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END-OF-PESAH READER

THE EXODUS, AMERICA'S EVER-PRESENT INSPIRATION

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There will be no cream cheese on matzah sandwiches eaten out of Ziploc bags at Six Flags Great Adventure this year. *Hol ha-Moed*, the intermediate days of Passover, usually a Semitic Spring Break of sorts for many Jewish parents and children taking off from work and school the length of the eight-day holiday, is missing its usual wheel-spinning activity - whether of the Ferris variety or those of next year's Fiats and Fords at the NY Auto Show, which would normally be held at NYC's Javits Center, instead now serving as a [makeshift hospital](#). Foregoing the Passover privileges of years past, we instead find ourselves anxiously awaiting updates on health and resources. While across the globe individuals process how best to survive, physically and spiritually, perhaps a measure of solace can be found in the midst of our social distancing by recalling that throughout the history of the United States, and even during its pre-history, when faced with uncertainty, danger, and personal and communal hardships, Americans have turned to the story of the Exodus for inspiration.

Roughly 130 years after Christopher Columbus had written in his diary of the intimidating physical dangers he and his crew faced, "The rising of the sea was very formidable to me as it happened formerly to Moses when he led the Jews from Egypt," the Pilgrim William Bradford likened his fellow Mayflower passengers' journey to "Moses and the Israelites when they went out of Egypt." John Winthrop, one of the Puritan founders of Massachusetts Bay Colony, compared his departure for New England to how the Lord "carried the Israelites into the wilderness and made them forget the fleshpots of Egypt." For these men of faith, whose compatriots and communities were plagued by disease, hunger, and harsh physical conditions, the bridge they envisioned through troubled waters was a literal one, the protective path the Lord had cleared for the Israelites through the Reed Sea and wilderness three millennia earlier.

The role of the Exodus in articulating the very idea of America extended through its first citizens' view of their Revolution and its villain, an "unnatural" nemesis sowing societal disunity. England's King George III was their Pharaoh. Thomas Paine referred to the British monarch as the "hardened, sullen-tempered Pharaoh of England." And Minister Elijah Fitch preached in a March 1776 sermon, "The means, that our unnatural enemies have made us of, to bring and keep us under their power and control, are much the same which Pharaoh, Egypt's haughty Monarch used, and they have as yet

had the same effect: Their schemes to oppress, divide, and then subjugate these Colonies, have served to unite our hearts, as one man, to cast off the burthens they have been imposing upon us." As scholar James P. Byrd has [documented](#), the third-most-cited biblical text during the Revolutionary War was Exodus 15's "Song of the Sea," the victorious hymn proclaimed by the Israelites after God had drowned the Egyptians at the Reed Sea - the chapter that has served every year (alas, besides the present one) as the central component of the synagogue Torah reading on the seventh day of Passover. During the Revolutionary Era, the hope for survival in the midst of uncertain chances was that the Lord would once again hear the cries of the oppressed, as He had done in Egypt.

God and Moses' partnership, was, for early presidents, the model of governmental leadership they hoped to embody. In writing to his beloved Abigail on May 17, 1776 about a sermon that he had heard which featured "a Parallel between the Case of Israel and that of America, and between the conduct of Pharaoh and that of George," John Adams seems to have pondered his own Moses-like role in America's freedom, writing "Is it not a Saying of Moses, who am I, that I should go in and out before this great People?" Despite Adams' affinity for the Exodus story, it was two other Founding Fathers who proposed that the seal of the United States reflect its rootedness in the story of Israel's redemption. Benjamin Franklin suggested "Moses [in the dress of a high priest] standing on the shore, and extending his hand over the sea, thereby causing the same to overwhelm Pharaoh who is sitting in an open Chariot." Thomas Jefferson chose the Israelites in the wilderness being led by a cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night, the manifestation of the Lord's protection against enemies both seen and unseen. After the Revolution's end, it was George Washington who, in American minds, best represented the hero of the now United States' founding narrative of deliverance. Pastor Eli Forbes, in his eulogy of Washington, the reluctant leader who led his people to victory over Pharaonic-like tyranny, encapsulated this analogy by referring to the biblical Moses as "the Washington of Israel."

The abolitionist cause also rested on the broken chains of the ancient Israelite slaves. Spirituals with titles like "Go Down, Moses" and "Didn't Old Pharaoh Get Lost" were sung by countless cotton-pickers yearning for liberation. Harriet Tubman's authorized biography appeared under the title [Harriet Tubman: The Moses of Her People](#). And Frederick Douglass, at an abolitionist rally on July 4, 1852, reminded Americans of the responsibility that lay in their freedom by explicitly evoking the Jewish festival, saying "This, to you, is what the Passover was to the emancipated people of God. It carries your minds back to the day, and to the act of your great deliverance; and to the signs, and to the wonders, associated with that act, and that day." He urged American slaveholders to rid themselves of the

“blindness which seems to be the unvarying characteristic of tyrants, since Pharaoh and his hosts were drowned in the Red Sea.” The very *Seder* ritual itself served as sacred succor for those in uniform fighting slavery. The *Jewish Messenger*, in 1862, published an account from one J. A. Joel of the 23rd Ohio Volunteer Regiment of a Passover celebration by Union soldiers in Fayette, West Virginia. In it, Joel recalls what seems to have constituted a particularly enthusiastic, albeit unintentional, fulfillment of the *Haggadah’s* commandment to imagine oneself as if he left Egypt:

We all had a large portion of the [*maror*] herb ready to eat at the moment I said the blessing; each eat [sic] his portion, when horrors! what a scene ensued in our little congregation, it is impossible for my pen to describe. The herb was very bitter and very fiery like Cayenne pepper, and excited our thirst to such a degree, that we forgot the law authorizing us to drink only four cups, and the consequence was we drank up all the cider. Those that drank the more freely became excited, and one thought he was Moses, another Aaron, and one had the audacity to call himself Pharaoh. The consequence was a skirmish, with nobody hurt, only Moses, Aaron and Pharaoh, had to be carried to the camp...

Transitioning, at the end of his story, from the humorous to the heavenly, Joel concluded, “I doubt whether the spirits of our forefathers, had they been looking down on us, standing there with our arms by our side ready for an attack, faithful to our God and our cause, would have imagined themselves amongst mortals, enacting this commemoration of the scene that transpired in Egypt.”

Following the assassination of Abraham Lincoln, which, as historian Jonathan Sarna has [noted](#), occurred during the holiday of Passover, the Great Liberator was eulogized throughout the country as a Moses-like figure. Reverend J.E. Rankin of Boston lamented, “In Abraham Lincoln God gave us just the man to take us safely through the last stages of the rebellion. But the nation had now reached the Jordan, beyond which were sterner duties... We have passed the Red Sea and the wilderness, and have had unmistakable pledges that we shall occupy that land of Union, Liberty, and Peace which flows with milk and honey.” A few days after Lincoln’s death, his body was laid inside Philadelphia’s Independence Hall directly beside the Liberty Bell and its call to “Proclaim liberty throughout all the land, unto all the inhabitants thereof,” a line from Leviticus delivered by God to Moses during the Israelites’ sojourn in the desert, a promise of freedom for those who would be enslaved in the future. A time in which the very social fabric of America had been torn in two, and countless individuals yearned for liberty from their constraints, was viewed through the prism of Passover.

