

A Humanist Haggadah
In Verse

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PREFACE

This Humanist Haggadah in verse is meant for secular Jewish, mixed, or non-Jewish families who for various reasons – philosophical, social, political, and/or linguistic -- might feel uncomfortable with more traditional Haggadahs. The traditional Seder is, of course, a religious ritual, yet it is also a celebration of freedom and a call to serve justice. In this Haggadah we retain and expand upon the ethical elements of the tradition in the hope that secular families will continue to find the Seder a useful way of passing on their beliefs and values to the next generation, as religious families have done for centuries.

In setting the table for the ritual, one should place near the head of the table the following:

- A Seder plate, on which is placed a symbolic reminder of the paschal lamb that was once sacrificed in the temple in Jerusalem. This can be a grilled or roasted lamb chop, a chicken neck, or, for vegetarians, a grilled vegetable. Also on the Seder plate should be some greens (such as sprigs of parsley or small lettuce leaves), a dab of horse radish (white or red), charoses (made in various ways, but often grated apples mixed with chopped walnuts, cinnamon, and sweet red wine), and a hardboiled, then roasted egg in its shell (not mentioned in the service but there as a symbol with various interpretations);
- A small dish of salt water;
- A bowl of plain water with a towel for drying hands;
- A plate with three pieces of matzah, often separated by paper towels, so there is clearly an upper matzah, a middle matzah, and a lower matzah.

An empty wine glass, “Elijah’s Cup,” is often placed on a part of the table that is closest to a door that opens to the outside. Next to it place an empty water glass for a relatively new tradition involving the prophetess, Miriam.

Depending on the length of the table and the number of guests, it may be necessary to place additional plates of horse radish, charoses, greens, salt water, and matzah so that these elements of the ritual can be reached more easily by those at a distance from the head of the table.

Also, each guest should have both a wine and water glass – the wine for the ritual, the water for the meal. Grape juice is often substituted for wine for those who are too young to drink, or who do not wish to drink, an alcoholic beverage. And the instruction, “Fill the *** cup of wine” need not be taken literally.

In keeping with the significance of the occasion, many families set the table elaborately, with a special tablecloth and matzah cover (often with an inner sleeve for the middle matzah), candles with silver candlesticks, special china and silverware, etc. Religious Jewish families have separate Passover tableware to be used only during the holiday.

During the Seder, the Leader will break the middle matzah in two, retaining one half to serve as the “Afikomen,” or symbolic dessert, which will be the last thing eaten at the meal. Traditionally, the children at the Seder are asked to find the Afikomen, which means that someone has to hide it surreptitiously during the meal break partway through the ritual. Which means that before the Seder, the hosts should choose a suitable place to hide the Afikomen.

At some Seders, the search for the Afikomen can become a treasure hunt, with one clue leading to the next, the difficulty of which, of course, depends on the ages of the participants. Once the Afikomen is found, the successful searchers are usually rewarded in some way, though often all the children who searched get something – money, sweets, etc.

Please feel free to add symbols, songs, rituals, family traditions to this secular text -- whatever you need to make this Seder your own.

THE SERVICE

The opening blessings over the wine have additional material to be recited on Friday and Saturday nights -- the beginning and end of the Sabbath. Here, as throughout, the additional material reflects a humanistic interpretation of the original religious meaning.

LEADER:

The Bible says we should recite
 Each year the tale of how we
 Cast off the bonds of slavery,
 That all our generations might
 Know we were slaves, but now are free.
 By "we," we mean "humanity,"
 And there are many still not free,
 And all are us, and so our tale
 Expands its old identity.

(Fill the first cup of wine.)

On Friday night begin the blessings over the wine here:

On Friday night, the Bible says,
 God finished the Creation,
 And rested on the Sabbath day,
 A day for meditation.
 And so we, on Friday night,
 Pause to dwell upon the light,
 And to wonder well how we
 Came from nothingness to be.

Continue, or on weekdays begin here:

(Lift the first cup of wine.)

We're grateful for the gift of wine
 And all the pleasures we enjoy,
 And for reason, and for love,
 Both of which our choices move,
 Twin guides to goodness we employ
 In ways that subtly intertwine;
 And for this festival, where we
 Each year give thanks that we are free.

