictly Halachic Jew
Neither Sefardi neither Mizrachi
neither Ashkenazi neither Israeli
Still a Diaspora Jew

I eat with my fingers
I dine with fine crystal
I have cheeks burning
Peach ruddy roasted warm coffee
Desert mocha midnight blue black Jew...
Jew in the pew Pew Report Jew
Forever an immigrant forever Yisrael
Forever wrestling honestly
Still proud to be a Jew

And yes, you're very welcome
I'm a Person of Color
you can look at me
You can see me
I'm a Jew of Color
And I claim my space
But I do get it
Gotta justify presence
in almost every Jewish space
So where were we again?
Yes, I am Jewish
This is my name
I am not intermarried
And I did not take his name
Yes, I am a convert
Yes, I am a Rabbi
I am here just like you
And yes I am a Jew
So where were we again?
Now you tell me all about you

Over the past few years, I've found myself coming back again and again to the Passover story as I learn to be a rabbi in situations I never could have imagined. Our narrative of liberation guides us to care for the vulnerable among us. We are told: “You shall not oppress a stranger, for you know the feelings of the stranger, having yourselves been strangers in the land of Egypt” (Exodus 23:9). That is, it is not enough to simply remember. Rabbi Shai Held teaches that “[o]ne of the Torah’s central projects is to turn memory into empathy and moral responsibility.” The retelling of our story in the haggadah is a call to oppose the rising forces of white nationalism that animate our country’s immigration policies. Our government’s goal is to force black and brown people out, and to keep any more from getting in. Fighting the nativist populism that inflicts cruelty upon immigrants is indeed part of my religious practice, a way in which I carry out my moral responsibility. My position as a rabbi — and as a human being — requires no less.

- Rabbi Salem Pearce, Director of Organizing, T'ruah

“Goy gadol, atzum, veraṽ” — We Multiplied

“No people have had a more inadequate preparation, educational and economic, for American citizenship.”

This quote comes not from today’s right-wing media but from *McClure’s Magazine* in 1907, referring to Russian Jews. Jews have been targets of the same rhetoric hurled at today’s immigrants.

As HIAS President and CEO Mark Hetfield likes to say, “We used to help refugees because they were Jewish; now we help refugees because we are Jewish.” The history of Eastern European Jews immigrating to the U.S. through Ellis Island looms large in the American Jewish psyche. But we must also remember and honor the diversity of Jewish experiences:

- The first wave of Jews to arrive in America were Sephardim, who established synagogues and Jewish communities, some of which continue to operate today.
- Native American Jews are not immigrants.
- African-American Jews likely have ancestors who were brought here violently and against their will.
- Converts may come from families that have been here for hundreds of years.
- Many Jews are themselves immigrants; for them, the story is not one of long ago but of here and now.

Our shared sacred story is one of migration, seeking the promised land and being exiled from it in cycles, but each individual also has their personal stories.

Racism is implicitly and explicitly embedded in American society’s structure and culture. It is a pervasive virus that seeps into all aspects of our lives, including our Jewish community. It’s what motivated a mob of Chasidic Jews to harass me in front of my home for carrying a Torah scroll because it was too far fetched for a black man carrying a Torah to be a fellow Jew. It’s what continues to marginalize Jewish people of color, making even holy Jewish spaces like synagogues intolerable for many. Every year we recall the Israelite experience of oppression, redemption and the recurring commandment to care for those in society that remain oppressed, such as the stranger, the orphan and the widow. These memories and values are key to embodying anti-racism through concrete acts of care and shifting access to power, which is critical to actualizing our true multi-racial community in its fullest glory.

- Yehudah Webster,
Community Organizer
Jews for Racial and
Economic Justice (JFREJ)

“*Veniz’ak el Adonai*” — We Cried Out

The Passover story of workers collectively rising up against their oppressors repeats itself throughout our history. In the early 20th century, we saw this theme reflected in the more than two million Eastern European Jewish immigrants fighting for union rights, protections, and solidarity. These workers, who risked so much to emigrate to their “Promised Land,” quickly found themselves working in sweatshops with low pay, excessive hours, and dangerous worksites. They used their European tradition of labor activism as a tool to organize thousands, many of them immigrant women, offering them the opportunity to change their world through the union movement. In 1909, Jewish women workers, including labor organizers Clara Lemlich and Rose Schneiderman, sparked the Uprising of 20,000 – a strike led and won by women garment workers who walked off their jobs and eventually gained thousands of union jobs. This movement ultimately achieved five-day workweeks, the recognition of the rights of women workers, and workplace safety regulations that still exist today. Today we commit to continue our tradition of labor activism and join in campaigns to make today’s United States a “Promised Land” for workers and immigrants.