The modern Civil Rights movement, too, evoked biblical Israel and its successful navigation of anxiety, fear, and constant danger. Then-candidate Barack Obama referred to the “Moses generation” of leaders, including Martin Luther King Jr. and John Lewis, who had paved the path to his presidential campaign.

Thus, throughout American history, the Passover story has served as a timeless and timely source of spiritual sustenance. From the Mayflower to Martin Luther King Jr.’s Moses-like vision of the Promised Land from atop the mountain, to our current moment, its miraculous mix of God’s divine intervention alongside courageous human leadership has enabled anxious eyes to look towards a redemptive future. As Princeton political philosopher Michael Walzer has [written](#), “[m]any men and women, believing in God’s mighty

hand, have nevertheless girded their loins, challenged the pharaohs of their own time, marched into the wilderness – and understood what they were doing by reading Exodus... marching through the world to a better place within it.”

This year, our marching consists of staying put, assuming we are not providing crucial medical care and support (may the Lord protect those on the front lines with a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night). During what seem to be the current interminably intermediate days, bracketed between nights recalling an ancient salvation and nervously awaiting one yet to come, the tale that has always served as the [unifying American story](#) can still, despite our current physical distance, “unite our hearts.”

On the second night of Passover, we began counting the *Omer*, marking 50 days until the holiday of *Shavuot*. That holiday commemorates Moses receiving the Torah at Sinai, at which time the nation of Israel, the medieval commentator Rashi tells us, was united as “one nation, with one heart.” Americans, like the ancient Israelites, have survived plagues and hunger. We have navigated uncertain waters and wildernesses. We have made it to the mountain. And we have united around the promise of our land. The sunken wheels of Egyptians chariots were followed by songs of salvation. And we will sing again soon.

CLIMATE CHANGE AND PRAYERS FOR RAIN AND DEW

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Weather concerns are a consideration in just about every decision we make each day. What to wear, how much time it will take to get to work, the timing of vacations, planning family celebrations – each one is impacted by our expectation and hope for what the weather will be. Therefore, it comes as no surprise that weather is a prominent part of our daily liturgy. We officially begin to pray for rain on *Shemini Atzeret* and start saying *mashiv haru'ach u-morid ha-geshem* right after (or during) *musaf* that day. But we delay the actual request for rain for a few weeks. In Israel, they delay for three weeks in commemoration of the concern for ancient travelers who the Rabbis wanted to be sure returned home safely from their holiday pilgrimage to Jerusalem. Outside of Israel, rain was not needed as urgently. Therefore, the liturgical practice was to wait until 60 days passed after the fall equinox, the last date when wood was brought into people’s homes (*Ta’anit* 10a). For complicated calendrical reasons, we actually defer inserting the phrase, “*ve-tein tal u-matar*,” the definitive ask, until December 4th (or the 5th this past year). We stick with this formulation for several months through the winter. Then, with the approach of spring and *Pesah*, we switch gears and prepare to pray for dew. On the first day of *Pesah* we incorporate a prayer for dew into the *musaf* prayer and resume saying *morid ha-tal* (in some traditions) and *ve-tein berakhah* after the holiday. This year, as we watch spring unfold outside our windows, it seems like an opportune time to examine how we might consider prayers for good weather throughout the year.

Rain consists of liquid droplets that have condensed from atmospheric water vapor and fall to earth by gravity when they become heavy enough. Concern about rain features prominently throughout *Sukkot* and reaches a culmination on *Hoshanah Rabbah*, the last day of the holiday, and on *Shemini Atzeret*. Examination of

the lengthy *hoshanot* prayers we recite on the seventh day of *Sukkot* reveals that concern about the full spectrum of bad weather is a prominent feature in the poetic and allusive but often-skipped prayers. There is a great deal of focus on water and the nutritive power of rain. We recall the many Biblical characters who were saved by rain or destroyed by floods and drought. Yet, while rain is the primary focus, we also pray that we should be spared windstorms, and pestilence, and a frightening litany of agricultural disasters.

What about dew? We start to pray for dew in the spring, perhaps in anticipation of several consecutive hot, rain-free months in Israel, when dew seems to be the only form of moisture available in the environment. As a meteorological phenomenon, dew is more mundane than rain. It is comprised of water droplets that imperfectly wet the surface on which they condense. Unlike rain, dew is experienced daily. The formation of dew is connected to a number of local physical phenomena occurring at the ground level. Unlike rain, which reflects recycling of water from the ground through the atmosphere and is an impressive natural phenomenon, the formation of dew appears to be inevitable, virtually automatic, simple condensation of water from the early morning air, a minor occurrence. Perhaps, that is why the prayer for dew is a brief, one-day affair and somewhat generic. It lacks the pomp and personality of *tefilat geshem*. Nonetheless, how dew gets started in the first place is still mysterious¹. Although growth of an assembly of dew droplets is better understood, the formation and expansion of an isolated droplet still remains poorly explained. It would be a mistake to dismiss dew as inconsequential. Dew generates free water in the environment. It is easily absorbed by plant leaves and maintains leaf moisture in the tree canopy². Dew has been found to account for almost half of the water content of three plant species that grow in the Negev³. All things considered, there is still space for prayer.

Along with sun, wind, and snow, rain and dew are how we experience the weather. Although we moderns are not as mindful as our ancestors were, the weather is still an imposing force. Hurricane Sandy shut down a major medical system for months. Flights are frequently cancelled and transportation services are shut down for days by ice storms. Extreme heat spells and poor air quality linked to temperature inversions kill the elderly and sick⁴. Large swaths of forest catch fire and burn out of control each summer. The Los Angeles hills and Australian outback seem so parched that even the early morning ground is dewless, dry to the touch.

We live in a world where only a small minority of the population is engaged in working the land and those who do often operate huge parcels of land owned by mega-corporations with computerized machines. Urban dwellers are distant from these concerns. Even in an electronically linked world, we live far away from people whose lives depend on the earth's seasonal productivity and cyclical changes. What are we to make of this disconnect and can we relate to the

¹ Morena Ustulin, Changwon Keum, Junghoon Woo, Jeong-taek Woo, Sang Youl Rhee, "[Effects of climatic variables on weight loss: a global analysis](#)," *Scientific Reports* 7 (2017): 40708.

² <https://www.hindawi.com/journals/amete/2015/104048>.

³ AJ Hill, TE Dawson, O Shelef, S Rachmilevitch, "[The role of dew in Negev Desert plants](#)," *Oecologia* 178:2 (June 2015): 317-27.

⁴ TT Trinh, TT Trinh, TT Le, TDH Nguyen, BM Tu "[Temperature inversion and air pollution relationship, and its effects on human health in Hanoi City, Vietnam](#)," *Environ Geochem Health* 41:2 (April 2019):923-37.

prayers for rain and fair weather on *Sukkot* and throughout the winter, and for dew in the spring on *Pesah*?

