

LEHRHAUS

Lehrhaus over Pesach

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Remembrances Of Slavery How Two Cultures Commemorate A Vital Part Of Their History

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Rusting shackles from the pre-Civil War South. A replica of the wooden crate in which Virginia slave Henry “Box” Brown shipped himself to freedom in Philadelphia in 1849. A 19th-Century poster that offers a reward for the capture of a runaway slave. Another poster, advertising “For Sale/NEGRO WENCH.”

These are among the artifacts on display in several museums – primarily in Baltimore, located in a border state during the 1800’s War Between the States; and in the Philadelphia area, where slaves who escaped bondage in the antebellum South

found freedom or passed through on the way to other points in the North, before the Civil War put a putative end to the evil institution -- that I have visited in recent years as part of my personal preparation for Pesach.

Like many members of the Jewish community, who visit museums’ ancient Egypt exhibits (the best I have ever seen is at Houston’s Museum of Natural Science, which has also hosted spectacular exhibits about the Pharaohs Ramesses and Tutankhamun – hmns.org) in an effort to understand the themes of the seder that stem from that idolatrous culture in order to get ready spiritually for the Festival of Freedom, I have added trips to museum exhibits about the US experience with slavery and the Underground Railroad to my own education about this homegrown strain of slavery.

The places I visited:

- the Reginald F. Lewis Museum of Maryland African American History & Culture (LewisMuseum.org);
- the Baltimore Civil War Museum (baltimorecivilwarmuseum.com), down the road from each other near the city's Inner Harbor, and near the docks where slaves came ashore and where the slaves were sold to the highest bidder;
- Baltimore's B&O Railroad Museum (borail.org);
- and the Lest We Forget Slavery Museum (lwfsm.com) in Philadelphia's Germantown neighborhood, an early birthplace of the anti-slavery movement in this country, not far from a plaque that marks the site of a home that belonged to an abolitionist who gave refuge to escaped slaves.

The Philadelphia institution is the most modest, and arguably the most evocative of the three I saw. Housed in two small rooms in the basement of the Germantown Historical Society, it is extremely personal. Gwen Ragsdale, executive director and curator, shows visitors the display cases of artifacts and antebellum posters mounted on the walls, sharing stories of individual slaves.

I've also gone to slavery museums, or exhibits, in Liverpool, UK; New York City; Sugar Land, and Houston, TX; Newport, R.I., Charleston, S.C.; Oyster Bay, Long Island, and Hempstead, N.Y. And

a church in Buffalo where escaped slaves found refuge in the 19th century.

Most recently I visited two other slavery-related institutions: "Tides of Freedom: African Presence on the Delaware River," a decade-old exhibit at Philadelphia's Independence Seaport Museum (phillyseaport.org) that features the water-borne slave trade, emancipation, the abolitionist movement, and escape; and assistance (petermotthouse.org)

Regarding "Tides of Freedom": A little-known aspect of the Underground Railroad is the large number of slaves, primarily in Southern states and Caribbean islands along bodies of water, who made their way from enslavement via bodies of water, a slice of history documented in Timothy Walker's "[Sailing to Freedom](#)" (2021, University of Massachusetts Press.)

Like other exhibits on the subject, "Tides of Freedom" includes manacles and a West African currency artifact, historical documents and charts, as well as realistic depictions of slaves' (and ex-slaves') experiences in a maritime environment.

The exhibition is relatively small and low-tech, but focuses attention on an often-overlooked part of African-Americans' march -- or ride on the waves - - to freedom.

I went to most of the museums during their off-season, usually in early mornings, accompanied in each venue by only a staff member of the institution, uninterrupted by the sounds of school

children or the shouted questions of foreign visitors; I could contemplate the displays in relative isolation and silence. The exhibits ranged from the decidedly low-tech, simple dioramas and framed, sepia photographs, to more-advanced videos and recordings.

They all shared one thing in common – a searingly honest depiction of brutality that words alone cannot express. We know the “Uncle Tom’s Cabin” stories of white-on-black inhumanity, but the museums brought it to another dimension. There you could look at – no touching allowed – the actual chains and whips which oppressed generations of men and women brought to the United States against their will.

With Passover in mind, it all seems hauntingly familiar. The depictions of undeserved and unrestrained cruelty. The interruption in family life. The risk-it-all attempts to escape. The desperation felt by the enslaved after decades of incarceration. In the museums, the particular had become universal (what cultures don’t have some history of slavery?), then particular again.

