



DENNIS  
PRAGER

THE RATIO-  
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HAGGADAH

THE ALPERSON EDITION

# THE RATIONAL PASSOVER HAGGADAH



THE  
RATIONAL  
PASSOVER  
HAGGADAH

Dennis Prager

EDITED BY JOSEPH TELUSHKIN

THE ALPERSON EDITION



REGNERY  
FAITH

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*To Joel Alperson, my friend who made  
The Rational Passover Haggadah and The Rational Bible possible,  
to his extraordinary wife, Conny, and to their children,  
Hannah, Rachel, Aaron, and David, with whom I have a special bond*



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# Introduction

Jews have celebrated Passover for more than three thousand years. It is probably the longest-observed ritual in the world.

I have written *The Rational Passover Haggadah* for many of the same reasons I wrote *The Rational Bible*, my commentary on the Torah. Biblical and other sacred texts need to be explained in a rational manner and made relevant. Like *The Rational Bible*, *The Rational Passover Haggadah* is meant for every type of Jew and for non-Jews.

But there is an additional reason, specific to *The Rational Passover Haggadah*. I have attended enough Seders to realize that even traditional Jews steeped in knowledge of Torah and Talmud, let alone more secular Jews and non-Jews, can use help in making their Seder discussions more interesting, deeper, and more accessible to every participant—as well as to those who may never attend a Seder.

Therefore, throughout *The Rational Passover Haggadah*, the reader will find topics marked “For Discussion.” These topics, related to some part of the Haggadah, raise some great issue of life—again, of interest to the religious Jew, the non-religious Jew, and the non-Jew. Best of all, these topics give every participant at the Seder a reason to participate in the Seder, and will hopefully provoke young participants to speak up, or at least pay attention.

This Haggadah is not confined to Passover use, nor is it only for people who attend a Seder. It is intended for year-round use and for those who may never attend a Seder. As the reader can see from the table of contents, the essay topics and discussions are relevant to any time and to any individual. This Haggadah is intended to serve as a guide to life, to God, and to Judaism.



## Acknowledgments

As was the case regarding *The Rational Bible*, *The Rational Passover Haggadah* would not have been written were it not for the efforts of Joel Alperson of Omaha, Nebraska. With the single exception of the actual writing of this Haggadah, he supervised every aspect of this project—just as he has with *The Rational Bible*. Most important, it was his cajoling that convinced me to write *The Rational Passover Haggadah*.

As with *The Rational Bible*, he convinced my lifelong friend, the eminent Jewish scholar and writer Rabbi Joseph Telushkin, to serve as editor of the project.

Joel Alperson and my wife, Susan Prager, who edits every word I write, also edited this work.

Aryeh Leifert, an American-born Israeli, served as an editor of the final manuscript. I benefited from his remarkable command of English grammar and from his ability to find typos even after four of us read every word aloud. His expertise in Jewish sources—he is a licensed Israeli tour guide and ordained rabbi—was also indispensable.

A special thank-you goes to Professor Leor Gottlieb of the Department of Bible of Bar-Ilan University, the academic editor of *The Rational Bible*, for his scholarly contributions to this Haggadah.

Barney Brenner of Tucson, Arizona, is a final reader of the manuscript. I marvel at his gift for identifying errors as well as his biblical knowledge.

As with *The Rational Bible*, Holly Hickman of Dallas, Texas, a committed Christian and deep admirer of Judaism, raised important questions and provided indispensable insights.

Finally, I asked Avner Stein of Orlando, Florida, the final editor of my weekly column, to read the galleys of this Haggadah, and, as usual, his work was indispensable.

Dennis Prager  
Los Angeles, California  
September 1, 2021



# THE RATIONAL PASSOVER HAGGADAH





# The Passover Seder and the Haggadah

Given that the Passover Seder is the most widely observed Jewish ritual, most Jews—and an increasingly large number of non-Jews—are familiar with the Hebrew word “seder.” However, few people know what the word means: it is the Hebrew word for “order.” The modern Hebrew word for “OK”—*b’seder*—literally means “in order.”

The name “order” was given to the Passover ritual meal because it is conducted in a set order. The Seder consists of fifteen steps written down in a book called the Haggadah (Hebrew for the “telling,” because it tells the story of the Exodus from Egypt). Understand these steps and you will understand what the Rabbis wanted to achieve at the Passover Seder. “Rabbis” refers to the ancient rabbis who compiled the Talmud, the holiest Jewish work after the Hebrew Bible. The Talmud, finalized in about the year 500, is the size of a large encyclopedia. It is comprised of dozens of volumes containing philosophy, theology, legends, stories, and, most of all, arguments and discussions about how to carry out Jewish laws. The earliest date for the Haggadah is 170, but the finalized edition dates to approximately 750.

Why does the Haggadah exist? Because the Torah, the first five books of the Bible, commands Jews to tell the story of the Exodus during the holiday of Passover (see Exodus 13:8 and 13:14–15), but it does not specify how to do so. Post-biblical Jewish law did.

Were it not for the Seder and Haggadah, a person would fulfill the Torah commandment in any way he or she chose. Perhaps there would be a holiday meal with family and/or friends at which some people might discuss the Exodus; perhaps a rabbi or a group of Jewish laymen would discuss the Exodus at synagogue; or perhaps one would talk about the Exodus in a phone call with a friend or relative. All of these would theoretically fulfill the Torah law, but none would come close to being a Seder.

In addition, any Jew can fully celebrate the Seder with other Jews anywhere in the world. All Jews recite the same Haggadah and therefore have the same Seder.

Finally, while there is plenty of room for spontaneous discussion—as we will see, it is encouraged—the authors of the Haggadah wanted to ensure that Jews incorporate certain aspects of the Exodus story and the Passover holiday at the Seder.

It has worked well. Though Jews were exiled from their homeland for nearly 1,900 years, they not only retained their national identity—a unique achievement in human history

for a dispersed people—they also kept the story of their Exodus from Egypt alive. The Passover Haggadah and the Seder are what made that possible.

### **For Discussion**

#### **What Is More Important in Judaism—the Home or the Synagogue?**

The central religious institution in Jewish life is not the synagogue. The synagogue, where Jews gather for communal prayer, is certainly important, but the central religious institution in Judaism is the home. The synagogue is essentially a religious adjunct to the home. The home is where the holidays—most important, the weekly Shabbat (Sabbath)—are celebrated. While many synagogues today conduct a Seder, the vast majority of Jews throughout Jewish history have observed the Seder in a home—either their own or that of a relative or friend.