I propose that addressing the question of climate change in a thoughtful manner is one meaningful way to close this gap. This is a multifaceted, multinational problem that will require integration of a wide array of activities. Information about trends in weather and impact on the biosphere must be systematically assembled and analyzed. Medical and economic costs need to be calculated. People need to be educated about the impact of their activity on climate changes. Political will must be marshalled to define feasible and equitable approaches to dealing with this global challenge. These are monumental tasks and will require all of human ingenuity to tackle and solve. It will be human beings who feel themselves enjoined and empowered to protect the planet and its resources for future generations who will get the job done.

But humility must also come into play. One can argue the scientific facts about the amount and rate and main contributors to the accumulation of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere, the impact of acidification on the oceans, the changing dimensions of the polar ice caps, the infectious disease implications of the expansion of the ecosystem for disease bearing animals and the spread of ticks to higher latitudes⁵. No computer modeling or simulation is able to fully capture the multidimensional aspects of these interlocked global problems or to provide foolproof answers. The sociopolitical factors will be very complicated and require patience and compromise to achieve a thoughtful balance. Regardless, it would be irresponsible to ignore the issue.

Many who question the rate of global warming and the nature of the threat it represents claim that human ingenuity will prevail and will find a solution. They assert that the earth has experienced significant fluctuations in atmospheric conditions and temperature in the past and endured. It is as if to say, "Don't worry so much. Climate change is a manageable problem like any other." They do not suffer from any "ecoanxiety," a diagnosis granted formal status by the American Psychological Association⁶. However, brushing off concern about worrisome changes in the weather as naïve angst may be a relatively moderate way of dismissing the issue. There is a newer and more troubling trend in which expressions of urgency about meteorological problems are dismissed as a form of misguided religious belief. Those who question climate change mock the predictions of impending doom and the eschatological tone of many of those who advocate for efforts to slow the trend in global warming. They dismiss the moralistic tone of environmentalists who endorse large-scale changes in human behavior and lifestyle. In a recent article in *Commentary* (November 2019, "[The religion of climatism: a new faith emerges](#)"), Josef Joffe criticized those who champion a greener worldview as having an "unflinching certainty," similar to the faith that Martin Luther espoused. Writing in *Law and Liberty*, [Paul Schwennessen claims](#) that environmentalists are adopting a quasi-religious tone that easily lends itself to the adoption of coercive actions directed by a central authority. Concerns about the environment are compared unfavorably to other fanatical belief systems. These critics overlook the measured prose of Bill McKibben, who has written "In the world

⁵ Goudarz Molaei, Eliza A.H. Little, Scott C. Williams, Kirby C. Stafford, "[Bracing for the Worst - Range Expansion of the Lone Star Tick in the Northeastern United States](#)," *New England Journal of Medicine* 381:23 (December 5, 2019):2189-2192.

⁶ Nitin K. Ahuja, "[Health and High Water](#)," *New England Journal of Medicine* 381:23 (December 5, 2019):2196-2197.

we grew up in, our most ingrained economic and political habit was growth; it's the reflex we're going to have to temper, and it's going to be tough⁷. Or Elizabeth Kolbert, who has stated, "With the capacity to represent the world in signs and symbols comes the capacity to change it, which, as it happens, is also the capacity to destroy it. A tiny set of genetic variations divides us from the Neanderthals, but that has made all the difference⁸." Challenging words to be sure, but humane and direct.

The view that concern about climate change is irrational zealotry distorts a genuine religious sensibility toward the environment and mankind's responsibility to protect it. The prayers we say on *Hoshanah Rabbah*, *Shemini Atzeret*, *Pesah*, and throughout the year are not magical incantations to be invoked as a means of bailing us out of environmental difficulties. The catastrophes they detail are not blind threats. They are an acknowledgement that nature is a divine gift for which we should be grateful but in which we play a significant part through our activities. Moreover, they embody the covenantal relationship between God and the Jewish people – do the right thing and things will work out well. If not, beware the consequences.

Neither science nor religion ever have access to all the facts or perfect solutions. Life is always changing, the past is never a perfect guide to the future, and the unexpected is the rule. Witness the coronavirus pandemic sweeping the globe as I write. But it demeans human rationality not to listen to the facts, weigh the evidence, and do what can be done to minimize threats to one's self and to others. As I said earlier in outlining the all-encompassing activity that will be needed to address climate change, it will require a combination of human power and humility. This reflects the philosophical sketch of human beings that Rabbi Soloveitchik drew in *The Lonely Man of Faith*⁹. The Rav was appreciative of the force of human intellect and creativity in confronting the world and asserting control over it. However, he underscored that science is not intrinsically moral and warned against hubris in applying technology.

This message should resonate as we deal with climate change. When Adam and Havah were placed in Gan Eden they were commanded to work it and protect it. They were granted the creative power (Adam/Havah I) to change and master the environment to serve their needs. But they were forced to acknowledge their limitations as finite mortals (Adam/Havah II). The human capacity to engage nature and alter the world is genuine but never comprehensive. Adam II looks upward and recognizes how miniscule he is in the universe that surrounds him. This sense of awe and scale serves as an antidote to any human notion of independent control of her existence.

We moderns must acknowledge the same dialectic as we pray for good weather and confront climate change. That means we must collect the relevant data, analyze it as thoughtfully and as comprehensively as possible. Then we need to define the causes, design effective solutions and spread the burden as equitably as possible. But we must always be aware of our limitations. Concerns about climate change reinforce human responsibility as humble stewards of the planet. As Jews, it plays out in our commitment to a good life that protects men and women and their God-given home on

⁷ Bill McKibben, *Eaarth: Making a Life on a Tough New Planet* (New York: Henry Holt & Co., 2010), 241.

⁸ Elizabeth Kolbert, *The Sixth Extinction: An Unnatural History*, (New York: Henry Holt & Co., 2014), 319.

⁹ Joseph B. Soloveitchik, "The Lonely Man of Faith," *Tradition* 7:2 (Summer 1965): 32. [Republished](#) by Random House.

Earth. Incorporating these environmental messages into ongoing educational programs could enhance our appreciation of the holiday of *Sukkot* and *Pesah* and our daily prayers about the weather.

WHEREFORE ART THOU, MOSES?

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The Yes, [Shakespeare wrote King Lear during a plague](#)— a remembrance that has been circulating on the internet, particularly among academics reeling from canceled spring conferences and the abrupt transition to online teaching. Naturally, the presence of [pestilence in Shakespeare's works](#) and the influence of outbreaks on the playwright's productivity and professional development have drawn attention. And for good reason.

Social distancing hasn't stopped teachers, performers, and readers of Shakespeare from coming together virtually and sharing messages of hope on social media. In launching the [#ShakespeareChallenge](#) on Twitter last month, Simon Godwin professed that "in moments of crisis we need Shakespeare to guide the way." In a hushed video recorded while her three-year-old daughter napped, [Michelle Terry](#), Artistic Director of The Globe, claimed that there is no industry as resilient, creative, or collaborative as the performing arts to "take on this challenge." Yet this pattern, or reflex, of turning to Shakespeare for answers to contemporary social, cultural, political, and environmental urgencies certainly predates COVID 19.

