

## **From Oppression to Liberation: For the Pursuit of Reproductive Justice in this Generation**

The four cups of wine we drink this evening are symbols of our freedom and God's presence in our lives. But, as the *seder* ritual reminds us, freedom is an ongoing journey. True freedom can only be enjoyed when all our sisters, brothers and others are freed of the many burdens that would delay or deny their inherent dignity.

As women, we still know the shackles of oppression all too well. In modern society, we still experience the exploitation of women and girls in our workplaces, medical facilities, and even governing bodies. By allowing this oppression to continue, we fail to recognize the holiness and moral agency present in all of God's children.

Tonight, we retell the story of the Exodus and consider how it applies to our lives today. We are reminded that there is still bitterness in the world and iniquity in our homes and communities: politicians seeking to control women's reproductive destinies; perpetrators of domestic and sexual violence seeking to control women's bodies; and societal barriers seeking, perhaps inadvertently, to limit a woman's ability to recognize her full potential. These examples and others are today's plagues; they remind us of the constraints Pharaoh placed on our Israelite ancestors.

At tonight's *seder*, instead of feeling despair, we envision - and commit to achieving - a society in which every person exerts full autonomy over their own reproductive and sexual life. At tonight's *seder*, we celebrate the values that lead us to work toward reproductive justice. This expanded social justice framework acknowledges the different systems of oppression that impact our lives and impede our ability to truly make our own decisions about our reproductive and sexual health. We renew our commitment to not only safeguard our legal rights to access the care we need but to go further, ensuring every person's ability to meaningfully do so regardless of gender, sexual orientation, race, income and other unique life circumstances. We pledge to leave the next generation a society in which reproductive freedom has truly been reached.

**The readings in this resource packet seek to inspire our commitment to reproductive justice. They are designed to be read before you drink each of the four cups of wine.**

Let us tonight honor those who are working tirelessly to bring us out of this metaphoric Egypt and pledge to renew our own fight toward achieving justice and freedom for all.

*Chag Sameach!*

*Coordinated by the following: Jewish Women International, National Council of Jewish Women, Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism in association with Women of Reform Judaism, and Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice.*



## **THE FIRST CUP OF WINE** **Hope, and Striving for Equity**

The four cups of wine recall God's four promises: "I will *bring you out* from under the burdens of the Egyptians and *deliver you* from their bondage. I will *redeem you* with an outstretched arm and great miracles. And I will *take you* to be my people." (Exodus 6.6-7) Just as the four promises and four cups speak to our redemption from Egypt, they symbolize the hope that, one day, all will be free – free from illness and worry, hunger and poverty, and free to determine the course of their lives.

Our land is blessed with material abundance, as well as the liberty to speak, gather, pray and so much more. Meanwhile, access to fundamentals, especially medical attention that includes reproductive care, is at great reach or beyond for many women and families still enslaved by the vicious cycle of poverty – even as some politicians labor to enshrine their personal faith restrictions, further denying the religious freedom of others by upending a woman's private pregnancy decision as she seeks out the legal and safe medical attention she believes she needs. As we celebrate Passover, we renew a commitment to safeguard the deliberations and wellbeing of each woman and her family, that her goodness and conscience is honored as she determines the course and destiny of her life.

So we raise the cup and recall: Our heartaches, the four promises, their fulfillment and our commitment to establish fairness and freedom for all. And we recommit ourselves to strengthen and extend the promise of reproductive justice, thereby honoring the integrity and sanctity of each woman's conscience and protecting her safe access to the legal medical attention that she and her doctor believes is right for her.

*Rabbi Dennis S. Ross is the director of Concerned Clergy for Choice in New York and author of All Politics Is Religious.*

## **THE SECOND CUP OF WINE** **Deliverance, and Respect for Moral Agency**

Why did the Israelites wander for a generation in the wilderness? It was clear to God (and Moses) that the Israelites who had been enslaved in Egypt were unprepared to be free. And why? Because the Egyptians had taken away their sense of self. By insinuating enslavement into the lives of the Israelites, the oppressors had removed their ability even to think of themselves as free and autonomous human beings.

Of course some communal standards are important. Torah recognizes that, left to ourselves, we might justify stealing and infidelity and dishonoring those we love. We are proud to be a part of a moral and compassionate people!

