



# MAH NISHTANAH:

## A SUPPLEMENTAL SEDER READING FROM J STREET

Every year, the Passover holiday is an important opportunity to reflect on the values of our people and the lessons of our history. We feel the experiences of our ancestors as our own — and apply them to the struggles and challenges we face in our own lives today. As the text says: “In every generation, each individual should feel personally redeemed from Egypt.”

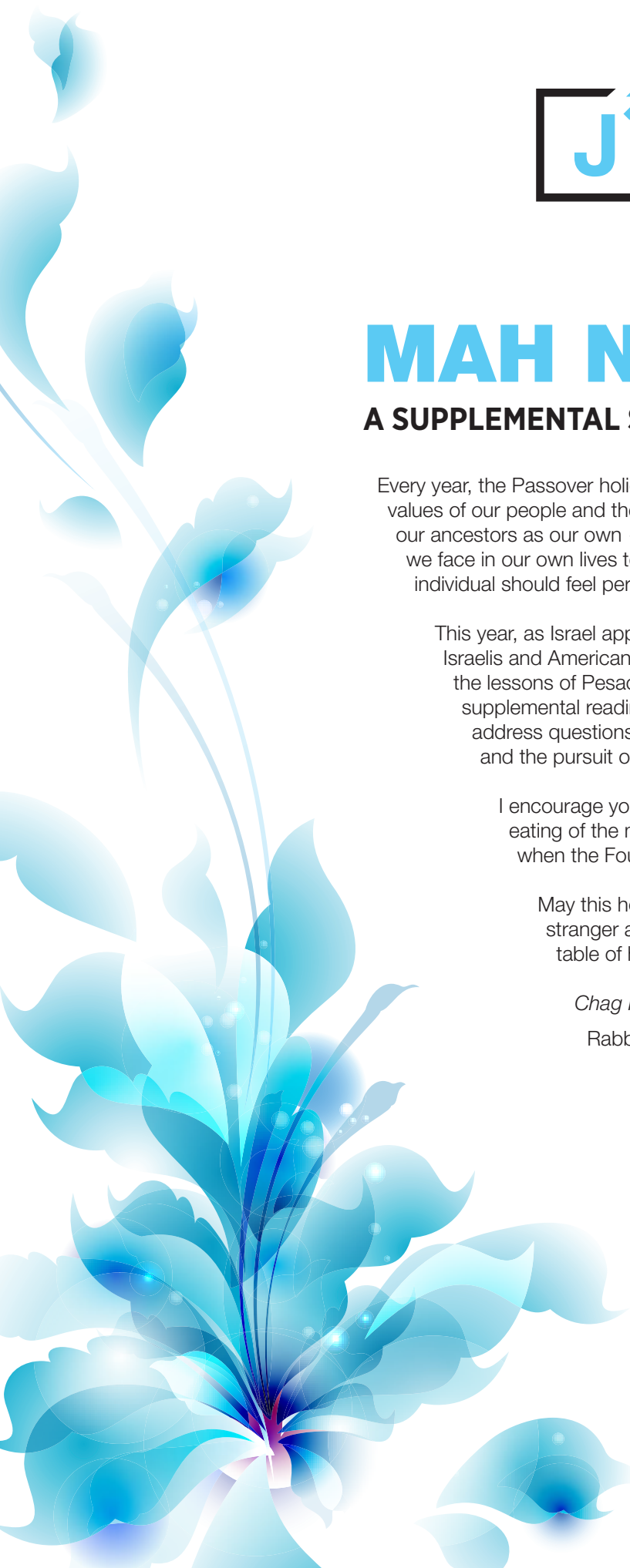
This year, as Israel approaches its landmark 70th birthday and both Israelis and Americans face daunting levels of political turmoil and strife, the lessons of Pesach feel particularly urgent and real. I hope that this supplemental reading can serve as a resource to help you raise and address questions of tolerance and discrimination, safety and violence, and the pursuit of peace.

I encourage you to use this reading in your seder either before the eating of the matzah and the maror, or right after *Mah Nishtanah*, when the Four Questions are asked.