For [Emma Smith](#), Shakespeare offers audiences a "narrative vaccine" by redirecting focus from the obliterating obscurity of deadly diseases to "humane uniqueness" and the import of the individual. What makes Shakespeare a panacea, as James Shapiro demonstrates in [Shakespeare in a Divided America](#), is that his plays offer a rare yet fertile common ground for exploring a variety of human responses to a host of human problems. From grief to governance and beyond, the works of Shakespeare have been mined for their timeless insights and assurances.

With Passover, Easter, and Ramadan approaching, like many people I am not sure about how best to observe holidays predicated on gatherings of family and community in light of current restrictions designed to protect the most vulnerable members of our families and communities. The Jewish festival of Passover, in particular, commemorates redemption and the construction of a shared identity. Its practices and liturgy are bound with notions of connectedness, collective memory, and intergenerational continuity. With hospitals filled, synagogues empty, and travel plans canceled, Passover in isolation feels like an oxymoron.

The *Haggadah*, the traditional text read over the course of the *Seder*, opens with an invitation: "Let all who are hungry come in and eat. Let all who are in need come and join us." This hospitable injunction is sure to reverberate more solemnly this year from within the closed doors of our homes. And amidst my downscaled holiday preparations, I found myself wondering: if Shakespeare is indeed the "be all end all," perhaps he can shed light on how to celebrate Passover in quarantine.

While scholars including [Julia Lupton and David Goldstein](#) have explored the risks and affordances of hospitality in Shakespeare that

carry over into our own time, I have yet to discover a direct reference to Passover, or the Last Supper, in the plays. However, invocations of the Exodus abound.

The bard's extensive knowledge of the bible has been studied for centuries. As [Hannibal Hamlin](#) notes, "there was no biblical book, including the Apocrypha, to which he did not allude." In *Twelfth Night*, when Maria and her entourage humiliate Malvolio by locking him in a cramped dark chamber and making him think he's gone mad, Feste taunts the presumptuous steward saying "thou art more puzzled than the Egyptians in their fog" (4.2.45).¹⁰ As *You Like It's* melancholy Jaques threatens to "rail against all the first-born of Egypt" (2.5.59) if his sleep is disturbed and Lorenzo thanks Portia for gifting him with the deed to Shylock's estate by saying "you drop manna in the way / Of starvèd people" (*The Merchant of Venice* 5.1.315).

Shakespeare's heroines also invoke the drama of the Exodus for heightened rhetorical efficacy. In *All's Well that Ends Well*, Helen persuades an ailing, stubborn king to let her try an experimental cure by recalling the supernatural wonders of Moses drawing water from the rock and the splitting of the Red Sea: "Great floods have flown / From simple sources, and great seas have dried / When miracles have by the great'st been denied (2.1.157-159).¹¹ Most appropriately, in *Antony and Cleopatra* (also written while the playhouses were closed during an outbreak), the tragic queen beckons the plagues of locusts ("flies" in the Geneva Bible), hail, and death of her firstborn son to afflict her as they did the biblical Egyptians. She counters Antony's accusation of betrayal by proclaiming that if she has been disloyal, "Let heaven engender hail... The next Caesarion smite, / Till by degrees the memory of my womb, / Together with my brave Egyptians all... Lie graveless till the flies and gnats of the Nile / Have buried them for prey" (3.13.195 - 204).

There are far more references to the Exodus than can be cataloged here, and no doubt more yet to be identified by the discerning ear. In a recent Zoom class on *The Tempest*, my students, who, much like Shakespeare's audience, have been exposed to biblical literature from a young age through their parochial education and religious leaders, said that Prospero's conjured storm— with "sky, it seems, would pour down stinking pitch, / But that the sea, mounting to th' welkin's cheek, / Dashes the fire out" (1.2.3-5)— reminded them of the seventh plague in which "Moses stretched out his rod... So there was hail, and fire mingled with the hail, so grievous, as there was none throughout all the land" (Exodus 9:23-24).

And where does Moses, the hero of the Passover narrative, appear in Shakespeare? The bard's ability to "cite Scripture for his purpose" (*Merchant* 1.3.107) is especially visible when his characters mention biblical personalities by name— an economical means of activating and illuminating a play's thematic concerns for his 16th and 17th-century audience. Adam, Abraham, Jacob, Noah, Job, Jesus, and Paul come up in multiple plays. Yet aside from a passing remark about an off-stage outlaw named "Moyses" in *Two Gentlemen of Verona*, believed to be Shakespeare's first play, the Hebraic Moses— arguably the central protagonist of the Old Testament and a prominent figure in Renaissance cultural consciousness— seems conspicuously absent from the playwright's work.

¹⁰ All references to Shakespeare works are from the [Folger Digital Texts](#).

¹¹ All scriptural references are from the [Geneva Bible](#), which most scholars agree is the bible Shakespeare consulted most often.

Moses is noticeably missing from another key text: the *Haggadah*. Aside from a verse quoted by Rabbi Yossi the Galilean in a section discussing the miracles performed during the Exodus, which notes that "the people believed in God and in His servant Moses" (Exodus.14:31), Moses is not mentioned at the *Seder* table.¹²

It's hard to say which is more astounding: the monumental role Moses plays in the saga of Jewish life and continuity or the fact that his achievements are denied ceremonial recognition. Following the patriarchs of Genesis, Moses is the Israelites' first political leader, a divine appointment he famously refuses in his conversation with God at the burning bush: "Who am I, that I should go unto Pharaoh, and that I should bring the children of Israel out of Egypt?" (Exodus 3:11). As a humanities teacher, I am fascinated by the Old Testament's invitation to engage in character analysis within its own narrative. Moses's epic struggle with identity and destiny must have captured Shakespeare's imagination. The bard's most compelling characters, including Hamlet, Lear, and Macbeth, all confront obstacles that prompt them to ask *who am I* and *why me?* When Juliet discovers she's fallen in love with the only son of her family's sworn enemies, she quickly grasps the turmoil that ensues when identity comes into conflict with individual will. Her poignant meditation, "Romeo, Romeo, wherefore art thou, Romeo?" (2.2.36) asks not *where* is Romeo, but *why* Romeo? Why him? Why me? Why now?

For Shakespeare's characters, feeling choiceless leads to tragedy, but being forced to reckon with one's circumstances and selfhood can also be a catalyst to greatness. Like Moses himself, readers of the bible have sought to understand why he was able to connect with the divine so intimately? To singularly speak to God "face to face, as a man speaketh unto his friend" (Exodus 33:11)? Put another way, *wherefore art thou, Moses?*

It is far beyond me to tackle a question that Jewish, Christian, and Islamic exegetes and scholars across disciplines have been grappling with for centuries. The reception and representation of the life of Moses significantly shaped Judeo-Christian theology and the trajectory of Western civilization. As Jane Beal shows in [Illuminating Moses](#), "Moses shaped community standards and influenced the exercise of individual piety for over a thousand years among groups of people who differed widely in geographical location, ethnic language, and religious convictions."