Many of the artifacts at the Lewis Museum were – not coincidentally – donated by a Jewish family that had accumulated a large collection of ephemera from US slavery.

My museum visits were true to the focus of Pesach, and to the sense of the Haggadah; they opened me, a white Jew, to details of physical slavery foisted upon Black individuals, details consistent with the theme of *spiritual slavery* that

the Rabbis maintain kept our souls in bondage to a culture of polytheist idol worship, rather than the actual instruments of cruelty we typically associate with *physical slavery*. I had taken a year-long Black history in course in college, in subsequent years I read a lot about modern-day slavery and human trafficking, I consider myself alert to the immeasurable inequities of slave-master relationships that slavery of any type represents, but my time in the museum exhibits that concentrate on the cruelties suffered by African-Americans – truly *African-Americans* – in the antebellum South broadened my knowledge base.

This type of pilgrimage to the venues that memorialize the slavery and the slave trade that brought

millions of subjugated African men and women to these shores, starting in pre-Revolutionary days, does not dilute the message of the seder – “We were slaves to Pharaoh in Egypt” – but reinforces the ubiquity of such inhumanity that has manifested itself in different ways in different locations. It sensitizes the visitor to other peoples’ suffering.

When I see the artifacts of slavery in southern plantations (and, as we are prone to forget, in northern cities too) I see the indignities that the people brought here in shackles and kept here against their will suffered – and I also think of our collective *avdut* in Mitzrayim. As it should be; if reciting the words of the Haggadah each year make us blind and deaf and indifferent to the

tortures that other peoples endured, then the words have no meaning; if we concentrate on our pain and ignore others', our seders have failed; if Pesach does not lead us to see the parallels between the slavery we escaped three millennia ago and the slavery that, in many people's minds, ended here in 1865 (or continues today in many other lands), the yom tov has not made us more empathic people.

These two slaveries, and the ways in which they are memorialized, are not mutually exclusive. Seders and museums transcend the bare facts of enslavement. Their tacit message: freedom is not an end in itself; rather, what we *do* with it; what we *were* is not as important as what we have *become*; the memory of the past should lead to current action.

The Lewis Museum and the Lest We Forget Slavery Museum offer myriad examples of slaves' descendants who have contributed to US society. True to the theme of the seder: we begin by mentioning our degradation, and conclude by emphasizing our spiritual successes.

By feeling a common bond with the slaves of the US South, and their descendants, I can better appreciate the reality of the 210 years in Egyptian slavery that we remember at our seders ... which make our past come alive. I see our commonality, I feel the pain of our neighbors – our ancestors, Jews from Canaan; and non-Jews from Africa, were whipped, humiliated, and emasculated, all because of what exploited benefits they could provide for the ruling class.

One major difference, as author Clint Smith's wonderful recent book, "[How the Word is Passed: A reckoning with the history of slavery across America](#)" (Little, Brown and Company) makes clear, for the descendants of slaves in this country, it's personal, it's individuals; they know the names, the stories, of the men and women on their family trees who felt the sting of the whip; they know some who a generation or two ago saw the scars on their relatives' bodies. For Jewish people, it's communal; we know the history of a people, we know the names of leaders like Moses or Joshua, but lack the names of individual slaves who suffered under slavery and escaped from the lashes.

Freedom, of course, came through different means for the two communities. Our ancestors, after 210 years of painful, genocidal slavery in Pharaoh's kingdom, did not require a bloody War Between the States to go free; G-d, as the Torah and the Haggadah tell us, brought us out through miracles. We did not need to hide or cower or slip away under cover of dark. We did not run scared – we marched in early-morning light. We did not need an Underground Railroad leader nicknamed the "Moses" of her people; we had the real thing.

Delivery for the Jews was through the hand of G-d; for the slaves here, through their efforts to free themselves, a war that divided the country, a presidential proclamation and constitutional amendments.

There are major differences between the way that Jewish culture and African-American culture have

come to commemorate our disparate experiences with slavery; the former is largely oral, the latter, heavy on extant, tactile artifacts. We remember with words, notably with questions, and not with display items. Both techniques tell their story well.

This is not a competition. There are no rewards, no moral high ground for who suffered most. The point is not an advantage of victimization but the growth of empathy, spurring both communities to future accomplishments.

