

## **Instructions for Passover**

### **A Message for All Faiths Unitarian Congregation**

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The theme of our messages for April is Liberation. Liberation is part of our Unitarian Universalist theology. Our principles and sources lead us to liberate people, minds, hearts, and spirits. This is one of the greatest tenets of Unitarian Universalism. To begin let me remind you of an ancient story of liberation. It is the story of Passover in the Book of Exodus in the Bible. Now before I tell a Bible story to Unitarian Universalists I know that I need to massage you a little bit. I encourage you to look at the Bible as a collection of literature. Something we value and nothing to be afraid of. After all one of our sources is that we recognize the value in all sacred texts. In the last congregation I served I taught three Bible study series. The Old Testament, The synoptic gospels, and the prophets. One member of the congregation made an appointment with me to tell me how un-Unitarian offering Bible study was. My response was simple. It's very Unitarian to offer Bible study because at our roots, at our foundation is inclusivity. If we are to practice what we preach then we must claim all sacred texts worthy of study, we must welcome all people regardless of their religion. It is who we are at our core and how we must live. We mustn't exclude to make everything meet our needs and views. That's enough massaging my hands are tired.

Passover, or Pesach in Hebrew, is one of the Jewish religion's most sacred and widely observed holidays. Passover commemorates the story of the Israelites' departure from ancient Egypt, which appears in the Hebrew Bible's books of Exodus, Numbers and Deuteronomy, among other texts. The word "Passover" is derived from the Hebrew word *pasach*, which means "passed over," referring to the 10th plague that killed the Egyptian firstborn, but miraculously "passed over" the houses of the Israelites. Found in the Torah, the Passover story tells of the Israelites' slavery, deliverance, and escape ("the Exodus") from Egypt.

The story begins with Joseph, son of Jacob, who was sold into slavery by his brothers and arrived in Egypt as a poor, powerless servant. Joseph's wisdom and ability to interpret dreams soon brought him power and status, though, and he became the Egyptian king's trusted advisor. His entire family joined him in Egypt, as did many of the rest of the Israelites. There they prospered and multiplied for many generations.

But a new king ("pharaoh") came to power in Egypt – one who did not remember how helpful Joseph had been. The Israelites' numbers had greatly increased over many years, and the new Pharaoh was suspicious of them, fearing they would someday rise up against him. So he treated them harshly, forcing them to work as slaves in terrible conditions. Nevertheless, the Israelites survived and continued to multiply.

Dismayed by their fortitude, Pharaoh took harsher action, declaring that all sons born to Israelite women should be killed at birth.

When an Israelite woman had a baby boy, she feared for his life. She placed him in a basket and set him floating in the Nile River, near where people came to bathe. Pharaoh's daughter came to the river and found the baby in the basket. She took him, named him Moses ("drawn from the water"), and raised him as her own. Growing up in the palace, Moses knew very little of the life he might have led. As he grew, however, he became aware of the plight of his people. One day, seeing an Egyptian taskmaster beating an Israelite slave, Moses killed the taskmaster.

Realizing what he had done, Moses fled to the land of Midian, where he married a Midianite woman, and became a shepherd. Tending his flock one day, Moses came upon an amazing sight – a bush that was burning, but not consumed. God spoke to Moses there, telling him that Moses and his brother, Aaron, would free the Israelites from slavery. Moses was unsure anyone would listen to him, but God promised support and powerful signs, so Moses left Midian and returned to Egypt. Moses and Aaron went to Pharaoh and demanded Pharaoh free the Jews ("Let my people go," Moses tells Pharaoh in Exodus 5:1). But Pharaoh, skeptical that Moses spoke on behalf of God, refused. In retaliation, Pharaoh forced the Israelites to work even harder and beat them mercilessly.

God then told Moses that, as proof of God's power, the Egyptians would suffer a series of plagues until Pharaoh agreed to let the Jews go:

1. Turning the water of the Nile to blood
2. Frogs
3. Lice
4. Wild beasts
5. Cattle disease
6. Boils
7. Hail
8. Locusts
9. Darkness
10. Slaying of the Egyptian firstborn

During the last plague, God killed the firstborn of each Egyptian family, but "passed over" (thus "Passover") the houses of the Israelites (who had marked their doors with lamb's blood), leaving their children unharmed. With this plague Pharaoh finally relented, and let the Israelites go. They hurriedly packed and left Egypt, without enough time for their bread to rise (hence the holiday's prohibition on eating leavened, or risen, grain products, and the custom of eating matzah, unleavened bread).