- Ann Toback,
Executive Director,
The Workers’ Circle

American Jewish communities today are of mixed socioeconomic class, as they have always been, and include poor and working-class Jews. A 2014 Pew Research Center study found that 16 percent of Jewish adults had a household income of below \$30,000, and another 15 percent earned below \$50,000.⁷ When the Jewish community mobilizes its resources to effect change in the world, we should remember to count among those resources the lived experience and change-making energy of poor and working-class Jews. It is not just that many of us were poor a century ago; many of us still are today.

⁷ <https://www.pewforum.org/religious-landscape-study/income-distribution/>

“*Vayare’u otanu HaMitzrim*” — They Did Evil To Us

Midrash tells us (Numbers Rabbah 15:20) how Pharaoh bait-and-switched the Israelites into slavery:

When Pharaoh said, “Let us be crafty with them’...and they put taskmasters over them” (Exodus 1:10-11), he gathered all of Israel and said to them, “Please, work with me today, as a favor.” That is why it says “the Egyptians enslaved the Israelites with *parekh* [hard work]” (1:13) — with *peh rakh* [a soft mouth]. [Pharaoh himself] picked up a basket and rake. Who would have seen Pharaoh picking up a basket and rake, making bricks, and not joined in with him? All Israel went quickly and worked alongside him with all their strength, for they were mighty and heroic. When it got dark, [Pharaoh] appointed overseers and said, “Count the bricks.” They immediately did so, and he said, “You shall make this same quantity every day.”

Human trafficking occurs when workers are exploited through

FORCE, FRAUD, or COERCION

and are unable to leave abusive employers. Conditions do not have to involve physical violence or manacles. Threats, manufactured debt, control of finances or travel documents, verbal abuse — all these and more can be involved.

Unable to leave the house.
Forbidden to answer the door.
Cut off from her family. Worked fourteen to sixteen hours per day.
Paid nothing. Threatened with deportation and harm to her family. Someone called in a tip.
She escaped.

Another tipster called the national hotline. She reported a woman in the neighborhood who never left the house, except to take out the trash. The FBI investigated. The woman had been held in forced labor for four years.

Involuntary servitude among domestic workers and nannies is one of America’s most hidden crimes. Like domestic violence, it occurs behind closed doors. Like trafficking into other sectors, the victimization can involve rape and sexual violence. Like other forms of trafficking, the abuse leaves deep scars. Unlike most trafficking, some of the perpetrators are diplomats, who bring in domestic workers on special visas.

Domestic workers are among the most exploited workers in the world. Over the years, trafficking victims have told me they never expected to be exploited here. “Not in America,” many have said. “That does not happen in America.” But it does. In America. And all around the world.

- Martina Vandenberg,
Founder and President,
Human Trafficking
Legal Center

3. In July 2017, the State Department said there was “no credible information that any member of a terrorist group has traveled through Mexico to gain access to the United States.”¹¹

4. Most undocumented immigrants in the U.S. did not cross the border between official ports of entry; rather, they entered the country with a visa and then overstayed.

Pharaoh’s fear remains with our country today.

- What past moment(s) of vulnerability do you think the US is grappling with when rhetoric around “securing our borders” ramps up?
- Whom do you think is blamed?



Art project by an immigrant child detained at the Tornillo tent city

Tornillo, Texas, December 2018, shortly before the facility was closed. Photograph by Justin Hamel.

