



CHAG V'CHESED: HOLIDAY DVAR TZEDEK

Passover 5774

By Representative Jan Schakowsky

Passover is my favorite holiday. My family gathers together to eat the *Seder* meal, sing songs and remember the days when our people were enslaved in Egypt and the miraculous story of our deliverance.

During that meal, in addition to the *matzah* and bitter herbs on our table, there is an orange on my *Seder* plate, symbolizing the marginalized people of the world and the imperative to fight for their liberation. We also fill a ceremonial cup of water to honor Miriam the prophet, sister of Moses and a central figure in the Exodus story.

These symbols are meaningful, and yet Passover is more than a history lesson—it's a call to action. It's a time when, as individuals and as a community, we renew our commitment to justice. The *Haggadah* tells us that we should invite all who are in need to share the hope of Passover. Our faith asks us to take action to help the oppressed so that all may enjoy the blessings of freedom.

Freedom means many things, but to women and girls all around the world, it means living in a world free from daily threats of violence. The statistics are horrifying. [One in three women](#) will experience physical or sexual abuse. [Women age 15 to 44 are as likely to die from violence as from cancer](#). Every year, some [14 million adolescent girls give birth](#) and, in many nations, it is [the leading cause of death of 15 to 19 year olds](#). Violence keeps girls from going to school, one reason that over [30 million girls worldwide go without education](#), even though we know [an extra year of secondary schooling will help women raise their lifetime wages by 15 to 20 percent](#) and would reduce child mortality—but they must be able to attend.

Now imagine a different world—one in which girls are free to go to school, without having to look constantly over their shoulders and be ready to run to protect themselves. Imagine if women were free to start businesses or just go along on their daily activities without fear of rape or assault. Today, [women make up nearly 70 percent of the world's absolute poor](#)—those living on less than a dollar a day. Think what a difference it would make if we could unleash their economic power.

The good news is that we *can* build that world. American Jewish World Service is proving that women can be empowered to overcome tremendous obstacles. Since 1985, AJWS has been making a difference across the globe, including in some of the most dangerous places, like the Democratic Republic of Congo. In the DRC, women and girls have been brutally and systematically raped as a tactic of war. In some villages, as many as [90 percent of women have been raped](#). Patrick Cammaert, who served as UN Force Commander in the DRC, has said that it is “more dangerous to be a woman than to be a soldier.”

I had the opportunity to travel to the DRC to see the work being done there. I visited the city of Bukavu, where I met extremely resilient women at City of Joy, a community where women who are survivors of violence can heal, learn and become successful. AJWS, City of Joy and others are working every day in the spirit of *tikkun*

olam or “repairing the world,” by helping to restore the wellbeing of women and girls physically, emotionally, spiritually and economically.

Freeing women and girls from violence is transformative—for them, for their families, for their local economies and for global stability. That is why I have authored the International Violence Against Women Act, which would firmly establish the prevention of violence against women as a top foreign policy priority. IVAWA is particularly groundbreaking because it takes a comprehensive approach to the problem, facilitating a full spectrum of reforms that would impact judicial systems, health care and education, and that would empower women and girls economically and help end practices that disadvantage them.

I am proud that advocating for passage of IVAWA is part of AJWS’s *We Believe* campaign. The campaign is bringing attention to the need to end violence against women and girls, end child marriage and stop hate crimes against LGBT people. It is a campaign that, like Passover, allows us to combine our beliefs and our actions. And, like Passover, it is committed to the spirit of freedom and justice.

I believe that this will be the century of the woman—where women all around the globe will be able to reach our full potential, leading our communities—like Miriam led the Israelites—to freedom, peace, prosperity and celebration. Through the work of AJWS and our individual efforts, we will be able to achieve a world where women can succeed.



U.S. Representative **Jan Schakowsky** (D-IL) started her public career as a consumer advocate, leading a successful campaign for freshness dates on supermarket products. After years as an organizer fighting for affordable energy prices, health care and senior citizen rights, Schakowsky served in the Illinois General Assembly for eight years before being elected to Congress in 1998. *Tikkun olam* (repairing the world) has been the guiding theme in all of her work.

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