



# IN EVERY GENERATION, CHANGE IS POSSIBLE

BY ROBERT BANK

**AS PASSOVER APPROACHES**, I am contemplating the ancient Israelites' journey from slavery to freedom and thinking about the journeys that lie ahead of us. While today, American Jews aren't facing the shackles or hard labor experienced by our ancestors in Egypt, our collective memory of those times makes us sensitive to the powerful forces of oppression in the world. As our ancestors once did, millions of people around the globe today still yearn for freedom.

From global hunger to the rise of authoritarian governments; from violent wars sending refugees fleeing for their lives to global warming and the increase in disasters affecting the poorest people on our planet—we confront formidable challenges. As 21st-century Jews who believe deeply in the Jewish obligation to pursue justice and repair the world, we feel the weight of these challenges every day.

Given this powerful and infinitely important burden, it is only natural to wonder: Can we make a difference? Even the most courageous among us grapple with feelings of fear, helplessness and self-doubt that injustice stirs in our deepest selves. We wonder, who are we to act, either as individuals or as a community, when the problems we face loom so large? How can we change history, when history has so often changed us?

*Who are we?*

Our struggle is not new. After all, Moses—the most iconic leader in Jewish history—struggled mightily with these same doubts. According to the Book of Exodus, when God chose him to stand up to Pharaoh and lead the Israelites out of slavery, Moses initially said, “Who am I?”

He doubted his suitability for the job, asking over and over again, “Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh and free the Israelites from Egypt?”<sup>1</sup> “What if they do not believe me and do not listen to me?”<sup>2</sup> “I have never been a man of words.”<sup>3</sup>

But Moses eventually mustered the resolve to step into his role—and so must we.

I gain great courage from examining what changed for Moses—what enabled him to get beyond his fear. Moses gained strength from partnership and solidarity. As it is written in the Torah, God told Moses, “I will be with you” and offered Aaron as a partner. It was only when Moses realized that he had support that he was able to assume the mantle of leadership.

<sup>1</sup>Exodus 3:11

<sup>2</sup>Exodus 4:1

<sup>3</sup>Exodus 4:10

*continued>>*

We, too, must remember that we are not alone in our struggles for justice.

*Who are we?* We are together.

By my side every day are the leaders of 450 remarkable social change organizations that AJWS supports in 19 countries around the world. These leaders regularly lay their lives on the line to defend human rights and pursue freedom for their own communities and others. They aid refugees fleeing Burma because of ethnic persecution, stand up for villages threatened to be submerged under the floodwaters of huge hydroelectric dams in Honduras, and insist on justice for survivors of rape in Democratic Republic of Congo. Again and again, up against some of the most oppressive regimes in the world, these courageous activists speak truth to power, overturn unjust laws, and insist that governments respect the rights of the poorest and most vulnerable citizens.

Also by my side are thousands of Jewish allies with AJWS and the greater Jewish communities who advance social change through their generosity, their advocacy and their action together. We effect change through our tzedakah or by educating our families, friends and neighbors. Sometimes we literally walk side-by-side in marches and rallies, where we stand up for our deepest values and belief in justice.

I felt the solidarity of all of these partners—locally and globally—more powerfully than ever last month, when I was in Uganda with a group of committed AJWS supporters visiting AJWS's grantees struggling to overcome the injustice and violence forged by war and poverty and intolerance. We sat side-by-side, American Jews and Ugandan activists—bridging the oceans of geography and experience that divide us—and talked about the transformations being brought about through our mingling of resources and activism.

This kind of powerful solidarity is one thing that can give us confidence. Another is an act of radical imagination. There is a line from the Haggadah that has been etched in my memory since my childhood in South Africa. It reads: "*Bechol dor vador, chayav adam lirot et atzmo ke'ilu hu yatza mimitzrayim*—In every generation, each person must imagine themselves as if they had come out of Egypt."

This is not an instruction to empathize with the suffering of our ancestors or to remember we were slaves in Egypt; the Haggadah is commanding us to visualize ourselves as people capable of achieving freedom.

Imagine: If the ancient Israelites could escape the grasp of the vindictive Pharaoh, we too can insist that our leaders promote just policies that advance the rights of all. If our ancestors had the courage and stamina to walk out of Egypt in the dead of night, we, too, can leave the comfort of our homes and take to the streets to defend the rights—even the lives—of others. If people who had been slaves could navigate the perilous desert and reach the promised land, we, too, are capable of surmounting great odds to advance dignity, justice and equality for the world's most vulnerable people.

*Who are we?* We are a generation capable of shifting our world toward justice.

If we want to challenge the forces that enslave and oppress people in the world today, we too must go through the very human struggle that Moses experienced and lay bare our deepest fears. But then we must join with others and envision ourselves stepping up to fulfill our obligation to move the world from slavery to freedom.

*Bechol dor vador*—In every generation... change is possible.

Face your fears, imagine freedom, and then step up to join others on the journeys that lie ahead of us.



**ROBERT BANK** is President and CEO of American Jewish World Service, the leading Jewish organization working to promote human rights in the developing world. Robert has spent his career championing human rights as an attorney, activist and leader. He joined AJWS as Executive Vice President in 2009 and previously served in New York's municipal government and in the leadership of GMHC—one of the world's leading organizations combatting HIV/AIDS. Robert has been honored with GMHC's Lifetime Achievement Award and the Partners in Justice Award from AVODAH: The Jewish Service Corps. He is also an advisor to The Conversation: Jewish in America and is a board member of Peripheral Vision International. Robert's passion for human rights was shaped growing up in a Jewish family in South Africa, which was engaged in the struggle to end apartheid.

### ABOUT THIS PUBLICATION

This essay is part of American Jewish World Service's Chag v'Chesed ("Celebration and Compassion") series. Written by prominent leaders, Chag v'Chesed draws on teachings from the holidays to inform our thinking about Judaism and social justice. AJWS is committed to a pluralistic view of Judaism and honors a broad spectrum of interpretation of our texts and traditions.

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45 W. 36th Street New York, NY 10018  
212.792.2900 or 800.889.7146