That is why virtually no Jew celebrates the Seder alone. If Jews learn that some Jew has no home to go to for the Seder, it is likely he or she will be invited to someone's Seder. Within the context of Judaism, a Jew being alone on Seder night is particularly sad. After all, the purpose of the Seder and the Haggadah is to tell a story, and one needs others to whom to tell the story. Rosh Hashanah (the Jewish New Year) and Yom Kippur (the Day of Atonement) are the most important Jewish holidays (along with Shabbat)—hence they are referred to as the “High Holy Days”—and most Jews will have at least one High Holiday meal with other Jews. But it is the Seder meal that most Jews feel the greatest need to share with others.

Therefore, Jews should seriously consider inviting one or more individuals other than family and close friends to their Seder. There are undoubtedly Jews in your city who, for whatever reason, do not have family or friends with whom they are celebrating the Seder. No Jew should be alone on this night. At the same time, I also suggest inviting non-Jews to your Seder. For too long, Judaism has been hidden from the world. This has not done the Jews or the world any good.

# THE SEDER

The Seder begins with the reading or chanting aloud of its fifteen steps—somewhat like starting a nonfiction book by reading aloud the chapter titles.

## The Fifteen Steps of the Seder

1. **Kadesh:** Kadesh means “sanctify” or “consecrate.” We begin the Seder by reciting a prayer of sanctification over wine.

2. **Urchatz:** A ritual washing of the hands. This is an act of purification, not a cleaning of the hands. Our hands are expected to already be clean before the ritual washing. The washing is a statement that one is about to engage in a holy act.

3. **Karpas:** We eat a vegetable such as parsley, celery, or potato (but not a bitter herb). This reminds those at the Seder that Passover falls in the spring, a time of rebirth and renewal.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, the Torah describes Passover as *chag he-aviv*, “the spring festival.”

4. **Yachatz:** The word means “cut in half.” There are three *matzot* (pieces of *matzah*, the unleavened bread of Passover) on the Seder leader’s (and sometimes on other participants’) plate. The leader (and any other participant who wishes) breaks the middle *matzah* in half. The larger of the two pieces is then set aside to be consumed as the final item eaten at the Seder.

5. **Magid:** The word means “tell.” It is the same word as the root of the word *Haggadah*, “the telling”—of the story of the Exodus. This is the longest and most important part of the Seder. Telling the story is the purpose of the Haggadah and, for that matter, of Passover.

Nations that do not tell their story to each succeeding generation will eventually have no succeeding generation to whom to tell their story. More on this in the Magid section.

---

*Nations that do not tell their story to each succeeding generation will eventually have no succeeding generation to whom to tell their story.*

---

6. **Rachtzah:** This is the second washing of the hands (*rachtzah* is from the same word as *urchatz*). The first, which had no accompanying blessing, is unique to the Passover Seder. This second washing is accompanied by a blessing—the same blessing recited before all other meals in Judaism.

7. **Motzi:** The word means “brings forth,” the Hebrew word contained in the traditional blessing recited when eating bread: *Baruch ata Adonai, Eloheinu melech ha-olam, ha-motzi lechem min ha-aretz* (Blessed are You, Lord, King of the universe, Who brings forth bread from the earth). The reason the blessing over bread is recited is that *matzah* is bread, but it is *unleavened* bread.

8. **Matzah:** This is the unique blessing for the first eating of *matzah* on Passover. Eating *matzah* on Passover is so important that the Torah refers to Passover as Chag HaMatzot, the “Holiday of *Matzot*.”

9. **Maror:** The word means “bitter.” This is the bitter herb (raw horseradish is commonly used), eaten to remind us of the bitterness of slavery.

10. **Korech:** This alludes to a “sandwich” that combines the bitter herb and the sweet *haroset* (a paste usually comprised of apples, nuts, and cinnamon among other ingredients) between pieces of *matzah*.

11. **Shulchan Orech:** The words literally mean “Set Table,” and signify the luxuriant Passover meal.

12. **Tzafun:** The word means “hidden.” The meal ends with the eating of the hidden *matzah* which was broken at the beginning of the Seder. This piece of *matzah*—about which more will be said later—is known as the *afikoman*, derived from the Greek word for dessert. Subsequent to the *afikoman*, the Jewish practice is not to eat anything, with the exception of drinking the third and fourth cups of wine (or grape juice, if a substitute for wine is necessary—see pages 10–11 for an explanation of the four cups of wine). Considering how delicious the meal and the desserts were, the *afikoman* is admittedly a letdown. However, the Rabbis were more interested in meaning than in cuisine.

13. **Barech:** The word means “bless” and refers to the Birkat HaMazon, the Grace after Meals, a series of prayers thanking God for the food and much else.

14. **Hallel:** The word means “praise” and is the root of the well-known Hebrew word “Hallelujah.” Some psalms from the Book of Psalms are recited.

15. **Nirtzah:** The word means “acceptance.” This is the Seder’s completion, when we pray that “just as we were able to carry out the Seder’s order this year, so may we be able to carry it out again.”

## For Discussion

### Why Are Rituals Important, Even Vital?

As noted in the introduction, Jews have celebrated Passover for thousands of years. It is most likely the longest-observed ritual in the world, a testament to the power of ritual to perpetuate gratitude and national identity, both of which rely on memory.

Memory, in turn, relies on ritual. Human beings find perpetuating gratitude very difficult. Unless people make a deliberate effort, the good that another has done for them is usually forgotten quickly. Remembering hurtful things comes far more naturally to people than remembering the good things done to them. That Jews have been grateful to God for the Exodus for over three thousand years is solely due to their observance of Passover, which is all the more remarkable in light of all the terrible suffering Jews have since experienced.

The need for ritual is just as true in secular life. Using America as an example, the holidays with the most observed rituals—Thanksgiving and Christmas—remain widely observed. On the other hand, holidays during which few or no rituals are observed—Presidents’ Day, for example—remain on the calendar, but are observed only as vacation days and are essentially devoid of meaning.

There is also a proof within Jewish life of the need for ritual. The reason Passover is the best-known and most widely celebrated of the three festivals is thanks to its Passover Seder ritual. The next best-known Torah festival (though not nearly as widely celebrated) is Sukkot (tabernacles), also because of its rituals of building a *sukkah* (booth) for the holiday (see Deuteronomy 16:13–15), gathering with friends and family in the *sukkah* for meals, and daily blessings over a *lulav* (palm frond) and *etrog* (citron), along with myrtle and willow. The least well-known of the three festivals among Jews is Shavuot (Pentecost)—precisely because it is essentially devoid of specific rituals (though many Jews engage in the ritual of studying the Torah much of, or even the entire, night).