May this holiday of freedom encourage all of us to welcome the stranger and that which is different. Let all find a seat at the table of humanity.

*Chag Pesach sameach,*

Rabbi Michael Strassfeld



# MAH NISHTANAH



**Why is this year different from all other years?**

**This year we mark the 70th birthday of the founding of the state of Israel!**

**So many miraculous accomplishments to celebrate:**

**Reviving a language**

**Building a country**

**Integrating thousands of refugees**

**And yet...**

On this night, we eat the bread of affliction of an unresolved conflict between Israel and the Palestinians.

On this night, we eat the bitter herbs of terrorism and threats of war.

On this night, we fear Israel's democratic values being eroded by the salt water of intolerance.

On this night, we think of refugees who have no safe place of their own to sit or recline.

This is my vision, says God:  
Make a path, clear the way, remove all stumbling blocks from the way of My people.  
Peace, peace to him that is far off  
and to her that is near.  
They shall sit every person under her vine and his fig tree;  
and none shall make them afraid.  
(Based on Is. 57:14, 19; Micah 4:4)

Yet some are skeptical of this vision saying:  
Can two people war for a hundred years  
and still in the old age of their struggle  
give birth to peace?

And we answer:  
*Ki od lo avdah tikvateinu.*  
For we have still not lost the hope of thousands of years.

For we have seen the desert bloom,  
so shall we make the hearts of two peoples bloom  
with honor and respect.

For despite all the difficulties that still lie ahead,  
we will stay faithful to the vision of Herzl.  
For if we wish it, it is not a dream.

I will speak of peace, though they speak of war.  
I will speak of hope, though they speak of despair.  
For the sake of Zion, I will not be silent,

For the sake of Jerusalem, I will not be still.  
(Based on Ps. 120:7; Is. 62:1)

*Ki od lo avdah tikvateinu.*  
For we have still not lost the hope of thousands of years.

The purpose of the Passover seder is not just to remind us of an ancient story of the Jewish people being freed from slavery in Egypt. As the text says: "In every generation, each individual should feel personally redeemed from Egypt." We are meant to experience the slavery of Egypt and the going out in freedom as our own story, and not just as that of our ancestors.

Therefore, we ingest the slavery by eating bitter herbs and we celebrate freedom by drinking four cups of wine. The seder is meant to move us to act for justice and freedom in the world.

And the work of righteousness shall lead to peace,  
and justice shall bring quiet and security forever. (Is. 32:17)

The midrash (rabbinic imagination) says that the Israelites merited being freed from the slavery of Egypt because they stayed faithful to their traditions.

We too proclaim our continued commitment to the values of democracy and Zionism with which the state of Israel was founded.

Who are we?  
We are the children of Abraham and Sarah, first immigrants in the world. Like them, we welcome the stranger who comes to our door.

We are the children of Isaac, seeking at long last reconciliation with the children of Ishmael, Isaac's older brother.

We are the children of Aaron, lovers of peace and pursuers of peace.

Let us proclaim: *Shanah haba'ah b'yerushalayim*

Next year in Jerusalem, the city whose name means salam/shalom/peace

# QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

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1

Does the Haggadah's section about the four children suggest a model for how a broad spectrum of Jews should sit together as a Jewish people? Or does the response to the wicked (or challenging) child demonstrate the problem of an increasingly divided Jewish community?

What is the challenge each of the children represents to a diverse Jewish community being able to sit down together—the wise, the wicked, the simple and the one who does not know how to ask?