But when any government seeks to dismiss the capacity of a person to think of herself as a free and autonomous human being, that government wants to take us back to Egypt. It is no more the business of an outside authority to know what is inside a woman's womb than it is to know what is inside her heart – unless she freely volunteers the information. When legislators by any name try to enter these very private places, they attempt to insinuate enslavement into the lives of a generation. We worked too hard to be free to go back, and there is no reason to wander in another wilderness when that freedom is already at hand.

Let this cup of liberation remind us that freedom is already within us and must not be taken away. No matter your age, your gender or your orientation (which is to say, no matter your practical concern), each of us and all of us were liberated from enslavement and none of us is going back.

*Rabbi Jack Moline is the spiritual leader of Agudas Achim Congregation in Alexandria, Virginia and directs public policy for the Rabbinical Assembly.*

## **THE THIRD CUP OF WINE: Redemption, and Safeguarding Access to Care**

Over the course of tonight's *seder*, we are commanded to imagine that we ourselves came out of Egypt – as if we ourselves were personally redeemed from slavery. Perhaps this is a lofty goal; few of us have experienced slavery in the way our Israelite ancestors did. Similarly, it can be hard to imagine the paralyzing confinement many women and families feel while seeking to access abortion care. We retell stories to transport our conscience back to the 'narrow places' of *Mitzrayim* and to rejuvenate our commitment to full redemption for all people. As Rabbi Weber's story reminds us, unfortunately this day has not yet come:

"We really wanted children. Seven months after we were married, we learned that Shira was pregnant and we were overjoyed. But at 18 weeks we learned that our baby had multiple anomalies and would die at birth. After talking with our family and our rabbis (yes, rabbis have rabbis, too), we chose to have an abortion.

The doctor said the best way to ensure that we could try again was to have what is now called a "partial birth abortion." We did, and after grieving for our loss we became the parents of three healthy (thank God) children, now adults.

The method we chose for the abortion is currently outlawed in 16 states. That's right: 16 states now tell people – even married couples – that they do not have the right to the medical care which is best for them. And 32 states will not allow public funding for this kind of abortion, since Shira's life was not in danger. The fact that she would have carried a dying baby for another five months doesn't matter in those states. Any woman not able to afford private health insurance will have to live the nightmare of knowing her baby's date of birth and date of death will coincide.

In the landmark case, *Roe v. Wade*, the Supreme Court decided that a woman's right to privacy includes the right to choose what happens to her own body. Yet from laws which require a woman prove her life is in danger before getting permission to abort, to protesters outside clinics taking pictures of women exercising their right to choose, no part of a woman's health is *less* private today. How could people we never met know better than we, what should happen to our bodies?"

As we drink our third cup of wine, let us reflect: *why is this right different from all other rights?* What can we do to help bring us out of the slavery of judgment and injustice and into the light of freedom that tonight's *seder* celebrates and represents? What can we do to redeem and value the personal choices that women and families make and, in process, redeem ourselves and our community?

*Rabbi Donald Weber and Rabbi Shira Stern are the spiritual leaders at Temple Rodeph Torah in Marlboro, NJ.*

**THE FOURTH CUP OF WINE**  
**Liberation, and Acknowledging Those Still in Dark Spaces**

*This cup of wine is dedicated*

*to the women who do not find themselves  
embraced by a community, as we are tonight.*

*Women who endure injury, humiliation, and  
sexual assault and cannot talk about it.*

*Women who suffered unspeakable abuses and did not live to tell.*

*This cup is for the shattered souls who never dreamed it would happen to them...*

*The women who stay to protect children, avoid shame,  
and bear the burden of shalom bayit in a home with no peace.*

*The women who stay because they have no place to go.*

*The women who stay because they believe in love.*

*And the women who escaped, and now struggle to find homes,  
build skills, and support their families.*

*This cup is for the women from whom everything has been taken –  
their families, their friends, their homes, their communities,  
their dignity, and their lives.*

*On Passover, as we celebrate liberation, we reaffirm our commitment  
to make all women safe in their homes and in their relationships.*

*This cup is for the women who find this night is no different from any  
other night. They are our sisters, they are ourselves, and they are not alone.*

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