In Shakespeare's time, Moses offered Catholics and Protestants alike a model for authorship and hermeneutics, education and worship, and lawmaking and leadership. In Moses, Erasmus found a fellow contemplative, Tyndale a fellow translator, and Philip Sidney a fellow poet. In the Christian tradition, typological readings of the Old Testament present Jesus as a "Second Moses"; just as Moses led the Israelites out of Egypt, Jesus led humanity out of sin, through which

¹² One popular explanation for this bewildering omission is that the redactors of the *Haggadah* exclude Moses lest readers mistakenly come to believe that the Jews' liberation from slavery, survival in the desert, and formation as a nation were all carried out *by* Moses rather than *through* Moses. Another complementary interpretation of Moses's absence from the *Seder* script is derived from the last part of the *Haggadah* which states: "In every generation a person is obligated to see himself as having himself come out of Egyptian bondage." The observance, or *mitzvah*, of Passover is fulfilled by recognizing that redemption is not a past event orchestrated by a larger-than-life historical figure, but an ongoing personal endeavor.

the law was superseded by grace. Yet the most widely acknowledged of Moses's virtues is his trademark humility: "Moses was a very meek man above all the men that were upon the earth" (Numbers 12:3). In the modern age, humility is not a quality readily identified in our leaders, and yet, this is the very trait that comes to the fore for Moses in times of national crisis.

Just weeks after being freed from the bonds of Egyptian slavery, the Israelites provoke the wrath of God by forging the Golden Calf. When God tells Moses he plans to wipe out the population with a plague and create a new nation from Moses's offspring, Moses pleads, "I pray thee, erase me out of thy book, which thou hast written" (Exodus 32:32). Moses's cryptic response underscores a hallmark of leadership. Most commentators agree that Moses challenges God saying that if He fails to show mercy to the Israelites, He should erase Moses from the Torah (Pentateuch), effectively volunteering to remove himself from history. According to the 15th-century rabbinic commentator Ovadiah Seforno, the "book" Moses is referring to is the "Book of Life," and it is Moses's intention to sacrifice himself and exchange any merit he's accumulated for the greater good. Both interpretations imply that ethics cannot hold space for ego.

For Emmanuel Levinas, God's unique "face to face" relationship with Moses gives rise to a transcending humanism in which a trace of the divine is present in the face of the individual, obligating us toward one another. Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks identifies the Jewish mystical concept of *bittul ha-yesh* (the nullification of the self) as a primary marker of leadership and an essential practice in being "open to the Divine, and also the human, Other." Understandably, Moses's legacy— of withdrawal and self-negation despite his power and influence— is better suited for backstage. In the theater, humility doesn't translate well into soliloquy or spectacle. Still, I can't help but imagine that Shakespeare's admiration for the Hebrew prophet and poet, is reflected by honoring Moses's virtuous request to be left out of the "book."

Although the Hebraic Moses is not summoned to the stage by name, Shakespeare signals the presence of the biblical paradigm through verbal echoes and plot parallels. When Henry VIII seeks a divorce from Katherine after twenty years of marriage, Shakespeare presents the English monarch as both Pharaoh and Moses at once through Katherine's tempered admonishment: "You're meek and humble-mouth'd; / You sign your place and calling, in full seeming, / With meekness and humility; but your heart / Is cramm'd with arrogancy, spleen, and pride" (*Henry VIII*, 2.4.119-122).

Scholars have found facets of Moses as lawgiver and performer of wonders in Shakespeare's Prospero, the complex protagonist of *The Tempest*. Other incomplete portraits of Moses based on aspects of his life including a prophecy linked to his birth, being surrendered to the water, and seeking refuge in a foreign land, can be seen in *Cymbeline's* Posthumus and *Pericles's* Marina, whose name means "woman of the sea," as [Marjorie Garber](#) notes in examining the layers of resonance Shakespeare engineers for his early modern audiences. For [Richard Strier](#), nuanced biblical allusions in *The Winter's Tale* to Moses allow Shakespeare to privilege humanistic faith over iconoclasm in the dynamics of the play's miraculous ending.

In all of these plays, considered the late romances in Shakespeare's canon, separated families are reunited, exiles are redeemed, and the healing process is initiated through intergenerational storytelling. Pericles requests that those gathered "stay to hear the rest untold" of what has passed (*Pericles* 5.3.98). Cymbeline gives orders to "publish" news of his family's homecoming "to all our subjects" (*Cymbeline*

5.5.579-80). Leontes requests his companions retire "where we may leisurely / Each one demand and answer to his part / Performed in this wide gap of time since first / We were dissevered" (*The Winter's Tale* 5.3.189-192). And when his company asks to "hear the story" of his life, Prospero promises to "deliver all" (*The Tempest* 5.1.371-372). As a playwright with a profound understanding of language— and whose words are continuously invoked to express the stirrings of our hearts and minds— the charge to "speak loudly" (*Hamlet* 5.2.446) might be seen as Shakespeare's solution to social distancing and societal trauma. While the biblical archetype does not line up with the heroes of Shakespeare's romances, this aspect of Moses's leadership, his oratory ethos, is present.

As an agent and divine interlocutor, Moses speaks and writes a people into existence. When the Israelites are sequestered to their homes during the tenth plague, Moses directs their focus to the stories they will tell and the questions they will answer when the danger has passed: "And when your children ask you, What service is this ye keep? Then ye shall say, It is the sacrifice of the Lord's Passover, which passed over the houses of the children of Israel in Egypt" (Exodus 12:26-27). Throughout the Exodus and beyond, Moses links speech to deliverance and continuity. After he completes the transcription of the Torah, Moses prepares the people for his death by gathering the elders and officers of the nation "that I may speak these words in their audience" (Deuteronomy 31:28). Though the name of Moses is "erased" from Shakespeare's canon, his rhetorical presence is felt at some of the most empowering moments of Shakespeare's works.

For Shakespeare's original audience, the bible did not simply record the ancestry and engagements of a few specific men and women, but rather mankind's continuous effort to understand itself in relation to an ever-changing world. Unlike Shakespeare's foundlings, royals in disguise whose identities are discovered and restored, Moses is not "born great." Still, as the son of Jewish slaves raised and educated in the Egyptian court and married to a Midianite, Moses's multiculturalism attracted Renaissance humanists and, I believe, appealed to a playwright heavily invested in the capacity of language and storytelling to forge connections that transcend time and space.

The word *Haggadah* is Hebrew for "telling," a distinctly human activity that is not limited to a particular period, people, or belief system. Although we might not be able to be face-to-face with those we love right now, we still have the ability to share stories, exchange memories, and invite others into conversations that transform absence into presence and suffering into healing. My hope for this Passover is that these acts of communication will be enough. *Dayenu*.