That was what I witnessed in the three museums I visited. An atmosphere not of blame but of documentation, an attitude not of hatred of understanding, a perspective not of superiority and exclusion but of unity and reconciliation.

The slavery museums are a sign that the African-American community has turned to improving itself, not hating the oppressors.

Which aligns with Jewish tradition; we are commanded not to hate the Egyptian, “because you were a stranger in his land” ([Deut. 23:7](#)).

No decent person defends slavery, or, on the other hand, revels in victimization. That is the lesson of the seder: we do not shrink from our past, or let freedom spoil us. We recount our beginnings in slavery, we state every year that we were slaves, we do not deny our shared past or find shame in it or condemn the slave masters, but give credit to G-d for freeing us, and take pride in the moral society we have attempted to build.

That is the tacit message of the museums where I walked – they boasted of educational and cultural achievements, of black people who have contributed to and helped build and defend the common good in this country.

Several years ago, I took my family to an old church in Buffalo where fleeing slaves had once found refuge; located near the Canadian border, the ultimate destination for many slaves, Buffalo was a frequent “station” for escaped slaves – and a lucrative venue for greedy slave-hunters. Hidden in the basement of the church was a coffin-sized space into which the men and women fleeing for their lives would squeeze themselves. That image has never left me – that was a symbol of the lengths to which people would go to obtain their freedom.

The man who guided us through the church – an African-American who bragged about his Jewish roots – shared stories about the role that the church had played in the clandestine Underground Railroad, but spent no time condemning the perpetrators or enablers of slavery. He was interested in heroism, bravery, not blame. Facts, not bitterness, were his emphasis.

That is why the number of such museums devoted to slavery and to the Underground Railroad that brought thousands of slaves to freedom, and of slavery exhibits in wider history museums, has grown in the last few years. Black people are taking control of their historical narrative, and most White people – even in an era of alarmism

about Critical Race Theory – do not feel threatened. The founders of the museums, and the people who will visit them – both Black and white – are energized by accomplishments, not condemnations. Both races seek role models of success, not targets of blame. While racism in general is far from eradicated, US society has, while disproportionately imprisoning persons of color, largely reached the point of rejecting the legacy of slavery and of Jim Crow; the statues and sculptures of the Confederacy’s political and military leaders are deemed offensive to the general public, not just to the descendants of Black slaves.

The Jewish community and the African-American community have reached a similar goal (overcoming the trauma of a sometimes-tragic past) through different paths (a shared meal for one, and museum exhibits for the other).

But the two communities’ commemoration styles have evolved in different ways, because of many dissimilarities:

- Making a seder among family and friends is logistically and financially easier than establishing a museum.
- The slavery of the Israelites, for most Jewish people, took place in what is now a distant land; of the Black people, in the country where many of them now still live. The continuing repercussions of US slavery are still visible; of slavery in Egypt, not so much. The descendants of the Egyptian slave masters can no longer be

identified; of the White slave masters, many can still trace their heritage back to plantations.

- Seders are largely the work of family and friends, while museums are the creation of professional museum makers, largely unknown to the people who view the exhibits.
- The freedom of African-American former slaves was earned through their own efforts, and of sympathetic abolitionists, legislators, and journalists. Ours? It was the doing of G-d, via His series of miraculous plagues.

The world never learned its lesson – that slavery was anathema to the Creator.

Overall, Jewish and Black people maintain different approaches to honoring their pasts, and both are true to the ethos of each community. A seder is fitting because Judaism is essentially a home-based religion, and a synagogue-based gathering on the holiday would remove that personal element, while generations of freed African-Americans, whose strength of community was vanquished by years of enslavement, have since worked hard to establish their own institutions – colleges, civil rights organizations, and museums. A communal venue like a museum to document their experiences is a testament to their communal strength.

Neither approach is perfect or all-encompassing.

The disadvantage of such museum exhibits – they

are static, unchanging, requiring you to travel there, and do nothing but walk around, look at the artifacts and read the panels. Of course, a seder can be a passive experience, but it is designed to be a participatory, interactive experience; the Haggadah to be read responsively, the drops of wine to be spilled, the food to be eaten. Pesach is essentially a tactile holiday.