A post-Torah holiday, Chanukah, commemorating an event that occurred about 1,100 years after the Exodus, is widely observed precisely because of the ritual of lighting an additional candle each night of the holiday’s eight days. Chanukah would not be nearly as widely observed if not for the holiday’s candle-lighting ritual (and, in the West, because of its proximity to Christmas).

---

*Remembering hurtful things comes far more naturally to people than remembering the good things done to them.*

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קדש  
KADESH  
(The Kiddush)

In keeping with the central theme of the holiday, the Passover Kiddush—the blessing over the wine—speaks of “the feast of *Matzot*, the season of our freedom . . . in memory of the Exodus from Egypt.”

The blessing over the wine itself—*Blessed are You, Lord our God, Who has created the fruit of the vine*—is but one sentence, placed between the two large paragraphs of the Kiddush.

---

*The Torah’s command that the Jew be happy is what shaped my understanding of happiness—that it is both a choice and a moral obligation.*

---

Another one-sentence blessing is appended at the end of the Kiddush: *Blessed are You . . . Who has kept us alive, sustained us, and brought us to this time*. This blessing, known as the *shehechey-anu*, is said on holidays and other happy occasions. It is intended to ensure that people express gratitude for the good things—even minor good things—in their lives. It is, therefore, not only recited at the start of Jewish holidays, but when tasting a fruit for the first time in any given season, when putting on new clothes, or when moving into a new house.

Regarding the joyousness of the holiday, there are actually laws in the Torah that command the Jew “to be happy” on the festivals—specifically Shavuot and Sukkot (Deuteronomy 16:11, 13–16). Interestingly, the Torah does not command happiness on the third of the three festivals, Passover. On Passover, the Torah assumes the believing Jew will be happy, given that the holiday is about escaping slavery. The emotion the Torah and later Judaism seek to evoke on Passover is gratitude (which, as it happens, is the primary creator of happiness). In effect, the gratitude inculcated by Passover makes the happiness of the other two festivals possible.

The Torah’s command that the Jew be happy is what shaped my understanding of happiness—that it is both a choice and a moral obligation. Most people think happiness

is a feeling or emotion that one either has or doesn't have at any given moment. Judaism made me realize that happiness is largely a choice. As the American president Abraham Lincoln, who suffered terrible emotional pain throughout his life, put it, "People are about as happy as they make up their minds to be."

So even if you are in a bad mood as Passover begins—or, for that matter, at any time in life—you owe it to all those around you to act as happy as you can (or, at the very least, not to inflict your bad mood on them). That is another significant insight Judaism has contributed: feelings should not dictate behavior, and behavior shapes feelings.

Pour the first cup. The *matzahs* remain covered. The Kiddush ("Sanctification") over the wine is usually recited by the leader of the Seder. At many Seders, others recite the Kiddush after the leader does. Lift the cup and recite/sing the Kiddush in Hebrew or in whatever language(s) the participants understand best. Outside of Israel, many Seder participants do not know Hebrew; therefore the most important sections of the Haggadah should be recited in the participants' native language. For example, the leader might chant the Kiddush in Hebrew and then ask another participant to recite the Kiddush in English.

If Passover begins on a Friday night (Shabbat), the Kiddush begins with the first paragraph of the weekly Shabbat Kiddush. It consists entirely of the Torah's description of God making Shabbat, the culmination of Creation (Genesis 1:31–2:3).

**(וַיְהִי-עֶרֶב וַיְהִי-בֹקֶר) יוֹם הַשְּׁשִׁי. וַיְכַלּוּ הַשָּׁמַיִם וְהָאָרֶץ וְכָל-צְבָאָם. וַיְכַל  
 אֱלֹהִים בַּיּוֹם הַשְּׁבִיעִי מְלַאכְתּוֹ אֲשֶׁר עָשָׂה וַיִּשְׁבֹּת בַּיּוֹם הַשְּׁבִיעִי מִכָּל מְלַאכְתּוֹ  
 אֲשֶׁר עָשָׂה. וַיְבָרֶךְ אֱלֹהִים אֶת יוֹם הַשְּׁבִיעִי וַיְקַדְּשׁ אוֹתוֹ כִּי בּו שָׁבַת מְכַל-  
 מְלַאכְתּוֹ אֲשֶׁר בְּרָא אֱלֹהִים לַעֲשׂוֹת.**

*(And there was evening, and there was morning), the sixth day. And the heaven and the earth were finished, and all their host. And on the seventh day God finished His work which He had done; and He rested on the seventh day from all His work which He had done. And God blessed the seventh day, and sanctified it; because He rested on it from all the work of creation that He had done.*

If the Seder takes place on any night other than Shabbat, the Kiddush begins with the following (the words in brackets are added on Friday night):



**בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה ה', אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם בּוֹרֵא פְּרֵי הַגָּפֶן.**

*Blessed are You, Lord our God, King of the universe, Who creates the fruit of the vine.*

*(Baruch ata Adonai, Eloheinu melech ha'olam bo'rei pri ha'gafen.)*

**בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה ה', אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם אֲשֶׁר בָּחַר בָּנוּ מִכָּל־עַם וְרוֹמְמָנוּ מִכָּל־לְשׁוֹן  
וְקִדְּשָׁנוּ בְּמִצְוֹתָיו. וַתִּתֵּן לָנוּ ה' אֱלֹהֵינוּ בְּאַהֲבָה (שְׁבֻתוֹת לְמִנוּחָה ו) מוֹעֲדִים  
לְשִׂמְחָה, חַגִּים וְזִמְנִים לְשִׂשׁוֹן, (אֶת יוֹם הַשְּׁבֻת הַזֶּה ו) אֶת יוֹם חַג הַמִּצּוֹת הַזֶּה  
זְמַן חֲרוּתֵנוּ (בְּאַהֲבָה) מִקְרָא קֹדֶשׁ זָכַר לִיְצִיאַת מִצְרַיִם. כִּי בָנוּ בְּחַרְתָּ וְאוֹתָנוּ  
קִדְּשָׁתָּ מִכָּל הָעַמִּים (וְשֻׁבֹת ו) מוֹעֲדֵי קֹדֶשׁ (בְּאַהֲבָה וּבְרַצוֹן) בְּשִׂמְחָה וּבְשִׂשׁוֹן  
הַנִּחַלְתָּנוּ. בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה ה', מִקְדָּשׁ (הַשְּׁבֻת ו) יִשְׂרָאֵל וְהַזְּמַנִּים.**