FELLOWSHIP FROM PLAGUE: LESSONS FROM PASSOVER

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The Few of us have experienced a transition from bondage to freedom, let alone one that was facilitated by a divine hand. As such, it is usually quite a challenge for us to fulfill the *Haggadah's* call “to see oneself as if we left Egypt.” This year, the challenge seems even tougher: with so many of us effectively under house arrest and unable to celebrate with our families, never have we felt so unfree!

Yet I'd like to suggest that our current predicament actually provides us with unusually good insight into the experience of the Exodus, one that makes it easier to understand a seemingly troubling aspect of our ancestors' behavior. Moreover, this insight carries deep lessons for the meaning of Passover and for how we should reckon with today's enormous social challenges. In short, the night of the Exodus included an astounding two-sided act of *eroding social barriers and the myths that support them*, and this act should guide us as we rebuild our post-pandemic society.

The Offer to Share Erodes Status Differences

What “troubling” aspect of the Exodus do I have in mind? The fact that on the night of the last plague, that of the First Born, the Children of Israel stopped on their way out to “borrow” fine utensils and garments from the plague-stricken Egyptians, with no apparent intention to return them. In his review of the millennia-old discussions on this question, R. Elchanan Samet¹³ argues persuasively that the term *she'ilah* should probably not be translated as “borrow” but “share.” But this does not really remove the problem, because sharing implies that the other will also have an opportunity to use the property again, and that was not our ancestors' plan. The ethical tension here does not go away even if one argues that the Israelites were justified in asking for restitution for their stolen labor or that they could no longer give the valuables to the Egyptians to use after the Egyptian Army attacked and caused them to flee across the Sea of Reeds. In short, *if our ancestors knew the plan was never to return, they should have asked for the Egyptian valuables outright!* Indeed, the text also says that we “stripped” ([Exodus 12:36](#)) the Egyptians of their valuables. That seems hard to justify.

In a [Lehrhaus essay written for last Passover](#),¹⁴ I argued that there are strong hints in the biblical text at an answer to this question. The key idea is that there was a deep moral flaw in Egyptian culture, one for which the Egyptian agreement to share with the Hebrews was a fitting correction, or *tikkun*. In brief, the problem with Egyptian culture (at least in the biblical account) was its rigid social hierarchy and especially how it treated strangers—and Hebrews in particular—as beneath them and even as subhuman. The most striking example of this tendency is how Joseph and his brothers (or at least their Hebrew cultural practices such as shepherding) were regarded as *to'evah*—abominable or taboo—such that the Egyptians would not break bread or live with them, even though Joseph had been made a viceroy (see [Genesis 43:32](#); [46:34](#))! The view of the Hebrews' practice as taboo is emphasized again in the Exodus story. After the fourth plague, when Pharaoh finally begins to soften his position and offers that Israel can offer sacrifices in Egypt, Moses counters that

¹³ Elchanan Samet, “[She'ilat Ha-keilim through the Lens of the Apologetic Commentary and the Lens of Other Commentary](#)” (Hebrew), in *Iyunim be-Parshat Hashavuah* Volume 1, Series 2, ed. Elchanan Samet (Jerusalem: Hotza'at Ma'aliyot, 2004).

¹⁴ Ezra W. Zuckerman Sivan, “[Where is the Justice in the Tenth Plague?](#)” *The Lehrhaus* (April 18, 2019). Accessible at <https://thelehrhaus.com/timely-thoughts/where-is-the-justice-in-the-tenth-plague/>.

this is impossible: “It would be an abomination to Egypt that we would sacrifice to the Lord our God; could we sacrifice an abomination to Egypt before their very eyes—wouldn't they stone us?” With this in mind, the reversal of the Egyptians after the tenth plague is astounding. The Israelites follow God's command to slaughter the paschal lamb, committing public abominations right before their Egyptian neighbors. And instead of being seen as offensive and worthy of stoning, Israel and Moses find favor “in [the Egyptians'] eyes,” and the Egyptians willingly share their valuables with them.

Now observe how the sharing—rather than giving or exchanging—by the Egyptians is key to this reversal, and the dismantling of Egyptian hierarchical myths in general. Here's the heart of the explanation I offered in last year's essay:

If the goal is to achieve fellowship between two people, sharing is actually more effective than a gift (even if there is an expectation of reciprocity). Gifts from higher status to lower status members of society are not uncommon; they may be well-intentioned but they also reinforce social hierarchy. What better symbolizes equality is the *exchange* of gifts. And paradoxically, *sharing* is even better for this purpose. Not only does it avoid the problem that the gifts may not be of commensurate value, it can blur the “line of touchability.” If I am willing to use what you have used, to wear what you have worn, I am saying louder and more credibly than words ever could that *I am no better than you*.¹⁵

The “stripping”—*nitzul*—of the Egyptians fits with this theme. Shorn of our garments and especially our finery, we stand naked and without pretense. Accordingly, the other use of this verb occurs later, when Israel repented for the sin of the golden calf and also presented themselves without pretense ([Exodus 33:6](#)). What finery were these ex-slaves wearing then? Presumably, the same finery: they were repeating the act of the Egyptians with parallel significance.

It is worth pondering for a moment how difficult it must have been for the Egyptians to admit that they were no better than the Hebrews. There were apparently cultural myths that went back many generations. And consider (as hinted by the text¹⁶) how these myths must have been reinforced over the years of bondage. As in other caste societies (e.g., the Jim Crow south), it undoubtedly would have carried significant social risks for Egyptians to do anything that could be construed by their peers as treating the Hebrews as equals. And yet somehow at that moment, they saw the truth. Indeed, the text takes pains to emphasize that the Egyptians did not hand over their valuables under duress. Indeed, the biblical term to “favor in one's eyes” consistently means something like *to see beyond one's default, negative assessment of someone and appreciate something under the surface*.¹⁷ The Egyptian willingness to share depended on their recognizing that the Egyptian hierarchical myths were just that, and that the Torah's message that all are equal before God was true.

The Request to Share Erodes Social Distance

The theory so far only considers the issue from one side—i.e., why sharing by the Egyptians is a fitting correction to their culture's

¹⁵ [Ibid.](#), section beginning “The Tenth Plague as Antidote for Egyptian Taboos.”

¹⁶ [Ibid.](#)

¹⁷ [Ibid.](#)

problematic flaws. But what about Israel's actions? One possible answer is that in fact, there is something problematic in what Israel did; accordingly, there is strong evidence that one month later, Israel suffered from a severe bout of survivor's guilt.¹⁸

My own personal experience of the pandemic this year has led me to recognize yet another angle on this question, one that suggests that just as the Egyptians undertook a remarkable act of myth-breaking fellowship, our ancestors did the same.

What do I have in mind?