On Saturday night continue:

At Sabbath's end, on Saturday night,
 We gaze upon the great divide
 Of good from evil, dark from light,
 And love from hate, that we might turn
 Away from wrong and towards right,
 While seeing all, as we would be
 Seen by all, with charity.

At all Seders add:

ALL:

We're thankful for the gift of wine,
 And for this festive day, when we
 Remember ancient miracles,
 Which we regard as parables,
 Knowing that it's up to us
 To part the restless sea.

(Drink the first cup of wine.)

LEADER:

I wash my hands symbolically
 To cleanse all hearts herein of hate
 That we might participate
 With unobstructed clarity.

(The leader washes his or her hands.)

(Greens are distributed to all assembled.)

LEADER:

Remember those who tilled the soil
 As slaves, and tasted many tears,
 Day and night consumed by toil
 In bitter bondage all those years.
 So in tears we dip these greens
 Each year to taste what slavery means.

ALL:

We're thankful for the greens that make
 Our food of earth and sun and rain,
 Stored sunlight, of which we partake
 To fuel our inner flame.

(Dip the greens into the salt water and eat them.)

LEADER:

We break the middle matzah in two
 And half of it we hide,
 The "Afikomen," so when we're through

We can reward the children who
 Looked for it far and wide,
 And found our lost “dessert” at last,
 The final course of our repast!

(The leader breaks the middle matzah and sets half of it aside.)

(The leader lifts the plate of matzah.)

LEADER:

This is the bread of affliction
 The Jews in Egypt ate,
 Baked quickly without leavening
 Because they could not wait.
 Let all who hunger come,
 And all who are in need.
 Even now there are still slaves
 Of every race and creed.
 Let us each year look forward to
 A time when all are freed.
(Fill the second cup of wine.)

THE FOUR QUESTIONS

(The youngest person or two at the Seder recites either the traditional questions, or the humanist question, or both.)

Why is this night different from all other nights?
Mah nishtanah, ha-laylah ha-zeh, mi-kol ha-leylot?

On all other nights, we eat both bread and matzah;
She-b'khol ha-leylot 'anu 'okhlin chameytz u-matzah;
 On this night only matzah.
Ha-laylah ha-zeh, kulo matzah.

On all other nights, we eat a variety of vegetables;
She-b-khol ha-laylot 'anu 'okhlin Sh'ar y'rakot;
 On this night, only bitters.
Ha-laylah hazeh, maror.

On all other nights, we do not dip even once;
She-b-khol ha-laylot 'eyn anu matbilin 'afilu pa'am 'achat;
 On this night, we dip twice.
Ha-laylah hazeh, shtey p'amim.

On all other nights some eat and drink sitting with others reclining;
She-b-khol ha-laylot 'anu 'okhlin ushotin beyn yoshvin u-veyn m'subin;
 On this night, we all recline.
Ha-laylah hazeh, kulanu m'subin.

THE RESPONSE

PARTICIPANT:

Why do we eat matzah?
 To remember those who wander,
 Refugees escaping
 From violence and oppression.

PARTICIPANT:

Why do we eat bitters?
 To remember those enslaved,
 Living bitter lives,
 Suffering in bondage.

PARTICIPANT:

Why do we dip twice,
 In charoses and salt water?

Once to sweeten suffering;
Once to remember tears.

PARTICIPANT:

Why do we recline?
Actually, we no longer recline,
Except for the leader at more traditional Seders.
But in ancient times, reclining at mealtimes
Was a sign of freedom,
And so the question remains,
Though the practice does not.

THE HUMANIST VERSION

Why is this Seder different from the traditional Seder?

THE HUMANIST RESPONSE

PARTICIPANT:

The Seder is a religious rite
For those of Jewish faith;
The Humanist Seder is a rite
For those of any faith,
Including secular faith.

PARTICIPANT:

Is this an appropriate
Act of appropriation?
Why not write a brand-new rite
To serve a new persuasion?

PARTICIPANT:

The Seder celebrates the turn
 From enslavement to rebirth,
 A universal narrative
 That echoes round the Earth,

Surfacing in spirituals
 Sung by African slaves,
 And told in many languages
 By those who ride the waves

In search of freedom and, perhaps,
 A peaceful promised land
 Where all are equally welcome,
 And none are contraband.