*Blessed are You, Lord our God, King of the universe, Who has chosen us from all nations and has raised us above all tongues and has sanctified us with His commandments. And You have given us, Lord our God [Sabbaths for rest], appointed times for happiness, holidays and special times for joy, [this Sabbath day, and] this Festival of Matzot, our season of freedom [in love], a holy convocation in memory of the Exodus from Egypt. For You have chosen us and sanctified us above all peoples. In Your gracious love, You granted us Your [holy Sabbath, and] special times for happiness and joy. Blessed are You, O Lord, Who sanctifies [the Sabbath,] Israel, and the appointed times.*

If the Seder falls on a Saturday night, the following is added. It is the traditional Havdalah (“Separation”) prayer said at the end of Shabbat and all other Torah holidays, marking the separation of the special time from the rest of time.

**בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה ה', אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם, בּוֹרֵא מְאוּרֵי הָאֵשׁ. בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה ה', אֱלֹהֵינוּ  
מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם הַמְּבַדִּיל בֵּין קֹדֶשׁ לְחֹל, בֵּין אוֹר לְחֹשֶׁךְ, בֵּין יִשְׂרָאֵל לְעַמִּים, בֵּין  
יוֹם הַשְּׁבִיעִי לְשִׁשִּׁת יְמֵי הַמַּעֲשֵׂה. בֵּין קֹדֶשׁ שְׁבֻת לְקֹדֶשׁת יוֹם טוֹב הַבְּדֻלָּת,  
וְאֶת־יוֹם הַשְּׁבִיעִי מִשִּׁשִּׁת יְמֵי הַמַּעֲשֵׂה קֹדֶשׁת. הַבְּדֻלָּת וְקֹדֶשׁת אֶת־עַמְּךָ  
יִשְׂרָאֵל בְּקֹדֶשׁתךָ.**

*Blessed are You, Lord our God, King of the universe, Who creates the lights of fire.*

*Blessed are You, Lord our God, King of the universe, Who distinguishes between the holy and the profane, between light and darkness, between Israel and the nations,*

*between the seventh day and the six working days. You have distinguished between the holiness of the Sabbath and the holiness of the Festival, and You have sanctified the seventh day above the six working days. You have distinguished and sanctified Your people Israel with Your holiness.*

The Havdalah prayer normally ends with the words “between the holy and the secular,” but when the Seder is on a Saturday night, Shabbat is not followed by the secular Sunday but by another holy day: Passover. Therefore, the Havdalah ends with the words “between the holy and the holy.”

**בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה ה', הַמְבַדֵּיל בֵּין קֹדֶשׁ לְקֹדֶשׁ.**

*Blessed are You, O Lord, Who distinguishes between the holy and the holy.*

**בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה ה', אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם, שֶׁהֵחֵינּוּ וְקִיַּמְנוּ וְהִגִּיעְנוּ לְזִמְנְךָ הַזֶּה.**

*Blessed are You, Lord our God, King of the universe, Who has granted us life and sustenance and permitted us to reach this season.*

### **For Discussion** **Why Are Distinctions at the Heart of Judaism?**

As noted, every Shabbat and Jewish holy day ends with the Havdalah prayer. Havdalah means “separation,” and separation, or distinction, is one of the most important concepts in the Torah and Judaism. One could say the Torah is based on distinctions.

God-made distinctions constitute divine order. The first chapter of Genesis is as much about God making order as it is about God creating. The state of the universe before divine order was, as described in the second verse of the Torah, chaos (*tohu vavohu*). God is the Maker of Order and Distinctions. In Genesis 1, God distinguishes between:

- Light and dark
- Day and night
- Land and water
- Good and evil
- Human and animal

Man and woman  
 God and man  
 God and nature

Later, the Torah makes distinctions between:

Holy and profane  
 Parent and child  
 Life and death

Preserving God's order and distinctions is one of man's primary tasks. The battle for higher civilization may be characterized as the battle between biblical distinctions and the desire of many "post-modern" individuals to eradicate many of those distinctions. As Western society abandons the Bible and the God of the Bible, it is abandoning these distinctions. The Havdalah prayer reminds the Jew how important distinctions are.

### For Discussion

#### Why Does Judaism Allow, Even Call for, Consuming Wine?

The Seder begins, as do all Jewish holy day meals, with a blessing over wine. In Judaism, alcohol consumption has always been allowed and even mandated on holy days. The name of the prayer over the wine is Kiddush, which is another form of the Hebrew word for "holy," *kadosh*. The Jew drinks on a holy day and, through the Kiddush, renders the act of drinking holy. The purpose of Jewish drinking is to celebrate the holidays with added joy. As Psalm 104:15 puts it, "Wine gladdens the heart." Of course, an alcoholic should not drink wine at the Seder or at any other time; at the Seder, he or she should substitute grape juice. Similarly, if wine, particularly the four cups mandated for the Seder, causes you to be sleepy or gives you a headache, you should either not drink four full cups or consider drinking grape juice. The purpose of the four cups of wine is to increase your joy of the occasion, not diminish it.

The Jewish attitude toward wine can be summarized by a well-known Hebrew phrase: "respect it and suspect it" (*kabdayhu ve'chashdayhu*). Alcohol can enable or even lead to evils such as child and spousal abuse, rape, and murder, not to mention out-of-control anger. It is impossible to measure the amount of human suffering caused by alcohol. Ask anyone who has been raised by an alcoholic parent or who has an alcoholic spouse or child, or anyone who has lost a loved one to a drunk driver.

It is therefore understandable that some religions—such as Islam, Mormonism (Latter-Day Saints), and some Christian denominations—prohibit consumption of alcohol. The Jewish view is that the desire for alcohol, like most desires, should not be suppressed, but channeled into decent and holy ends. This attitude largely worked well for Jews, who historically had low rates of alcoholism. But as Jews began drinking for pleasure rather than to celebrate holy days, their alcoholism rates increased.

While Judaism mandates alcohol on holy days, and while the Torah does not forbid it, when the Torah mentions wine, it almost always associates it with negative events. One example is the story of Noah and his son (Genesis 9:20–25), who, after Noah gets drunk, sexually humiliates (or worse) his father. Another negative story concerning wine appears in Genesis 19:30–36. Lot’s daughters, fearing no men are left alive after the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, get their father drunk on wine and sleep with him to produce offspring. And Leviticus 10:9 legislates with the most severe threat that priests must abstain from any consumption of wine while performing their work in the Sanctuary.

