



The 5776 (2015-2016) cycle of *Dvar Tzedek* is a special one. To commemorate AJWS's 30th anniversary, we are sharing a selection of some of our favorite commentaries from past years. Each legacy commentary will be introduced with a related reflection on AJWS's work and contemporary issues.

Introductory Reflection

In her 2012 *Dvar Tzedek* on *Parashat Bo*, Rabbi Wendi Geffen explores the differences and similarities between *matzah*, which represents the Jews' oppression in Egypt, and *chametz*, which represents freedom. Despite the differing symbolism, *chametz* and *matzah* are extremely similar, differing only in the length of their cooking time. So too, our own oppression and freedom can change on a dime. We were slaves not long ago; and people suffering from oppression today hope to soon experience freedom.

One community yearning for this transformation is transgender people, who are persecuted in many parts of the world. In Nicaragua, for example—where many trans people face relentless discrimination and bigotry from their families, schools, employers, health care providers and religious communities—a trans woman named [Dayanara](#) came out to her family when she was a teenager. Ostracized by her parents and thrown out of her home, she lived on the streets for years, earned money through sex work, developed a drug addiction and ended up in prison, where she was raped repeatedly. When she was released, Dayanara made a commitment to turn her life around. She got help from the Association for Transgender Nicaraguans (ANIT), an organization supported by AJWS that empowers trans people to defend their rights. Now, at 29, she is finishing her high school degree and is one of ANIT's community leaders. Together with other activists, she is working to increase access to legal justice for trans people who have been victims of violence. She also trains health providers and police officers to promote tolerance and end discrimination against LGBT Nicaraguans.

As soon as Dayanara put her painful past behind her, she turned to help others who faced similar challenges. Many Jews today similarly use the *matzah* to represent the responsibility we have toward others who are not yet free. As Rabbi Geffen writes, "...our history of affliction and our newfound freedom together obligate us to bring about the same transformation for others in our world." Read Geffen's thoughtful commentary on *Parashat Bo* to learn more about our responsibility to transform oppression into freedom.

Parashat Bo 5776

By Rabbi Wendi Geffen

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Passover doesn't arrive until April, but *Parashat Bo* already has us thinking about it. In detailing the first *Chag haMatzot*,¹ the Festival of Unleavened Bread, the *parashah* establishes perhaps the most fundamental dichotomy of Passover: chametz vs. matzah.

¹ The modern Passover festival as it is understood and practiced today has evolved over time, and was essentially fixed by the time of the Mishnah's publication. *Parashat Bo*'s initial presentation of the observance—the very first mention of anything having to do with Passover—details three seemingly

We generally assume chametz and matzah to be opposites, given their oppositional treatment in the text.² After all, matzah was the bread baked by our ancestors in their hurried attempt to leave the oppression of Egypt. Matzah reminds us of our last moments of servitude and our narrow, constricted existence in *Mitzrayim*. Tradition would later name matzah “*lechem oni*”³—the bread of poverty and affliction. Chametz, on the other hand, is the bread of decadence and freedom: baked with no time constraints, it has all the time it needs to expand and rise. It represents excess and ease—something our ancestors never experienced in Egypt—and thus, is as far as possible from everything matzah represents.

But despite this differing symbolism, there actually isn’t a lot of difference between chametz and matzah. They are composed of identical grains⁴ and differ only in the length of their cooking time: leave your wheat soaking for 18 minutes or less, you have matzah; leave it soaking 18.1 minutes or more, you have chametz. For so-called opposites, the line is notably thin.

This thin line blurs more when we examine the two in the context of the Passover story. On Passover, the *lechem oni* reminding us of our suffering is the same stuff that enables us to become free; the bread of affliction is also the bread of liberation. And chametz, the supposed symbol of ease, ultimately comes to represent the fermenting stench of oppression.

The malleability of these symbols—and their meanings—is even more pronounced at the modern Seder, where we use matzah to represent a new idea: responsibility. We begin *Maggid* (the portion of the Seder where we retell our story) by holding up the matzah and declaring: “*Ha lachma anya*”⁵—this is the bread of affliction that our ancestors ate in the land of Egypt.” But instead of going into the details of this affliction, the text issues a command: “Let all who are hungry come and eat. All who are in need, come and participate in the Passover ritual.” We don’t introduce the matzah as a self-serving vehicle, one by which we dwell on our own oppression—or even our own freedom—but rather, we lift up the matzah as a way of demonstrating our responsibility toward others who are still oppressed and not yet free.

The introduction of the matzah in relation to our own suffering does not serve to exemplify how far we’ve come, nor how free we are to do whatever we please. Instead, our history of affliction and our newfound freedom together obligate us to bring about the same transformation for others in our world. It is our responsibility as free people to intervene on their behalf as God did for us, to bring about a new reality where the oppressed can taste liberation and attain true freedom.

different institutions: the Pesach sacrifice (Ex. 12:1-13, 21-28, 43-50), the Festival of Unleavened Bread (Ex. 12:16-20, 13:3-8) and even the ritual of consecrating/redeeming the firstborn (Ex. 13:1-2, 11-15).

² We are commanded to remove all chametz that we own, and at the same time, to be sure to consume matzah.

³ Deuteronomy 16:3.

⁴ Wheat, oats, barley, spelt or rye.

⁵ Aramaic for *lechem oni*—the bread of affliction.

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In this light, “*Ha lachma anya*” is just the beginning. We may start by inviting those in need to join our meal, but we shouldn’t stop there. The charge for inclusivity and social equalization is one that calls to us not just at our Seder tables, but for as long as anyone sits shackled, physically or metaphorically, in our world. The closing words of *Ha lachma anya* emphasize this notion: “This year we are slaves, next year may we be free.” By concluding that we are, in fact, not yet free, the passage can teach us that *true* freedom does not exist until *everyone* is free.

Passover won’t arrive for nearly three months, but we do not need to wait until then to work toward sustainable change, to enable the oppressed in our world to enjoy the same freedoms for which we already give thanks. By regularly contributing our financial, occupational and spiritual resources toward responsibly and sustainably ending oppression, we take the steps that may lead us to truly experience the fulfillment of our collective desire, that one day we may all be free.



Wendi Geffen is a rabbi at North Shore Congregation Israel in suburban Chicago. Dedicated to social justice and its Jewish textual roots, she regularly works to empower the synagogue and her larger community to act on the Jewish imperative to pursue *tzedek*. Wendi is also the creator of Beyond and Back, a Chicago-wide program that engages young adults to explore their Jewish identity through text study and dialogue. A graduate of Emory University, she was ordained at Hebrew Union College and received honors for academic achievement in Bible. Wendi can be reached at geffenajws@gmail.com.

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