The key is to consider our current experience of sheltering-in-place to protect ourselves from a plague, and use it to imagine what it would have been like to live through the night of the tenth plague. Just as then, we are cowering in fear before the "plague destroyer" ([Exodus 12:13](#)). Just as then, it feels as if "there is a loud cry" in the land as there is "no house where there is not someone" stricken down by the plague ([Exodus 12:30](#)). Just as then, the plague is (as [New York Gov. Andrew Cuomo recently put it](#)) the "great equalizer."¹⁹

And just as then, we are in our homes, with our doorways as our main protection. A major incident in my home recently was when a miscommunication about our protocol in receiving deliveries led to a stranger being admitted to our home and a package being dropped off; this took less than a minute but it was the source of significant anxiety. My guess is that this would be true in your home as well. And this reaction would have been unthinkable for any of us just weeks ago.

Now let us consider the scene at our ancestors' doors as if we were there. In the midst of this terrifying plague, word somehow gets to you (via a terrifying knock on the door perhaps) that Moses says it's time to leave—in the middle of the night, even though Moses had explicitly said that "no man should leave the doorway to his home until morning"—that until morning, only the blood (from the paschal lamb) on the doorway would provide protection from the "destroying plague" ([Exodus 12:22-23](#)). And now, not only must you muster the courage to go through that doorway, not only must you go before you are well-provisioned for the perilous journey ahead, you must take a detour to your neighbors' plague-stricken houses and ask to borrow their valuables ([Exodus 12:34-35](#))!

What would you do? Would you stay in your homes or would you follow Moses's new instructions?²⁰ If you were married, would you

¹⁸ Ezra W. Zuckerman Sivan, "[Why Do We Deserve God's Favor?](#)" *The Lehrhaus*, (January 25, 2018). *Accessible at* <https://thelehrhaus.com/scholarship/why-do-we-deserve-gods-favor/>.

¹⁹ "From the firstborn of Pharaoh sitting on his throne, to the firstborn of the maidservant behind the millstones, to every first-born of the livestock" ([Exodus 11:5](#)); "every firstborn in the land of Egypt, from man up to and including livestock" ([Exodus 12:12](#)); and "from the first-born of Pharaoh sitting on his throne to the first-born of the captive, who is in the dungeon (*beit ha-bar*), and every first-born of the livestock" ([Exodus 12:29](#)).

²⁰ While the idea of approaching their Egyptian neighbors to share their valuables had come up twice before ([Exodus 3:22](#); [11:2](#)), these are communications between God and Moses; there is no evidence that he had yet told the people this, and good reason to think that he had not, as he did not include it in his instructions to them about what to do on the night of the Exodus ([12:21-27](#)).

and your spouse have an easy time working this out between the two of you? Would you head out in the middle of a plague when it seems that you and your family are safe in your home? Would you do so when it seems that your household has been spared by a protective measure that you would be leaving behind? And would you head into a home that was struck by the plague in order to interact with these people? Would you ask to share the very clothing they were recently wearing? Would you ask to use the utensils they had recently used?

One does not need to know about the germ theory of disease in order to be extremely reluctant to do these things. As discussed in two recent *Lehrhaus* essays (by [Miriam Reisler](#) and [Jeremy Brown](#)), the Talmud ([Bava Kama 60a](#)) recommends that one should shelter in place during a plague, and the idea is likely quite ancient. The proof-text for the Talmud is this very story. The implication is that the smart thing to do in this situation is to stay indoors! And if staying in your home is just common sense, that's *kal va-homer* (a fortiori) the case for not going into someone else's plague-stricken home and interacting with them and using their things. *Who would do that?*

The obvious answer is: someone who was confident that this was not any plague but a divine one, one that was targeted and from which everyone but those targeted would be protected. Moreover, one would have to be highly confident in God's human emissaries, the elders who had transmitted Moses's original instructions ([Exodus 12:21](#)) and those who were knocking on your door now, even though their instructions had been updated (leaving at night, approaching the plague-stricken Egyptians).²¹

Just as the Egyptians needed to get over their abomination of the Hebrews and the myths that supported it, our ancestors would have had to get over their fear of the randomness of plague and of catching it from the families of those stricken by it. They also would have needed to transcend their instinct to believe that the blood of the paschal lamb had magical powers. They would have to believe there was in fact divine logic underlying what was going on, such that neither they nor their Egyptian neighbors (except for their first born) were threatened.

To be sure, just as the Egyptians would have had good reason by the tenth plague to doubt the myths about Hebrew inferiority they had imbibed from childhood, our ancestors would have had corresponding reason to believe that God was in the process of redeeming them. After all, they had largely been spared from the earlier plagues. Moreover, they had taken the very big step of slaughtering the paschal lamb and they had not been attacked. And finally and crucially, the elders had told them in advance that the tenth plague would happen tonight and that they would be spared—which was indeed the case so far. But with all that, it still would have been a big step to venture out that door and approach the Egyptians with the request to share their valuables. And yet they did take that step, apparently because they had sufficient confidence that they could see beyond surface appearances.

Put differently, just as the Egyptian willingness to share with our ancestors represents an act of fellowship that disrupts traditional status hierarchy and its supporting myths, our ancestors' willingness to enter Egyptian homes and ask to share with them represents an act of *fellowship that disrupts the social distancing-based myths*

²¹ Various commentators suggest that they in fact did not leave until the morning. But this is not the plain meaning of the text, which states that the Egyptians "hurried them out at night" ([Exodus 12:33](#)).

associated with plague. The request to share and the agreement to share thus was a two-sided act that effectively undermined critical age-old myths about social barriers: the stranger as inferior; the stranger as source of contamination.

Conclusion

Let us conclude with two implications for how we think about Passover and the Exodus, and then with implications for our post-pandemic world.

First, as we read just a few days ago, the *Haggadah* tells us that we eat matzah on Passover “because there wasn’t enough time for our ancestors’ dough to rise before the Blessed One Holy be He revealed Himself to them and redeemed them.” But why is the fact that they left before their dough rose so significant? Perhaps it’s because it signifies their willingness to leave the apparent protection of their homes and venture into plague-stricken ones with the faith that God was behind the plague and that He, not their blood-coated doorways, was their protector. Together with their willingness to sacrifice the paschal lamb and risk Egyptian opprobrium, this act of leaving at a time and in a manner that ran against their every instinct signals that our ancestors were active partners in their redemption.²² This explanation is consistent with the interpretation of the crucial verse of [Exodus 13:8](#), as “it is in merit of this set of actions by Israel (symbolized by the unrisen dough) that God did this for me when I left Egypt.”

Second, while the theory developed here emphasizes the pro-social symbolism of a request to “share” from someone who would otherwise be shunned, it is still hard to be comfortable with the idea of asking to share something when you do not plan on returning it or with “stripping” your neighbors. At a narrow level, it is worth recalling that the real test of Israel’s intentions to share never occurred. This test was obviated by Pharaoh’s move to mobilize the “people” to support a cavalry attack on our unarmed ancestors in order to re-enslave them despite the fact that they had turned back, with no clear plan for exiting the country ([Exodus 14:1-5](#)). Once our ancestors were forced to flee across the Sea of Reeds, there was no turning back.