Nevertheless, the Rabbis decreed, “Even the poorest man in Israel . . . shall have no fewer than four cups of wine, even [if the wine comes] from the communal coffer.”<sup>2</sup> This prescription applies to women as well and is unique in Judaism—because Passover and the Seder are unique. On this night, more than any other, the Jew, no matter how poor or troubled, is to feel prosperous and free.

The four cups represent the four expressions of deliverance promised by God in Exodus 6:6–7:

“I will bring out.”

“I will deliver.”

“I will redeem.”

“I will take.”

## ורחץ URCHATZ (And Wash)

Wash your hands but do not say the traditional blessing “on the washing of the hands” (*al netilat yadayim*). Pour water over your hands. At all other meals of the year the ritual washing of one’s hands is done at a sink, but not tonight. This special washing is done at the Seder table. Someone brings a pitcher of water and a bowl to each of the Seder participants, and each person pours water twice over the right hand and then twice over the left hand.

As previously noted, the purpose of this unique washing is not to clean one’s hands, which should be clean before coming to the Seder table, but, among many other reasons offered by the Rabbis, to make it apparent that one is embarking on a particularly holy meal.

## כרפס KARPAS (Greens)

Take a small amount of the greens or other vegetable (less than the size of an olive, according to tradition), dip it into the salt water, and say the blessing below, having in mind that this blessing will also cover the bitter herbs to be eaten later. Generally, parsley, celery, or potato is used, and almost any other vegetable is permitted. What is not permitted is any vegetable that can be used as a bitter herb (horseradish, for example)—because the eating of a bitter herb is a separate law to be fulfilled later in the Seder. The vegetable is dipped in salt water (reminiscent of the tears of slaves), and one then recites the blessing over vegetables:

**בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה ה', אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם, בּוֹרֵא פְּרֵי הָאֲדָמָה.**

*Blessed are You, Lord our God, King of the universe, Who creates the fruit of the earth.*

# יחץ

## YACHATZ

### (Break the *Afikoman* in Half)

The head of the household, and anyone else who has a plate with three *matzot*, breaks the middle *matzah* in two. The smaller half is placed between the two other *matzot*. The larger piece is wrapped and hidden somewhere in the vicinity of the Seder table. This piece of *matzah* will be used for the *afikoman*, the final food eaten at the Seder meal.

As we will see, some of the Seder's most important ceremonies are performed by children. One of the primary purposes, if not the primary purpose, of the Seder is to teach children—the next generation of Jews—about the Exodus, the most important event in their history.

In order to help keep children awake as long as possible—ideally at least until the *afikoman* is eaten at the end of the meal (which is not the conclusion of the Seder), a playful tradition developed long ago. The Seder leader “hides” the *afikoman* and the children try to find it. When they do (they always do), they “steal” it, and hide it themselves. Since, as noted, the Seder cannot proceed after the meal until the *afikoman* is eaten, one or more of the children then ask for a ransom in return for the *afikoman*.

A typical scenario might go like this: As the meal draws to an end, the Seder leader prepares to distribute the *afikoman* by retrieving it from its hiding place but “discovers” that it has disappeared! He announces, “I can't find the *afikoman*,” at which point one or more of the children proudly declare, “I took it, and I will return it for a reward.” The leader then says, “What would you like?” Then the child might name some toy or game or even something as expensive as a bicycle. I received the finest material gifts of my teenage years not for my birthday or for Chanukah, but for returning the *afikoman* at the Passover Seder.

One year, my grandfather, the nominal leader of the Seders of my youth, gave me a shortwave radio—a radio capable of tuning into radio stations throughout the world. That gift was one of the most important I ever received. It changed my life by opening my mind to the world. I listened to it virtually every night (except for Shabbat) of my

high school and college years. Another year, he gave me a portable typewriter, which prompted me to start writing. So I have the fondest memories of “stealing” the *afikoman*, not to mention of my grandfather.

Of course, the gifts need not be extravagant. But the *afikoman* ritual serves its primary purpose—keeping the children awake. It also gives the children a sense of importance at the Seder in that the meal’s completion depends on their returning the *afikoman*. And it is fun for children to engage in adult-like behavior by negotiating with their parents or grandparents.

Some moralists object to this whole enterprise, arguing that it encourages children to steal. Speaking personally, I can only express sadness for children whose parents refuse to play this game; humorless parents can be a challenge. Children are no more likely to become thieves because they stole the *afikoman* than become pirates because they dressed up as one on Purim.



מגיד  
MAGID  
(Telling—the Exodus Story)

The leader uncovers the *matzot*, raises the Seder plate, and says out loud:

הָא לְחֶמֶא עֲנָא דִּי אֲכָלוּ אַבְהֵתְנָא בְּאַרְעָא דְמִצְרַיִם. פֶּל דְכָפִין יִיתִי וַיִּיכַל,  
פֶּל דְצָרִיךְ יִיתִי וַיִּפְסֹת. הַשְׁתָּא הָכָא, לְשָׁנָה הַבְּאָה בְּאַרְעָא דְיִשְׂרָאֵל. הַשְׁתָּא  
עַבְדִּי, לְשָׁנָה הַבְּאָה בְּנֵי חוֹרִין.

*This is the bread of affliction that our ancestors ate in the land of Egypt. Anyone who is hungry should come and eat, anyone who is in need should come and partake of the Pesach rituals. Now we are here, next year we will be in the land of Israel; this year we are slaves, next year may we be free people.*

The Magid section begins with a passage in Aramaic, the language Jews spoke at the beginning of the Common Era.

People understandably assume “hungry” and “in need” are synonyms, used here to reinforce the importance of providing for the poor. But they are not necessarily synonymous.

It might have been the intention of the author of this prayer to communicate that poor people are not necessarily needy (other than materially) and that many needy people are not necessarily poor. We are to care for both on Passover.

With regard to the hungry, Passover, with its feast-like meal, requires Jews to make sure that food is made available for the holiday for everyone. For this reason, Jewish communities have always had *maot chittin* funds, money specifically earmarked to ensure people have the means to celebrate Passover with a certain measure of luxury.

