

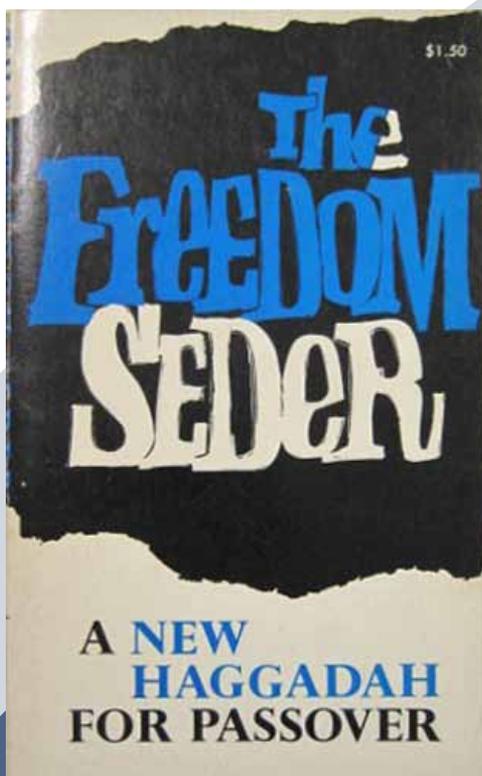
Sacred Stories

A Living Commentary on American Jewish History and the Hebrew Bible

EKEV JULY 27, 2013

The Universal Blessing

By Rabbi Doug Heifetz



Artifact:

The Freedom Seder

Arthur Waskow, Washington, D.C.: The Micah Press, 1970

National Museum of American Jewish History

Located in the Civil Rights case, to the left of the large film screens on the second floor

The Universal Blessing

Sacred Stories **EKEV**

The weekly Torah portion, Ekev, connects spirituality with eating. It states, “When you have eaten your fill, give thanks to the Lord your God for the good land which he has given you.” [Deuteronomy 8:10] The Sabbath and other festivals all offer chances for splendid meals and, in response, we express gratitude for our many gifts and blessings. Jews often ritualize this gratitude through *birkat ha-mazon*, the grace after meals.

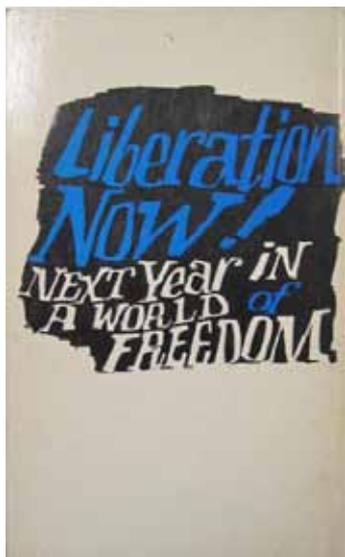
However, it’s not just the quality of the food that elicits this response. The participants in our meals and celebrations can strengthen our gratitude, as well. When we share the occasion with others, we not only

“The verses of Ekev remind us that meals should restore our sense of pure, universal thanksgiving.”

feel a sense of bonding with them, but also a shared sense of gratitude and exaltation. The emotion can bring together participants from many different backgrounds. We transcend many differences of social and religious background as we join together in the most universal spiritual experience. The more diverse the group, the more united and grateful we feel.

For generations, diversity has been part of American Jewish celebrations. I grew up with stories about the religious feasts that my great grandfather celebrated with his Native American neighbors in Oklahoma, when he settled there in the early 20th Century. He apparently learned Choctaw before English, and spoke both languages with a strong Yiddish accent. According to family legend, he delighted in attending the feasts of his new neighbors, and returned the invitation at Jewish holidays.

Neighbors, and strangers, came together on April 4, 1969, on the third night of Passover and the first anniversary of the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., for a celebration of freedom and a festive meal



in the basement of a Washington, DC church. Inspired by the *haggadah* written by Rabbi Arthur Waskow, The Freedom Seder brought together people of all ethnic and religious backgrounds to participate in the traditional retelling of the story of the Exodus from Egypt, connecting the ancient Israelites' liberation to the modern struggles of the Civil Rights Movement. To honor that first Freedom Seder, and to continue its legacy, the Museum hosted its first (annual) Freedom Seder in March 2013. Over 250 people gathered in person and another 400 participated virtually, as we celebrated freedom, tradition, and our continued struggle for a better world, all during a communal meal.

The verses of Ekev remind us that meals should restore our sense of pure, universal thanksgiving. All the more so, when can we share festive meals with people of many different backgrounds, we can experience an outpouring of gratitude that transcends cultural differences.

Rabbi Doug Heifetz serves as the rabbi of Oseh Shalom, a 300- household Reconstructionist congregation in Laurel, Maryland. He received his ordination from the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College in 2005. He teaches with the goal of creating a more compassionate, balanced, reflective and healthy world. He often speaks and writes about immigrant rights, global warming, food, health and the spread of chronic disease. He lives in Silver Spring, Maryland, with his wife and two young children.

ARTIFACT:

The Freedom Seder (Front and Back Cover)
Arthur Waskow, Washington, D.C.: The Micah Press, 1970
National Museum of American Jewish History



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About this partnership:

Both the Jewish People and the United States of America are rooted in a quest for greater freedom and human dignity. Inspired by this parallelism, the National Museum of American Jewish History is collaborating with Clal—The National Jewish Center for Learning and Leadership and its Rabbis Without Borders program to launch a new initiative, **Sacred Stories: A Living Commentary on the Hebrew Bible and American Jewish History**.

Sacred Stories weaves together Judaism's foundational sacred text, the Torah, with one of the most successful expressions of freedom in human history, the story of Jewish life in America. **Sacred Stories** explores our shared values by linking these two vital and compelling stories through contemporary commentary and 21st century media.

The **Torah** is a central feature of Jewish tradition. Used to refer generally to Jewish wisdom, it also refers specifically to the 5 Books of Moses which makes up the Hebrew Bible. A portion of the Torah text, a **Parsha**, is read on **Shabbat** (Sabbath). The whole Torah is read sequentially over the course of the year. Shabbat is the Jewish day of rest and begins on Friday evenings and ends Saturday night. Many Jews observe Shabbat to emulate God's resting on the seventh day of Creation. The fourth commandment is to keep Shabbat holy which Jews do with festive meals, resting, and learning.



The National Museum of American Jewish History, on Independence Mall in Philadelphia, presents educational programs and experiences that preserve, explore and celebrate the history of Jews in America. Its purpose is to connect Jews more closely to their heritage and to inspire in people of all backgrounds a greater appreciation for the diversity of the American Jewish experience and the freedoms to which Americans aspire.



Clal—The National Jewish Center for Learning and Leadership is a think tank, leadership training institute, and resource center. Bringing Jewish insights to a wide American audience, Clal makes Jewish wisdom an accessible public resource. A leader in religious pluralism, Clal builds bridges across communities to encourage diversity and openness. Linking Jewish texts and tradition with innovative scholarship, Clal promotes Jewish participation in American civic and spiritual life, reinvigorating communities and enhancing leadership development.