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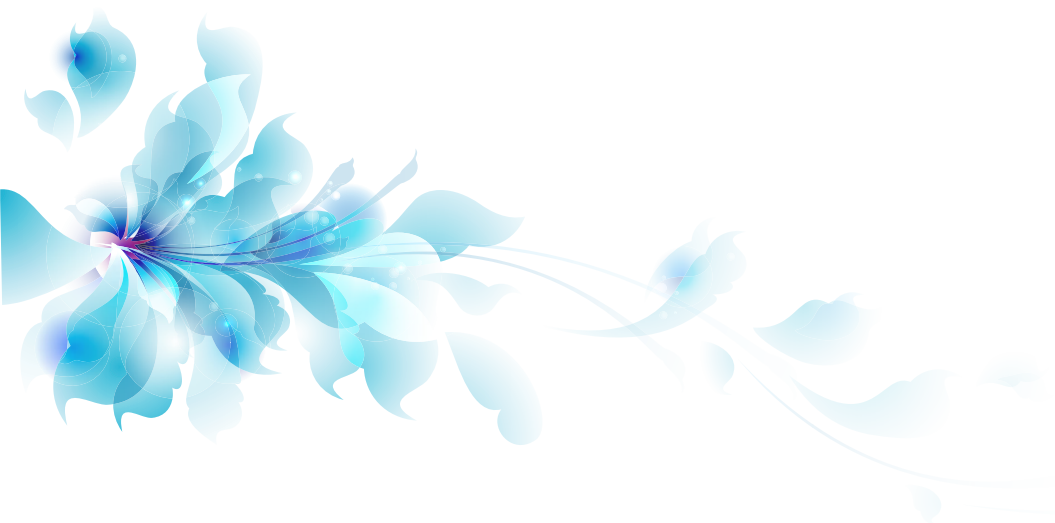
2

In the midrash, at the moment of the Egyptians drowning at the crossing of the sea, God tells the angels to stop singing, saying: “The Egyptians are also my children. How can you sing at their deaths?”

What does that midrash suggest about how to move to reconciliation after a bitter conflict?

What examples are there in recent history that may also provide models for reconciliation?

**The Author:** Rabbi Michael Strassfeld is retired from being a congregational rabbi at The SAJ, a Reconstructionist synagogue in Manhattan. He is nearing completion of a new book about re-inventing Judaism in the 21st century. Together with his wife Rabbi Joy Levitt, he is the author of *A Night of Questions: A Passover Haggadah*.



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## HOW CAN WE MAKE NEXT YEAR DIFFERENT THAN THE PAST?

**We can begin, in a small way, by participating in four actions:**

1

In just a few weeks, from April 14-17, thousands of people will gather at the J Street's National Conference in Washington to demonstrate the power and resolve of the pro-Israel, pro-peace movement. Register for the conference today and come to Washington to add your voice at this important moment.

[jstreet.org/conference](http://jstreet.org/conference)

2

In just a few days, the Senate will begin to consider the nomination of Mike Pompeo to the role of Secretary of State. As a hawkish ideologue who rejects diplomacy, lauds military force and holds hateful anti-Muslim views, Pompeo is a dangerous choice who could push our country down a path of further conflict. Sign J Street's petition and tell your senators to reject his confirmation.

[act.jstreet.org/sign/do-not-confirm-mike-pompeo-secretary-state](http://act.jstreet.org/sign/do-not-confirm-mike-pompeo-secretary-state)

3

The Israeli government's ongoing eviction and demolition of Palestinian villages in the West Bank is a deeply damaging process that destroys communities, undermines the prospects for a two-state solution and imperils Israel's future as a Jewish and democratic state. Sign up to join the student activists of J Street U in the "Stop Demolitions, Build Peace" campaign to rally Jewish communal leaders and elected officials to push back against these demolitions.

[act.jstreet.org/sign/stop-demolitions-build-peace](http://act.jstreet.org/sign/stop-demolitions-build-peace)

4

Clergy play a critical role in our movement. They are powerful ambassadors, who have significant influence with Members of Congress, Jewish communal leaders, American Jewry and the media. Engage your local clergy in J Street's work - invite them to join J Street's Rabbinic and Cantorial Cabinet or to give a sermon discussing pro-Israel, pro-peace advocacy. Encourage your congregation to host a J Street event.

**J Street** organizes and mobilizes pro-Israel, pro-peace Americans who want Israel to be secure, democratic and the national home of the Jewish people. Working in American politics and the Jewish community, we advocate for policies that advance shared US and Israeli interests as well as Jewish and democratic values, leading to a two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