The “needy” refers to people in need of things in addition to, or other than, food. Perhaps the most common example is the need for companionship. In speaking with tens of thousands of people over nearly forty years—by phone on my radio show and in person—I was shocked to learn that vast numbers of people are lonely. Vast numbers of people do

not have close friends, and an even greater number of people have no community. Among the many prices people pay for having abandoned religion is a lack of community. There are few, if any, secular communities that have replaced religious communities.

Natan Sharansky, the long-imprisoned hero of the Soviet Jewry movement that began in the 1960s to enable Soviet Jews to emigrate from the Soviet Union, wrote about his experience. Several decades after leaving Russia for Israel, where he became a major political figure, Sharansky wrote a memoir, *Never Alone*, whose theme, reflected in the book's title, was that by belonging to the Jewish people, even in solitary confinement, he never felt alone. On Passover, no Jew should be alone. That is what this prayer calls on us to provide: food and community.

### The Four Questions

Pour a second cup of wine. Then, a child, usually the youngest who can speak, asks the famous “Four Questions” of the Passover Seder:

מה נִשְׁתַּנָּה הַלַּיְלָה הַזֶּה מִכָּל הַלַּיְלוֹת?  
 שֶׁבְּכָל הַלַּיְלוֹת אָנוּ אוֹכְלִין חֶמֶץ וּמַצָּה, הַלַּיְלָה הַזֶּה – כָּלוּ מַצָּה.  
 שֶׁבְּכָל הַלַּיְלוֹת אָנוּ אוֹכְלִין שָׂאֵר יִרְקוֹת – הַלַּיְלָה הַזֶּה (כָּלוּ) מָרוֹר.  
 שֶׁבְּכָל הַלַּיְלוֹת אֵין אָנוּ מְטַבֵּילִין אֶפְּסֵינוּ פַּעַם אַחַת – הַלַּיְלָה הַזֶּה  
 שְׁתֵּי פַּעַמִּים. שֶׁבְּכָל הַלַּיְלוֹת אָנוּ אוֹכְלִין בֵּין יוֹשְׁבֵין וּבֵין מְסֻבֵּין – הַלַּיְלָה הַזֶּה  
 כָּלָנוּ מְסֻבֵּין.

*Why is this night different from all other nights?*

1. *On all other nights we eat chametz and matzah; this night, only matzah.*
2. *On all other nights we eat other vegetables; tonight, [only] maror.*
3. *On all other nights, we do not dip [our food] even one time; tonight, [we dip it] twice.*
4. *On all other nights, we eat either sitting or reclining; tonight, we all recline.*

The Four Questions, marking the unofficial opening of the Seder, accomplish at least three important goals.

First, they establish that the Seder is next-generation oriented. Teaching the next generation what the previous generation stands for and seeks to perpetuate is the only way a religion or a nation can survive. It is certainly the reason Jews are the longest

living continuous culture. It is also why, at the time of this writing, the American and Western value systems are in danger of not being perpetuated. Depending on the Western country, since either World War I, World War II, or the Vietnam War, many members of the adult generation failed to teach the next generation American and Western values.

Second, standing up and asking these questions gives the Jewish child a chance to “perform” publicly—usually for the first time in his or her life. The self-confidence this imbues in most children is priceless. And its association with a Jewish experience can be life-shaping.

Third, these questions teach the Jewish child that the path to learning is through asking questions.

Questions played a critical role in Jewish life from the very beginning, and in the Bible they are often directed to God. Abraham, the first Jew, challenged God: “Shall not the judge of all the earth act justly?” (Genesis 18:25). The Psalmist similarly challenged God: “Why do You hide Your face, ignoring our afflictions and distress?” (Psalms 44:25). And the prophet Jeremiah posed a question that even pious believers still ask: “Why does the way of the wicked prosper?” (Jeremiah 12:1).

Unlike these theological questions, the Four Questions of the Haggadah are directed not at God, but at one’s parents. Given the central importance of the Four Questions, however, the ironic fact is that few fathers or mothers actually answer them.

This is exemplified by an old Jewish joke:

At the Seder, the family expectantly waits for young Judah to recite these questions as he has done for the past two years. But the boy remains seated. His parents motion for Judah to stand, but he remains seated. Finally, they tell him to rise and recite the Four Questions.

“I won’t do it,” the boy says.

The parents and all the guests are shocked.

“Why not?”

“Every year I ask the Four Questions,” the boy responds, “and Papa never answers them. It’s clear he doesn’t know the answers. So I’m not going to ask again. It’s not nice for Papa.”

The truth is there are plenty of papas and mamas who don’t know the answers. Here, then, are the Four Questions and at least one papa’s answers:

## For Discussion

### Suggested Responses to the Four Questions

First Question: “Why is it that on all other nights we eat both leavened bread and also *matzah*, but on this night we eat only *matzah*?”

Answer: When the Jews fled Egypt, they left on such short notice they had no time to wait for the bread to rise, so they took the bread from the ovens while it was still flat. In addition, eating *matzah* makes the point that it is better to eat a “poor man’s bread” and be free than to eat tasty soft bread but live in slavery. This point alone is worth the whole holiday.

*Freedom is a value, not an innate human desire.* Many people prefer tasty food to liberty (the Jews in the desert, for example), and most people prefer to be taken care of than to be free.

If liberty were an innate yearning—as much as or more than being taken care of—there would be many more free societies than there are. France gave America the Statue of Liberty because America, for all its history until the present time, has been the freest country in the world. Why has it been? Because America was founded to be free. That is why its iconic symbol is the Liberty Bell, on which,

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*Freedom is a value, not an innate human desire. Most people prefer to be taken care of than to be free.*

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it should be noted at the Seder, is inscribed one verse—a verse from the Torah: “Proclaim liberty throughout all the land unto all the inhabitants thereof” (Leviticus 25:10). Of course, America did not live up to its belief in liberty with regard to blacks. Half the country practiced slavery, and slavery is the opposite of liberty. But slavery was practiced in every nation and among every ethnic and racial group in history. What has rendered America unique is not its having practiced slavery, but that it became the freest country in the world.

Second Question: “Why is it that on other nights we eat all kinds of herbs, but on this night we eat only bitter herbs?”

Answer: We eat the *maror*, the bitter herb, to remind us of the bitterness of the slavery our ancestors endured in Egypt.

Third Question: “Why is it that on other nights we don’t even dip our herbs once, but on this night we dip them twice?”