PARTICIPANT:

This new Humanist rite retains
 Segments of the old,
 Whose words and symbols, though reset,
 Never lose their hold,

Still germane to secular Jews
 Who remember well
 The songs and stories of their youth
 Now transformed to tell

The ancient tale in modern terms
 That generations might
 Continue the tradition
 As long as it gives light.

THE FOUR CHILDREN

PARTICIPANT:

The Torah speaks of children:
 One wise, one unwise,
 One who simply does not know,
 And one who does not ask.

PARTICIPANT:

What does the wise child ask?
 “What does this ritual mean?”
 Pass on, then, to the wise child
 The legacy herein.

PARTICIPANT:

What asks the unwise child?
 “What good is this to you?”
 Teach the unwise child
 To think of all as us.

PARTICIPANT:

What asks the simple child?
 “What is all this for?”
 Explain that it’s a ritual
 That sustains a way of life.

PARTICIPANT:

And as for the child who does not ask,
 It’s up to you to tell
 The tale of the Exodus

As a heritage and calling.

(Sing or recite together the African-American spiritual, "Go Down, Moses," to tell the story of the Exodus.)

When Israel was in Egypt land,
Let my people go,
Oppressed so hard they could not stand,
Let my people go.

CHORUS: Go down, Moses,
Way down in Egypt land.
Tell old Pharaoh
To let my people go

No more shall they in bondage toil,
Let my people go.
They shall go forth with Egypt's spoil,
Let my people go.

CHORUS

The Lord told Moses what to do,
Let my people go,
To lead the Hebrew children through,
Let my people go.

CHORUS

As Israel stood by the waterside,
Let my people go,
At God's command it did divide,
Let my people go.

CHORUS

Pharoah said he'd go across,
 Let my people go.
 But Pharoah and his host were lost,
 Let my people go.

CHORUS

Oh, let us all from bondage flee,
 Let my people go,
 And put an end to slavery,
 Let my people go.

CHORUS

LEADER:

Despite all pleas, the Pharoah
 Refused to free his slaves.
 Ten plagues then descended
 Upon him and his people,
 Which we now recall
 By spilling our wine,
 One drop for each plague,
 To symbolize our sorrow
 For his people's pain.

(Each participant puts his or her pinky into the cup of wine and spills out a drop for each plague as it is recited. This symbolizes a reduction of happiness because of the plagues that afflicted the Egyptians.)

ALL:

Blood, Frogs, Vermin, Wild Beasts, Murrain, Boils, Hail, Locusts,
 Darkness, Slaying of the First Born.

LEADER:

After the tenth plague,
 The Jews were set free.
 And so they fled in haste,
 Across the parted sea.

(Sing or recite together the traditional Seder song, "Dayenu," or the Humanist version, or both below:)

DAYENU

*Ilu hotzi, hotzi anu,
 hotzianu mimitzraim,
 mimitzraim, hotzianu,
 Dayenu!*

CHORUS

*Dai, dai, yenu,
 dai, dai, yenu,
 dai, dai, yenu,
 dayenu dayenu
 dayenu
 (2 times)*

*Ilu asah, asah bahem,
 Asah bahem sh'fatim,
 Sh'fatim, asah bahem,
 Dayenu.*

CHORUS

Etc.

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TRANSLATION AND TRANSLITERATION FROM
<https://www.haggadot.com/>

If He had brought us out from Egypt,
Ilu hotzianu mimitzrayim,
 and had not carried out judgments against them,
v'lo asah bahem sh'fatim,
 Dayenu, it would have been enough!
dayeinu!

If He had carried out judgments against them,
Ilu asah bahem sh'fatim
 and not against their idols,
v'lo asah beloheihem
 Dayenu, it would have been enough!
dayeinu!

If He had destroyed their idols,
Ilu asah beloheihem,
 and had not smitten their first born,
v'lo harag et b'choreihem,
 Dayenu, it would have been enough!
dayeinu!

If He had smitten their first born,
Ilu harag et b'choreihem,
 and had not given us their wealth,
v'lo natan lanu et mamonam,
 Dayenu, it would have been enough!
dayeinu!

If He had given us their wealth,
Ilu natan lanu et mamonam,
 and had not split the sea for us,
v'lo kara lanu et hayam,
 Dayenu, it would have been enough!
dayeinu!

If He had split the sea for us,
Ilu kara lanu et hayam,
 and had not taken us through it on dry land,
v'lo he'eviranu b'tocho becharavah,
 Dayenu, it would have been enough!
dayeinu!