The advantage of the exhibits – the reality of the slavery they represent cannot be easily refuted; no one can deny the veracity of the countless manacles and diagrams of slave ships and “wanted” posters and announcements of slave auctions. While some ill-intentioned can debate the mendacity of the institution itself, no one can question whether it existed – unlike the secular skeptics in the Jewish community who doubt the authenticity of the Torah’s account of the Israelite’s experience in ancient Egypt. They ask: Where is the proof, does science and archeology support the biblical rendition, was there really an exodus?

Disadvantages of a seder – its language is stilted, often stagnant, and its rituals often indecipherable; as recent anecdotal and statistical evidence indicates, a growing number of Jews have lost interest in going to a seder.

Advantages of a seder – it brings people together annually, and keeps us together. It creates memories that are as alive today as they were 3,300 years ago.

As Jews, we need not turn to a museum-based commemoration of our own slavery history to appreciate the success that the African-American community has made in educating both insiders and outsiders about the strides the descendants of former slaves have made in overcoming the stain of slavery.

At some seders, people who have survived concentration camps or time under Communism, share their personal stories. Likewise, for members of African-American families whose parents or grandparents had heard relatives’ stories, either first-hand or second-hand or etc., of the horrors endured in the South, slavery is not something from the distant past.

For Jewish families and African-American families alike, it is the stories that connect generations.

Nonetheless, the seder has a distinct weakness. Because it’s less personal, more distant, it’s harder for us to identify – or identify with – specific people who came out of Egypt. More imagination is needed.

What can we do? How do we turn our distant history into personal stories? As our rabbinic leaders suggest, we can try to picture ourselves, at our seders, as Israelites in ancient Egypt. *We are coming – today – out of Egypt. Tonight.* We can read the history of that period. We can research more-recent grievances committed against the Jewish people – particularly, the Shoah, the most

extreme example of modern-day animus against the Jewish people. Some survivors put a potato peel, a symbol of starvation, on the seder plate. We can place a photo of a death camp survivor's tattooed arm at our seder table as flesh-and-blood evidence of what took place in the life of an individual person; I don't need a photo – I have seen too many of those indignities on peoples' flesh. I will keep them in mind this year.

The seder, without question, is one of Judaism's greatest success stories. It has survived, with some linguistic and stylistic changes, through the ages, across the Jewish world, and helped the Jewish people survive. It is by far the most-observed of Jewish traditions. It has bound us as people, while serving as a template for other people's striving to commemorate their own narratives. It fosters creativity – in terms of text and additions to the seder plate/table and other rituals.

The seder is literally in our hands.

Consider the orange on the seder plate, or Miriam's cup, consciousness-raising additions endemic to particular groups and orientations, which have ballooned into at least a few dozen adaptations, depending on the social-political-religious issue *du jour*.

I have done some local research. There are many slavery exhibits and plaques and tours closer to home, in the boroughs of New York City.

This year, and G-dwilling in future years, I will visit some of them as part of my spiritual preparation for Passover.

Leshana Haba b'Brooklyn.

נמשלת ללבנה

Shoshanah Haberman is a Landscape Designer with a love of Torah.

נמשלת ללבנה

ניסן תשפ"ו
שושנה הברמן

והוצאתי
והצלתי
וגאלתי
ולקחתי.

כאיילת השחר שבקע אורה
כך היא גאולתן של ישראל,
בתחילה קימעא קימעא,
כל מה שהיא הולכת
היא רבה, והולכת.

היינו כחולמים?

בזמן שהרועה תועה -
תועין אחריו.
אבל אפילו בצל רועה נאמן -
כל פרק של

שפרק הפריחה
שווה לחוות
אפילו אם יבוא שוב החורף.

גאולה ובנין
מסתיים בחורבן
וגלות.

אסוף צבעוניות
ואעטר בהן את שולחני
לכבוד החג.

תופים תיקנו
והם עוד בידינו -
אבל נדמה
שעדיין לא הגיע עת למחולות.

והבאתי?
כוס חמישית תלויה במחלוקת.

עד שיבוא אליהו.
ואחרי האש -
קול דממה דקה.

השוטר לפני בית הכנסת
חמוש ברובה במקום האקדח
השגרתו!

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מתפתחות סערות.
ובין עצים פרועי שיער
מרקדים שדים.

אני מחטטת בין שיירי השלכת,
מחפשת נבטים,
שיעלו מתוך הרימה והתולעה
ויפרחו.

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