Answer: The two dippings refer to the dipping early in the Seder of the green vegetable into salt water and the dipping later in the Seder of the bitter herb into the *haroset*, the sweet

mixture of nuts, wine, and apples or other fruits. The salt water in which the vegetable is dipped symbolizes the tears shed by the oppressed slaves. *Haroset* appears in the Mishnah, meaning that it was eaten at the Seder at least two thousand years ago. Yet its precise reason for being has been lost. Some say it represents the mortar the Israelite slaves used when laying bricks. Some say it has the opposite purpose: an attempt to lessen the bitterness of the *maror*. Still others, according to Leeor Gottlieb, professor of Bible at Israel's Bar-Ilan University, "found in it a symbolic significance, meant to remind us of the devotion Israelite wives demonstrated in encouraging their husbands to continue having children and not to lose hope in the future during the dark days of slavery, because the apple tree (whose fruit is the main ingredient of [*haroset*]) is mentioned in the context of marital intimacy in Song of Songs 8:5—understood homiletically as referring to the period of slavery in Egypt."

Fourth Question: "Why is it that on all other nights we either sit or recline at the table, but on this night we eat in a reclining position?"

Answer: Though Jews are familiar with this question because of its inclusion in the Four Questions, outside of the Orthodox world most Jews do not assume a reclining position at the Seder table (which usually involves the placing of a pillow on one's seat). The reason Jews are instructed to recline is that in the time of the Roman Empire, the dominant world power when the Haggadah was formally composed, free men reclined at the table. Therefore, eating in a reclining position came to symbolize luxury and freedom.

### For Discussion Four Adult Questions

Now that the children have asked their questions, adults might wish to ask and discuss questions of their own. Here are four with which one might start:

1. Given that our society is overwhelmingly secular, why should I take God and religion seriously?
2. If God took the Jews out of Egypt in Pharaoh's time, why didn't He take them out of Europe during Hitler's time?
3. Must the Seder be a religious experience, or is it enough for it to be a family and/or national Jewish experience?
4. Given that Jews make up two-tenths of 1 percent of the world's population—or, to put it another way, 99.8 percent of the world is not Jewish—why is it so important that the Jews and Judaism survive and that I help keep them alive?

The purpose of these questions is to stimulate discussion among the Seder participants. In light of that, the following answers are my answers, not “the right” answers. Nor are they the entirety of what I would answer. They are listed here to stimulate further discussion.

An answer to Question 1:

Only if there is a God is there ultimate meaning to life. If there is no God, everything that exists does so as a result of random chance, including, of course, every human being. See the discussion about the centrality of God under “God, Not Moses, Is Credited with the Exodus” (page 30).

An answer to Question 2:

One can ask the identical question regarding other nations’ mass murders: the forty to sixty million Chinese killed by Mao’s communist regime; the twenty to thirty million murdered by Stalin’s communist regime, including six million Ukrainians; the one out of four Cambodians killed by Pol Pot and his communist regime; the mass killings of Armenians by the Ottoman Turks; the slaughter of Tutsis by Hutus in Rwanda; and so many others. And since every life is infinitely precious, one can also ask this question about any individual unjustly murdered: Why didn’t God intervene to stop it?

The most honest answer is that God allows bad things to happen to good people because God has given human beings free will. If God were to intervene to save every individual who was about to be hurt by another human being, human beings as we know them would not exist. For one thing, humans would be robots. For another, if evil were not possible, nor would good be possible: if all we could do was good, acts of goodness would be no more “good” than breathing.

Returning to the specifically Jewish question posed here: Why didn’t God intervene in the Holocaust (or, for that matter, during any of the innumerable atrocities committed against Jews throughout history) as He did during the Exodus?

In attempting an answer, it is important to bear in mind that God allowed centuries to elapse before intervening to end the Jews’ suffering in Egypt. For hundreds of years, He allowed their enslavement, and He did nothing to prevent the murder of their baby boys when Pharaoh felt threatened enough by their numbers to order that all male Hebrew newborns be thrown into the Nile. So, then, if we are to attribute the end of the Egyptian enslavement to God’s intervention, we could also attribute the end of the Holocaust to God’s intervention. Of course, it doesn’t explain why God first allowed six million Jews to be murdered—but neither does the Exodus explain why God first allowed generations of Jews to suffer and, near the end, the baby boys to be killed.

All we can say for certain is that the Jewish people survived Pharaoh and the Jewish people survived Hitler and the Nazis. Does God have a hand in the survival of the Jewish people? I believe so. Of course, it's a belief—it cannot be proven, but it is the best explanation for the Jews' utterly unlikely survival across three thousand years, something no other people dispersed from its homeland achieved.

Finally, nowhere in the Torah is it implied that God will prevent the murder of a single Jew. What the Torah does promise is that God will never allow the whole Jewish people to be annihilated.

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*The most important Jewish question, therefore, is not only whether the Seder needs to have a religious component but whether being a Jew needs to have a religious component.*

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An answer to Question 3:

At the time of this writing, more Jews attend a Passover Seder than participate in any other Jewish activity, including attending synagogue on Rosh Hashanah or Yom Kippur. This is as true for secular Jews outside of Israel as it is for secular Israeli Jews. Since living in Israel serves to maintain the Jewish identity of many secular Israeli Jews, and since family life in Israel is quite strong, one can foresee non-religious Israelis attending Seders for the indefinite future. However, the same cannot be said about most irreligious Jews outside

of Israel. It is difficult to imagine that secular Seders will last long outside of an Israeli context. This, then, is one reason to involve God and religious ritual in one's Seder: to maximize the chances that one's children and grandchildren continue having a Seder. The most important Jewish question, therefore, is not only whether the Seder needs to have a religious component but whether being a Jew needs to have a religious component.

An answer to Question 4:

### **For Discussion** **Why Be a Jew?**

This is the most important question in Jewish life. Why be Jewish? Why should someone born a Jew identify as a Jew and lead a Jewish life, and why should someone searching for a religion be Jewish?

In the modern world there are innumerable options: other religions, secular “-isms” that function as religions, and atheism. Yet modern Jewish life has rarely given Jews rational

answers to this question. It has been preoccupied with answering the question of how to be a Jew, not why. But without a why, the how eventually becomes irrelevant.

Let us begin by excluding a reason that many Jews give when trying to inspire a young Jew to retain a Jewish identity: pride in Jewish achievement—which usually means pride in the achievements of modern Jews, not pride in the Jews’ having given the world God, the Bible, ethical monotheism (a God whose primary demand is that humans behave ethically), and the Ten Commandments, among other world-shaping values.

A typical example is Jewish pride in the disproportionate number of Jews who have won a Nobel Prize. However, it is hard to imagine any young Jew deciding to lead a Jewish life because of the number of Jews awarded a Nobel Prize.

