4 Ways of connecting your Seder to Israel and to the Jewish People

Before reading about the Wicked child – you can add this reading about current events in Israel

1. Who is “Wicked”?

The Hebrew word rasha is the word used in the Haggadah for “wicked”. In the last few months, the State of Israel has been attacked and called a “rasha” or “wicked”. These words haven’t come from any modern enemy but from Haredi politicians in the Knesset and leading ultra-Orthodox rabbis. Not since the decrees of Pharoah, they said, has there existed such a large enemy as the Israeli government against the people of Israel.

Why this outcry? In March, the Knesset passed a bill to require some of the ultra-Orthodox yeshiva students to be drafted into the Israeli Army. In 1948, during the War of Independence, every type of Jew – secular and religious including the ultra-Orthodox went out to defend the newborn state. No one stayed at home or in the yeshiva because it was a question of life and death.

While the existential situation in Israel has changed since then, the existence of the State of Israel is still endangered today, and therefore the heads of the army cannot allow the exemption of so many young able-bodied Israelis from the army.

The Haggadah explains to us the mentality of the rasha. It is not that he does evil things, as would be the literal interpretation. It is the fact that he is excluding himself. He says: “I am not part of this, this does not relate to me.” The Haggadah answers him “if you would have been there you would not have been redeemed”. Meaning, If you are part of Am Yisrael, this is what you do to gain your freedom but if you exclude yourself you cannot gain freedom in this way.

Questions for Discussion:
What do you think about the question of drafting the Ultra Orthodox and the use of the term “wicked” in this situation?

Before or after reading Avadim Hayinu – you can add this reading about past and present struggles for freedom: Let My People Go (Again)!

2. Many of us, as children or adults remember the movement that swept world Jewry to help free the refuseniks or the prisoners of Zion and then to connect these Jews back to Judaism after 70 years of Communism. We strove to help them learn Hebrew and to make Aliya or to find them safe haven in other countries like the USA, Canada, Germany and more. The feeling of Jewish Peoplehood was tangible and mutual responsibility tantamount.

25 years ago, the Iron Curtain was pulled away from the Former Soviet Union. Hundreds of thousands of Jews remained in Ukraine, Russia and the rest of the former Soviet Union countries after the fall of Communism. Today, these Jews and their children and grandchildren are feeling renewed insecurity due to the current political situation that is threatening the region, not to mention new and increased anti-Semitism. The western world again seems to be in conflict with “Mother Russia” and this new reality, together with the deteriorating economic situation, seems to be echoing voices of just 25 years ago.

For now, the borders are open and Jews can freely come and go as they desire. But people don’t just get up and leave their communities, their schools, their youth movements and their synagogues. That is easier said than done for complicated reasons, both individual and communal.

Questions for Discussion:
Should we encourage these or other Jews to leave and make aliyah to Israel or immigrate to other countries or do we need to strengthen existing communities and help ensure their spiritual and physical security? Where do our responsibilities lie in fulfilling the commandment of caring for the entire house of Israel in their time of trouble – אחינו כל בית ישראל נתונים בצרה?
Before thanking God during Hallel, you can add this reading.

Ezrat Yisrael – Separate but Equal

Last year in our “4 Ways”, we asked very difficult questions on the freedom to express your Judaism in the State of Israel. There are large issues that must still be resolved such as: recognition of all streams of Judaism to convert, to marry, to bury and to receive state funding, but there has been some progress. There is now a new area at the western wall called “Ezrat Yisrael”, meaning the Israel section, which has been partially built to allow ongoing egalitarian services. This happened thanks to the ongoing work of pluralistic religious organizations in Israel and around the world, all of whom are very concerned about the state of religious pluralism in Israel. Together, these organizations with the support of World Jewry, must continue to fight against the fundamentalization of Judaism in Israel and the lack of religious freedom for all Jews in our country. Our work is not yet finished although we must recognize these achievements.

Questions for discussion:
What else do you think this coalition of movements can change and advance?

Before ending your seder and singing L’shana Haba’ah b’Yerushalayim, you can add this reading.

Who does the State of the Jewish people belong to?

Before we sing, l’shana haba’ah b’yerushalayim, Next Year in Jerusalem, let’s ask ourselves why do we also say yerushalayim hab’nuya, Next Year in Jerusalem, in a rebuilt Jerusalem. Jerusalem has already been built and rebuilt in the modern age. Anyone who has been to Jerusalem can see that. The physical building of offices and parks and homes in the modern state of Israel exists. At the beginning of the 20th century, the halutzim, or pioneers, dried out the swamps and replaced them with fields of flowers and produce in a miraculous amount of time. It seems, though, that there is a certain ideal we aspire to for Jerusalem and for Israel, a yearning that we express year after year, which is beyond physical structures. In order for us to continue building the Jewish state for the entire Jewish people, we must turn to our relationship not just with God, not just with the land, but with each other.

Questions for discussion
What are the spiritual swamps that are still left for us to overcome? Is it: Environmental Challenges, Religious Pluralism, Relating to the non-Jew, foreign workers, refugees, Peace?

Happy Passover!

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