If He had taken us through the sea on dry land,
Ilu he'eviranu b'tocho becharavah,
 and had not drowned our oppressors in it,
v'lo shika tzareinu b'tocho,
 Dayenu, it would have been enough!
dayeinu!

If He had drowned our oppressors in it,
Ilu shika tzareinu b'tocho,
 and had not supplied our needs in the desert for forty years,
v'lo sipeik tzorkeinu bamidbar arba'im shana,
 Dayenu, it would have been enough!
dayeinu!

If He had supplied our needs in the desert for forty years,
Ilu sipeik tzorkeinu bamidbar arba'im shana,
 and had not fed us manna,
v'lo he'echilanu et haman,
 Dayenu, it would have been enough!
dayeinu!

If He had fed us manna,
Ilu he'echilanu et haman,
 and had not given us Shabbat,
v'lo natan lanu et hashabbat,
 Dayenu, it would have been enough!
dayeinu!

If He had given us Shabbat,
Ilu natan lanu et hashabbat,
 and had not brought us before Mount Sinai,
v'lo keirvanu lifnei har sinai,
 Dayenu, it would have been enough!
dayeinu!

If He had brought us before Mount Sinai,
Ilu keirvanu lifnei har sinai,
 and had not given us the Torah,
v'lo natan lanu et hatorah,
 Dayenu, it would have been enough!
dayeinu!

If He had given us the Torah,
Ilu natan lanu et hatorah,
 and had not brought us into the land of Israel,
v'lo hichnisanu l'erezt yisra'eil,
 Dayenu, it would have been enough!
dayeinu!

If He had brought us into the land of Israel,
Ilu hichnisanu l'erezt yisra'eil,
 and not built for us the Holy Temple,
v'lo vanah lanu et beit hamikdash,
 Dayenu, it would have been enough!
dayeinu!

IT WAS NOT ENOUGH

When we were freed from slavery,
It was not enough.

When we survived the wilderness,
It was not enough.

When we found a homeland,
It was not enough.

Even when we lived in peace,
It was not enough.

When we survived in exile,
It was not enough.

When we survived the Holocaust,
It was not enough.

When we retained our hope and love,
It was not enough.

For till all humankind is free
Of hunger, pain, and slavery,
And we have eyes enough to see,
It will not be enough.

THE SYMBOLS OF PASSOVER

LEADER:

Rabbi Gamliel used to say,
Point out three things, come what may:

The first is the lamb: The Lord “posach,”
Passed over the Jews when the first born were killed.
In ancient times that place was filled
By a first-born lamb, which we replace
With meat or a vegetable we’ve grilled.

The second is matzah: the unleavened bread
That the Jews took with them when they fled
In haste from Pharoah. It was too late
To leaven the bread. They could not wait.

The third is moror, the bitter herb:
For life is bitter in slavery,
Which is why we remember that the Jews were slaves
And will not rejoice till all are free.

The Lesson of Passover

ALL:

In every generation we
Should take this story personally,
As though we ourselves might be
Still in the bonds of slavery,
Or still a wandering refugee,
Homeless, living in poverty.

It's our responsibility
 Not to rest till all are free.
 If not, why burn this memory
 Into our identity?

ALL: *(Lifting the second cup of wine.)*

We're thankful for the gift of wine
 And for the fruit of tree and vine
 That, grown from sown or wind-blown seed,
 Is ours in trust for all in need.

(Drink the second cup of wine.)

LEADER:

I wash for all a second time:
 The first before the service, then
 This before the meal, to clean
 Our hands as I had cleansed our hearts.

(The leader washes his or her hands.)

(The leader breaks the upper matzah and the remainder of the middle matzah into smaller pieces and distributes them to everyone.)

ALL:

We're thankful for the gift of bread
 That springs as we do from the dust,
 And is by soil and sunlight fed
 To ease our pangs and nourish us.

(Everyone eats the matzah.)

(Everyone combines charoses and moror on one piece of matzah.)

LEADER:

We now partake of the moror
Sweetened with charoses,
That we recall how bitterness
Is sweetened by redemption.

ALL:

We're thankful for the whole of life,
Both happiness and sorrow,
Both equally the gifts of love
That binds us to what else might prove
Lives we merely borrow.

(Everyone eats the combined charoses and moror.)