I first realized how unconvincing this line of argument was to me when I turned thirteen. One of the gifts I received for my bar-mitzvah was a book titled *Great Jews in Sports* (I remember it being somewhat thin, with large print and big pictures). Though I followed sports, I remember thinking: *What difference does it make? Why should it matter to me that some great baseball players or boxers were Jews?*

So I begin this list of reasons to be Jewish by excluding what many people might mention—pride in Jews’ achievements. I have pride in the Jewish achievement of shaping the world through the Torah. That defines my Jewish pride. And, more important, it gives my life purpose and meaning: to continue to shape the world through the Torah.

In making the case for being or becoming a Jew, the first word that comes to mind is “Shabbat.” If I had to make a sales pitch for Judaism, I would begin with Shabbat. If I were allowed only one reason for someone to lead a Jewish life, I would say “Shabbat.” If I were to encourage a Jew to engage in one Jewish ritual, it would be Shabbat.

It is not possible to take Shabbat seriously and not become a changed person as well as a serious Jew. I will add that it is an immeasurable loss to America and to Christianity that the Sabbath is not taken seriously. When I was a young boy, it was taken quite seriously. No stores were open on Sunday—and this was in Brooklyn, New York, not Des Moines, Iowa. Life was palpably different on Sunday. There was little traffic—where were you going to go? And people dressed up. Everywhere there was a church, people dressed beautifully, in what was known as their “Sunday best.” Then the 1960s came, the Sabbath began to die, and most people who did attend church stopped wearing their “Sunday best.”

Shabbat is not only a life-prolonger, it is a life-fulfiller. The alternative—every day essentially the same, Friday night as a repeat of the other nights of the week and Saturday as a repeat of the other days of the week—is, to those of us who have Shabbat, thoroughly depressing.



To someone considering Judaism, this is my first argument: you will have Shabbat. And by the way, God seems to think so, too: It is the only ritual in the Ten Commandments. Kosher isn't in the Ten Commandments. Nor is Yom Kippur. Not one ritual except for Shabbat.

If the Jews did nothing else distinctly Jewish, the Jews would survive thanks to Shabbat alone. Nor is any other ritual as transformative as Shabbat. Kashrut doesn't transform your life nearly as much as Shabbat does. To leave the world of work and politics and video games for a day each week and spend it with family and/or friends is Judaism's greatest gift to the Jews and to the world. The power of Shabbat in keeping the family together also cannot be overstated. Every week of the year, families (and/or friends) sit down to share an elaborate meal which usually goes on for hours. Friday night and Saturday are sacred family time. Shabbat is by far my most positive family memory of my childhood. The Seder is a powerful and positive memory. But that was once a year. Shabbat is every week.

My second argument for being Jewish is the Torah. The best way I can articulate the power of the Torah is with this sentiment: I do not believe in the Torah because I believe in God, I believe in God because I believe in the Torah. Studying the Torah is my way of encountering God—even more so, for me personally, than prayer. I believe God's words are in the Torah. Indeed, I've worked much of my life making that case.

The Torah does something else for me.

I need to have my mind engaged, not just my emotions. That's one of the reasons I love classical music. Classical music touches my heart; I often have tears at the end of, let's say, a Brahms symphony. But classical music engages my mind, not just my emotions. That's part of the reason I love it. And the Torah does the same—it engages both my intellect and my emotions. The Torah is so intelligent and wise, my mind is fulfilled in studying it. For too many people in all religions, their religiosity is rooted in emotions, not the intellect.

Number three, by being a Jew you are sustaining or joining the Chosen People. Chosen-ness is not some abstract theological term for me. I believe that God chose this people to take His message to the world: belief in the Ten Commandments and in a universal God Who demands moral behavior and Who judges every individual accordingly.

Being a member of the Chosen People is open to anybody. Judaism has always, from the outset, welcomed the non-ethnic Hebrew into the Jewish people. The first Jew, Abraham, was a convert. The Messiah in Judaism will descend from a convert, Ruth. Many non-Jews left Egypt with the Jews. *Erev rav* is the Torah's term for the mixed multitudes who went out with the Hebrews from Egypt; they received the same Ten Commandments at Sinai and experienced the same visions of God. There has never been, ethnically speaking, a "pure" Jew. We don't all come from Abraham, but even if we did, Abraham himself wasn't a "pure" Jew.

If you take Chosenness seriously, it is life-transforming and, ultimately, world-transforming. One of the tragedies of modern Judaism is that rabbis rarely emphasize Jewish Chosenness. In any given year, how many rabbis speak about the Jews being Chosen and what that means?

Number four: I am passionate about Judaism generally and the Torah specifically for their emphasis on goodness and morality. After graduating from a yeshiva high school, I continued studying Judaism at the yeshiva's metivta (post-graduate academy) under the school's remarkable principal, Rabbi David Eliach. I once asked him his take on ethical monotheism. His response permanently influenced me. "Judaism," he said, "*is* ethical monotheism, and ethical monotheism *is* Judaism."

God wants us to be good. That is the message of Judaism. It is staggeringly simple. The proof is that, according to Judaism, every good person shares in the world to come. That should be a very big selling point for Judaism. There's no clearer illustration of a religion's emphasis on goodness and morality than its asserting that God doesn't judge a non-Jew's theology, only his behavior.

Those are pretty big selling points: Shabbat, Torah, the mission of the Chosen People, the emphasis on being good, and the appeal to the mind as well as the heart.

And all those lead to the fifth reason: Judaism fills one's life with meaning.

Meaning, as Viktor Frankl, the great Jewish psychoanalyst who survived Auschwitz, said, is the greatest human need, even more so than the erotic drive. There are many people who lead celibate but nevertheless happy lives, but no one is happy whose life lacks meaning.

Having God and religion in one's life, having a mission, having a community (one of Judaism's other strong points)—these fill a committed Jew's life with meaning.

In a nutshell, just as God keeps the Jewish people alive in the world, the Jewish people keep God alive in the world. This is true even though most modern Jews are secular. The continuity of the Jews and their return to Israel after 1,900 years in exile bear testimony both to the existence of God and to the validity of His promises.

The answers offered here do not mean that there are no secular answers to the question of why it should matter if the Jews survive as a distinct people. But it is harder to provide persuasive secular answers than persuasive religious ones to this question. Therefore, non-religious Jews at the Seder ought to try to answer this question, and this may help: How much do the secular Jews at the Seder care if their children and grandchildren identify as Jews? And if they do care, why?