But at a deeper level, the question remains, and perhaps is meant to resonate through the ages. Consider a framing of it that makes it quite contemporary: When another people rejects your request that you share valuable property to which you both have claim, and attacks you instead, what do you owe them? The question is perhaps most poignant when the leadership of that other people was unelected and corrupt:²³ *Should the common people suffer when they are duped by their leaders?* And if we turn a cold shoulder to those people and tell them that they had their chance and are now history’s losers, perhaps this suggests that we weren’t sincere about wanting to share in the first place?

²² As R. David Bigman writes (“[My First Born Son Israel: On the Birthright and Responsibility](#)” (Hebrew)), “Via the drawing of the (paschal) lamb prior to the designated time, Israel transitioned from being passive observers in the events (of the Exodus) to assume the status of active participants. From that point they weren’t only subjects, servants of God, but partners with the Omnipresent akin to being His sons.” Accessible as part of the booklet [Homilies for Passover](#) (Hebrew), by R. David Bigman (2020), accessible at <http://www.maalegillboa.org/files/חוברתלפסח.pdf>

²³ And what if that leadership’s autonomy was limited by forces out of its control, including divine intervention (Exodus 14:4)?!

No one said redemption would be easy, and it is thus no surprise that our ancestors feel a measure of [survivor’s guilt](#)—one that is institutionalized in the sanctification of the first-born ([Exodus 13:11-14](#)), which symbolizes the important truth that our children have no greater claim to life and property than theirs.²⁴ And [it is notable](#) that Moses enjoins Israel “Do not abominate the Egyptian” as the Egyptians had done to our ancestors (Deuteronomy [23:8](#)).²⁵ The price of victory (even in a just war) over a foe who is just like us (such that we could imagine behavior the same way if the shoe were on the other foot) is a certain degree of ambivalence and discomfort; the question is whether that feeling can be productively channeled: Will we remember that we are no better than they? Will we behave towards them as we would have wanted them to behave towards us if we had lost?²⁶

Beyond the foregoing implications, it is worth reflecting on how our present moment in history carries both great risk and great opportunity when it comes to following the Torah’s strong hint that we must overcome the myths that promote the idea that the stranger is inferior and/or that the stranger is a contaminator. On the one hand, boundaries between groups are going up everywhere in the world. Rumors are flying about how various nationalities are responsible (did you notice that everyone is suffering?). This is even true within countries: my home state of Rhode Island recently tried to keep New Yorkers out. Indeed, from the time my son and I returned to Boston from New York two weeks before Passover, we self-quarantined on a floor above the rest of our family; in this case, our doorway was apparently insufficient to protect our family from *one another*.

Yet while our separation from each other may look like we are recoiling from one another in horror, we all understand how contagion works and that this says nothing about the worth or threat that any one group poses to the other. To the contrary, it is widely reported that there has been an explosion of social contact: we are all “zooming” with far-flung family members and we are reaching out to ties that have frayed. We are showing one another how much we care, even when we are not physically close. There is great possibility in the present moment because we can see clearly that we are all naked before the virus and that we are all in this together. This should give us some hope that once we are able to be out and in nearer proximity to one another, our social foundations will be stronger than they were before.

An ironic cause for optimism in our ability to see beyond surface realities lies in our very use of the epidemiological term “social distancing.” My [sociologist colleagues and I](#) are uncomfortable with this term because for about a century, we have used the term “social distance” to mean the tendency for two people not to have social relations with one another. Political scientist and disaster-recovery expert Daniel Aldrich [has expressed similar discomfort](#) and has launched a somewhat successful campaign that we should use the term “physical distancing” rather than social distancing so that it is clearer that we should *promote* social relations even while taking care to keep physically apart. This seems like a laudable effort, but at the same time, the explosion of social outreach that is afoot suggests that the problem is not too serious. Even if it is difficult for societies

²⁴ Op cit., “[Why Do We Deserve God’s Favor?](#)”

²⁵ Op cit., “[Where is the Justice in the Tenth Plague?](#)”

²⁶ Thanks to several friends, including David Brock, Simeon Seigel, and Yael Unterman, for pushing me to address this issue.

to coordinate on the change of a label once it has gained widespread use, we may still be able to ignore its surface meaning and coordinate on the deeper meaning.

A similar lesson about our ability to see beyond surface-level social barriers that actually provides a foundation for stronger social bonds may be found in Jewish dietary practices in general and those particular to Passover. On the surface, it might appear that in refusing to eat non kosher food and to share utensils with those who eat non kosher, we are following the Egyptian model of looking down on others refraining from engaging in a consummate act of human fellowship: to [“participate with them in the common human activity of restoring the body through food.”](#)

And yet, anyone who knows Jewish dietary laws and associated traditions knows that there is little in the Jewish tradition that says that Jewish dietary practices are superior to others. In fact, the rabbis encouraged us to view non-Kosher food as appealing but to refrain from eating it simply because God has commanded it ([see Rashi on Leviticus 20:26](#)).²⁷ Similarly, while there are various homiletic interpretations of why we refrain from eating *hametz* (leaven) during Passover, we do it because we are commanded and that’s pretty much it; none of us has negative associations with it the rest of the year. Indeed, even the Shabbat—[with which we Jews have a “love affair” that builds tremendous communal strength](#)—does not imply any negative attitude towards the calendars that non-Jews maintain (see [Beitzah 16a](#)).

More generally, every social group is sustained by traditions that build internal cohesion and bind earlier generations to later ones. To outsiders, this may sometimes look foreign and off-putting. But strengthening the bonds within our own family does not necessarily hinder our ability to build strong relations with others.²⁸ To the

²⁷ Beyond that, there are various rabbinic restrictions that remain in place and that were originally meant to ensure that Jews did not eat or drink items that were implicated in pagan worship. This is consistent with the dim view our tradition takes of “idolatry,” though in practice (and especially in modern times) it involves no active efforts to sanction alien forms of worship and certainly has no implications for Jewish dietary laws. The larger point is that it is quite possible for a community to maintain rules about its diet (and other forms of cultural expression) without it being a negative commentary on others. Indeed, even the prohibition against intermarriage can be understood in positive terms as the promotion of communal and intergenerational cohesion; especially insofar as others (regardless of race or ethnicity) can marry into the group after conversion, it has no necessary negative connotations (see Elli Fischer, [“Michael Chabon’s Sacred and Profane Cliché Machine,”](#) *Jewish Review of Books* (June 13, 2018). *Accessible at* <https://jewishreviewofbooks.com/articles/3239/michael-chabons-sacred-and-profane-cliche-machine/>.

²⁸ While a long literature in social psychology has promoted the idea that ingroup favoritism and outgroup biases are two sides of the same coin, more recent research has largely dismantled this idea. For review, see pp. 1278-9 in Catherine T. Turco and Ezra W. Zuckerman,

contrary: our families are where we learn how to connect and share with others (including those who may indeed be our rivals!) and this foundation makes it possible for us to do the same for those who are outside our families. As such, our experience of Passover too carries a basis for optimism in a way: what may look like the construction of artificial social barriers may actually facilitate our ability to transcend them. The key is to recognize the other as fundamentally like oneself, not someone to look down on or to be afraid of simply because they are not you.

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