“With their provisions on their backs”

Imagining Our Passage to Freedom

Below is a Passover ritual and question guide inspired by the Syrian Seder tradition so that you can imagine yourself into the experience of Exodus. You can add it to the portion of your Seder when you split and hide the afikomen.

יַחַץ

Yachatz Ritual – Breaking the Matzah for the Afikomen

The Seder leader breaks the middle matzah and places the larger piece in a cloth or pillowcase to be hidden for the afikomen.

Seder leader:

In the next section of the Seder (maggid/telling the story) we will say:

בְּכָל דּוֹר וָדוֹר חַיָּב אָדָם לִרְאוֹת אֶת עַצְמוֹ כְּאִלּוּ הוּא יָצָא מִמִּצְרַיִם

In every generation each person is required to view themselves as if they personally left Egypt.

(Mishna – Pesachim 10:5)

Syrian Jews fulfill this commandment by asking that each Seder participant take this bundle of matzah, place it on their shoulder, and recite the biblical verse that describes the moment when the Israelites assembled in the darkness with their meager provisions, poised and ready to flee for their freedom.

מִשְׁאֲרֹתָם צְרֻרֹת בְּשִׂמְלֹתָם עַל־שִׁכְמָם׃ וּבְנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל עָשׂוּ כִּדְבַ֣ר מֹשֶׁה

... misharotam tzerurot besimlotam al shich'mam, uv'nei yisrael asoo kidvar moshe...

... with their bread-kneading bowls on their shoulders, the children of Israel did as Moses commanded...

(Exodus 12:35)

Imagine what it may have been like to be an Israelite in this moment. Gripping tightly to the few things you are bring with you – maybe a bowl carrying the bread that didn’t have time to rise, one change of clothes and a jug of water – you gather with your family in the darkness, hushing a crying baby, shuffling close to the others so you don’t feel so scared, so alone.

Like a slave on the underground railroad, like a Jewish émigré waiting to board a ship in 1938, like a Mayan asylum seeker departing their village, like a Rohingya refugee crossing the Naf river to flee genocide.

What circumstances led you to this point? What does it feel like to run for your life?
In a moment I am going to ask each of you in turn to take this bundle of matzah, put it on your shoulders and imagine yourself at the precipice on flight. What do you see? Who else is there? What does it smell like? What feelings are making themselves known in your body? When you receive the parcel, close your eyes, take a moment, and imagine yourself as an emigrant, a refugee – from Mitzrayim, from Mississippi, from Guatemala, from Burma.

In keeping with the Syrian Jewish ritual, each guest is asked three questions, in turn: “Where are you coming from? Where are you going? What are you carrying?”

**Ritual Instructions:**
Model this ritual by going first. Pick up the parcel of matzah, pause to reflect on what it would feel like to leave your home and flee, and tell the guests around the table to ask you the three questions above. You may answer from the images that come to mind to you or use the traditional words, below. Then pass the parcel of matzah to your right, give the next guest a moment to imagine, and prompt those assembled to ask the questions. Repeat until all the guests have imagined and described themselves leaving slavery and fleeing to freedom.

All assembled: “Where are you coming from?”

Guest: “Mimitzrayim – From Egypt”

All assembled: “Where are you going to?”

Guest: “Liyrushalayim – To Jerusalem”

All assembled: “What are you carrying?”

Guest: “Matzah U’maror – Matzah and Maror”

**QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION:**
You can use these questions for a whole group conversation at the Seder or ask your guests to form pairs or triads for the conversation.

• What did it feel like to imagine yourself experiencing the Exodus? Where you scared, excited, nervous?

• What are some of the benefits of projecting yourself into someone else’s experience? What are the limitations or dangers?

• Rabbi Shai Held explains that, “One of the Torah’s central projects is to turn memory into empathy and moral responsibility. Appealing to our experience of defenselessness in Egypt, the Torah seeks to transform us into people who see those who are vulnerable and exposed rather than looking past them.” How did it feel to make the connection between the Jewish story and contemporary refugees? Did this exercise activate a sense of compassion? Outrage? Responsibility? How do you plan on responding to that sensibility?