Pharaoh immediately regretted his decision, and his army chased the Israelites to the Red Sea. With the sea ahead of them, and Pharaoh's army closing in behind, the Jews appeared to be doomed. At that very moment, though, God told Moses to stretch his staff over the sea, and, in perhaps the greatest miracle in all of Jewish tradition, the waters parted, allowing the Jews to cross on dry land. Just as they reached the far shore of the sea, the waters closed, drowning

Pharaoh and his soldiers. Moses, Miriam, and all the Israelites sang songs of praise to God for their deliverance and the Israelites began their journey in the desert.

What are the instructions, the lessons, we can learn from the Passover story, told again and again, by generation after generation? What can we glean from the life, personal trials, and insights of Moses, one of the most well-known prophets in the Judeo-Christian tradition?

What are we to make of the story of the Jewish people, led from slavery only to find themselves wandering in the desert, lost, disgruntled and unhappy, for 40 long, difficult, years?

While we, as UU's, are neither Jewish, nor Christian as a whole, we do honor the teachings of these traditions, and seek wisdom in the ancient stories.

The Rev. Ellen Quadgrass tells us, "There is this idea of the "truth in the myth" – not the truth of actual events but the truth of the echoing lessons that spoke to people thousands of years ago and can still speak to us now. And that truth, for this holiday, and for our time, is the story, of how to become free.

Something that can seem, at first, unnecessary. We are, after all, already free. We live in a free country. We can say what we want, buy what we want (well, for the most part), we're free to go just about anywhere we please. Or can we? Over the past month we've experienced this as myth.

There are important ways that those who came before us set things up so that we do have a great deal of freedom and what a blessing that is. But freedom is not a simple yes or no question – we can be free on the outside but constricted on the inside. There are so many ways our lives get narrow. Maybe for you it's restrictive health challenges, or maybe it's financial – there's not enough to go around. Or, we tie ourselves up, through addiction, through overspending or underspending, through overfocusing on status or power or through an endless stream of mindless activities... Or maybe we put too much weight on what others think, or we put too much weight on what we think, or we act out on impulse or we don't act at all. There are so many ways we limit ourselves and our capacity to enjoy or participate fully in life.

Psychologist Eric Fromm wrote a book in 1941 about our tendency to want to "escape from freedom." How the responsibility that comes with freedom can be so uncomfortable we want to escape it; we allow ourselves to be enslaved by something or someone who tells us what to think or say, by things that distracts us, by anything that gives us comfort, or a feeling of security.

It's these tendencies, this internal struggle, that explains why the journey to real, growing, evolving freedom, is not just one, as the book explains, of "freedom from" external restrictions or coercion, but just as importantly a journey of "freedom to" – freedom to act creatively and courageously in the becoming of our authentic selves. To become more and more the kind of person who reflects our second reading, someone who's not content with hand-me-down knowledge, whose mind is open, who is not driven by others' opinions, who is not slave to habit or impulse, and who can genuinely, compassionately, love.

This is a journey, that, in mythic story after mythic story, requires facing external, worldly challenges, sometimes harrowing ones... it's a journey that requires transformative inner moments, of opening eyes, waking up to life as it is, rather than how we might wish it were. And

it is a journey through which, if we bring our courage and our faith, we might come out the other side a changed person, or a changed community, or we may even, be part of creating an unexpectedly changed world.

Joseph Campbell calls the journey to this kind of authentic life the hero's journey. The journey from the protected, dependent child we've been toward the interdependent, brave, compassionate, self-actualized person any one of us can become.

The Passover story is one such hero's journey. A story of challenge and difficulty and trials, external & internal, along the journey to freedom, a story in which we are invited to participate, once a year, and this year, here, on April 11th . All are invited to sit down to the Seder meal and re-live one particularly rich chapter of that historic drama. To imagine ourselves in it, and walk through the journey of the Israelites as a way of casting light on our own, yet-unrecognized captivity. And, in walking ourselves through it, that we may gain insight in how we can grow up and grow wise, in our journey to be free.

What is your hero's journey? What still small voice, or loud booming voice may be calling you out of the comforts that bind you [to find the brothers that still wait for you]?

What desert wilderness must you walk through to be sharpened and softened?

What do you need freedom from – and, just importantly, what are you called to do with the freedom that you have?

As we reflect on our captivity, whatever form it takes, as we look to growing freedom, whatever journey we must endure, may we trust the voice of greater wisdom, of greater love, that calls us on, and when we look around at the changes that we are helping to create, may we be amazed, and glad.

May it be so.