⁸ <https://www.marketwatch.com/story/heres-how-much-has-already-been-spent-on-border-barriers-2018-12-12>

⁹ <https://thehill.com/opinion/immigration/425514-border-wall-wont-stop-migrants-but-will-increase-use-of-smugglers>

¹⁰ <https://www.wnycstudios.org/podcasts/tnyradiohour/episodes/louis-cks-return-stage> “The Black Vote in 2020”

¹¹ <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2019/01/04/gops-pernicious-link-between-terrorism-border-wall/>

“*Avodah Kashah*” — They Put Hard Work Upon Us

Why did Pharaoh hate and fear the Israelites so much?

A clue may be found in what the Israelites were forced to build in Egypt: not pyramids, or sacred tombs for the Pharaohs, but *arei miskanot* (Exodus 1:11), understood as either “garrison-cities” or “granary-cities.” The latter interpretation (following II Chronicles 32:28) echoes an earlier story, in Genesis, about how Joseph saved Egypt from a devastating famine by stockpiling and then rationing food.

The Torah says that a new Pharaoh arose who “did not know Joseph” (Exodus 1:8). According to the medieval commentator Rashi, it was not that he actually had never heard of Joseph. Rather, he was a xenophobe who could not stand the knowledge that mighty Egypt could have been brought to its knees by famine and then saved by a foreigner. So he decreed a massive building project, to protect Egypt from ever being vulnerable again, and he carried it out on the backs of Joseph’s descendants — pretending that he didn’t know that their ancestor had saved all of Egypt.

A similar building project has been carried out by both American political parties — the construction of fencing and walls on the U.S.-Mexico border — to the devastation of border communities and immigrants throughout the U.S. According to Taxpayers for Common Sense, from 2007-2018 the U.S. spent \$9.7 billion on border barriers, almost exclusively on the Mexican border.⁸ The fear that immigration threatens America — its economy, security, and very identity — has been used to justify these draconian and wasteful policies.

Here’s what we know about border security and immigration:

1. “Constructing a border wall has not been empirically shown to deter undocumented migration; instead, it displaces crossing methods and increases the use and cost of smugglers. This is dangerous because smugglers have been known to physically and sexually abuse undocumented migrants and even engage in human trafficking.”

- Anti-trafficking expert Dr. Kimberly Mehlman-Orozco⁹

2. Many people coming to the U.S. “illegally” are actually following the rules for seeking asylum, which is a legal process meant to offer protection to those escaping persecution or threats to their lives. New policies enacted since 2017 have made it increasingly difficult to request asylum, prompting journalist and historian Jelani Cobb to note, “The era of America as a country of asylum is over.”¹⁰



“Rising Above Oppression,” by Margeaux Gray
5”x 6”, Carved clay and paint, © 2015

Ms. Gray writes, “My story of rising above slavery and the unjust violence I experienced inspired this piece. Additionally, my ancestors and those who paved a path for my freedom to be possible were also an influence in its creation. The carved painting is of a woman connected to her ancestors. She draws from their strength and wisdom. She is empowered by them and rises above the oppressive nature that has for so long silenced her. She breaks through a wave and steps into the light of freedom.”

“*Vayar et onyeinu*” — God Saw Our Suffering

Me’am Loez on Exodus 1:22; commentary of Rabbi Yaakov Culi (17th-18th c. Turkey), translated from the original Ladino by Rabbi Aryeh Kaplan:

“Every boy that is born you shall throw into the Nile.” Throughout all this, the Israelites did not know that this was a plan devised against them by Pharaoh. They were led to believe that such ghastly acts were being done by individual Egyptians on their own initiative. Many Israelites even complained to the authorities, and were told that if proper witnesses would be brought, the perpetrators would be punished. Eventually, of course, the Israelites discovered the truth.”

A new midrash:

“God saw our suffering, our toil, and our oppression.” (Deuteronomy 26:7)

“Our suffering” — This represents the interpersonal realm, how we treat others. We may ourselves treat workers fairly and refrain from racist comments, but that is the barest beginning.

“Our toil” — This represents the ideational realm, both in our own heads and in the society at large. We absorb racist, exploitative ideas from the moment we are born.

“Our oppression” — This represents institutional racism, where the very structures of our society — economics, politics, alleged meritocracy — hem us in by the color of our skin.

We cannot wait for God to take us out of this Egypt. We are working together on ending Egypt for all of us.