(The leader breaks the bottom matzah and distributes it. Everyone places the bitter herb between two pieces of matzah.)

LEADER:

In ancient times, the sage Hillel,
Whom even now is still known well,
Combined the matzah with moror,
A sandwich of which few want more,
A taste we share symbolically
With all who live in poverty.

(Everyone eats the combined matzah and moror.)

(The meal is served and completed.)

LEADER:

(Breaking up and distributing the Afikomen.)

In ancient times, the Paschal lamb
 Was the last dish, but now we can
 Pass over it, and in its stead
 End with this unleavened bread,
 Sparing beasts from the ritual knife
 As once we did for human life.

(Everyone eats a piece of the Afikomen.)

(Everyone fills the third cup of wine.)

LEADER:

We're thankful for the meal that we have eaten,
 And for the food that springs forth from the earth.
 Blesséd is the turning of the year,
 Which brings this time of fruitfulness and plenty.
 Blessed be all of us, that we remain
 Healthy till we gather once again
 To celebrate this festive time together.

(Everyone raises the cup of wine.)

ALL: We're thankful for the gift of wine
 And for the fruit of tree and vine,
 And for the Earth, the common womb
 In which all seedlings root and bloom.

(Everyone drinks the third cup of wine.)

ELIJAH

(Fill Elijah's cup of wine and Miriam's cup of water. Open the door.)

LEADER:

We open the door to Elijah
 To remind us of a world
 Where hatred, anger, and greed
 Haunt the ravenous night.

Elijah wanders ceaselessly
 Through the world of darkness,
 That we might live with open hearts,
 Sheltered by his presence.

Jews for generations
 Have poured for him a glass of wine
 That he might share our joy
 And join our celebration.

(Sing together the traditional Seder song, "Eliyahu Hanavi.")

Eliyahu Hanavi,
 Eliyahu Hatishbi,
 Elyahu, Eliyahu,
 Eliyahu Hagilodi.

Bimheira v' yameinu,
 Yavo eileinu
 Im mashiach ben David
 Im mashiach ben David.

Eliyahu Hanovi,
 Eliyahu Hatishbi,

Elyahu, Eliyahu,
Eliyahu Hagilodi.

Elijah, the Prophet,
Elijah, the Tishbite,
Elijah, the Gileadite.

May he soon, in our days, come to us
With the Messiah, the son of David,
With the Messiah, the son of David.

(Sing together the African-American spiritual, "Didn't My Lord Deliver Daniel.")

Didn't my Lord deliver Daniel,
Deliver Daniel, deliver Daniel;
Didn't my Lord deliver Daniel,
Then why not every man?

He delivered Daniel from the lions' den,
And Jonah from the belly of the whale,
And the Hebrew children from the fiery furnace,
Then why not every man?

Didn't my Lord deliver Daniel,
Deliver Daniel, deliver Daniel;
Didn't my Lord deliver Daniel,
Then why not every man?

(Close the door.)

MIRIAM**LEADER**

(Holding Miriam's cup as all raise their glasses of water.)

To Miriam, the prophetess,
 A toast not with wine, but water.
 When Amran's sons, Moses and Aaron,
 Led the Jews through desert sand,
 They'd have died without his daughter.

For Miriam supplied the well
 That traveled with them on their way,
 A miracle, yes, but typical
 Of roles that women often play,

As vital, yet less valued than
 Those of men. As in the sand,
 Though wine cost more than water, which
 Do you think would more throats demand?

(Everyone drinks to Miriam.)

(Fill the fourth cup of wine.)

ALL:

We're thankful for the gift of wine
 And for the fruit of tree and vine,
 Which surrounds the waiting seed
 To nourish it, or serve the need
 Of those who sow it, beast or we,
 For all live symbiotically.

(Everyone drinks the fourth cup of wine.)

LEADER:

The service of the Passover
Is now completed with this last
Symbol from the Jewish past:
The dream of all humanity
For a home, where they may be
No more a wandering refugee.

“Next Year in Jerusalem!”
Refers no longer to a place
Where one might ancient paths retrace,
But to a long-sought future when
All ingather to redeem
The Promised Land of which we dream,
A home for all humanity
Where everyone is equally
Well-loved, well-housed, well-fed, and free.

ALL:

Next year in Jerusalem!

(Sing L'Shana Haba'ah B'Yerushalayim.)