

LET MY PEOPLE GROW: THE EXODUS FROM EGYPT AS A JEWISH CALLING

Note:

This lesson includes more texts than can be covered in a 90-minute session. We encourage you to explore the texts not covered in class on your own time.



TEXT 1

MICHAEL LERNER, *HOW THE REVOLUTIONARY MESSAGE GOT REPRESSED AND ABANDONED*

(1943–2024) American political activist, editor of *Tikkun*, a progressive Jewish interfaith magazine based in Berkeley, California, and the rabbi of Beyt Tikkun Synagogue in Berkeley.

Every ruling elite of the ancient and medieval world, and many in the modern world, justified their rule by ideologies whose central message was that the world cannot be changed . . . Along came the Jews with a very different message: “The world can be fundamentally changed. Every system of oppression, no matter how powerful it
5 appears to be, can be overthrown . . . We know it, because we did it ourselves.”

Lerner, M. 1994. *Jewish Renewal: A Path to Healing and Transformation*. New York: Putnam Adult, 129.



TEXT 2

EXODUS (*SHEMOT*) 13:3–4

3 And Moses said to the people,

Remember this day, on which you went free from Egypt, the house of bondage, how GOD freed you from it with a mighty hand: no leavened bread shall be eaten. **4** You go free on this day, in the month of Abib.

שְׁמוֹת יג, ג-ד

ג וַיֹּאמֶר מֹשֶׁה אֶל הָעָם זְכוֹר אֶת הַיּוֹם הַזֶּה אֲשֶׁר יִצְאֲתֶם מִמִּצְרַיִם מִבֵּית עֲבָדִים כִּי בְּחֹדֶק יָד הוּצֵיאָהּ
אֶתְכֶם מִזֶּה וְלֹא יֵאָכֵל חֶמֶץ. ד הַיּוֹם אֲתֶם יֹצְאִים בְּחֹדֶשׁ הָאֲבִיב.



TEXT 3 DEUTERONOMY (*DEVARIM*) 16:1-3

1 Observe the month of Abib and offer a passover sacrifice to the ETERNAL your God, for it was in the month of Abib, at night, that the ETERNAL your God freed you from Egypt. **2** You shall slaughter the passover sacrifice for the ETERNAL your God, from the flock and the herd, in the place where GOD will choose to establish the divine name. **3** You shall not eat anything leavened with it; for seven days thereafter you shall eat unleavened bread, bread of distress – for you departed from the land of Egypt hurriedly – so that you may remember the day of your departure from the land of Egypt as long as you live.

דְּבָרִים י"א, יח-כא

א שְׁמֹר אֶת חֹדֶשׁ הָאֲבִיב וְעָשִׂיתָ פֶסַח לַה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ כִּי בַחֹדֶשׁ הָאֲבִיב הוֹצִיאָךְ ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ מִמִּצְרַיִם לַיְלָה.
ב וְזָבַחְתָּ פֶסַח לַה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ צֹאן וּבָקָר בַּמָּקוֹם אֲשֶׁר יִבְחַר ה' לְשֹׁכֵן שְׁמוֹ שָׁם. ג לֹא תֹאכַל עָלָיו חֶמֶץ שִׁבְעַת יָמִים תֹּאכַל עָלָיו מִצּוֹת לֶחֶם עֲנִי כִּי בַחֲפָזוֹן יֵצְאתָ מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם לְמַעַן תִּזְכֹּר אֶת יוֹם צֵאתְךָ מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם כָּל יְמֵי חַיֶּיךָ.



TEXT 4 DEUTERONOMY (*DEVARIM*) 5:12-15

12 Observe the sabbath day and keep it holy, as the ETERNAL your God has commanded you. **13** Six days you shall labor and do all your work, **14** but the seventh day is a sabbath of the ETERNAL your God; you shall not do any work—you, your son or your daughter, your male or female slave, your ox or your donkey, or any of your cattle, or the stranger in your settlements, so that your male and female slave may rest as you do. **15** Remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt and the ETERNAL your God freed you from there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm; therefore the ETERNAL your God has commanded you to observe the sabbath day.

דְּבָרִים ה, יב-טו

יב שְׁמוֹר אֶת יוֹם הַשַּׁבָּת לְקַדְּשׁוֹ כְּאֲשֶׁר צִוָּה ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ. יג שֵׁשֶׁת יָמִים תַּעֲבֹד וְעָשִׂיתָ כָּל מְלֹאכְתְּךָ.
יד וַיּוֹם הַשְּׁבִיעִי שָׁבַת לַה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ לֹא תַעֲשֶׂה כָּל מְלֹאכָה אֹתָהּ וּבִנְיָהּ וּבְתָרָהּ וְעִבְדָּהּ וְאִמְתָּהּ וְשׁוֹרָהּ
וְחִמְרָהּ וְכָל בְּהֵמָתָהּ וְגֵרָהּ אֲשֶׁר בְּשַׁעְרֶיךָ לְמַעַן יָנוּחַ עֲבָדְךָ וְאִמְתָּהּ כָּמוֹךָ. טו וְזָכַרְתָּ כִּי עֶבֶד הָיִיתָ בְּאֶרֶץ
מִצְרַיִם וַיֹּצִיאֲךָ ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ מִשָּׁם בְּיָד חֲזָקָה וּבְזֹרֹעַ נְטוּיָה עַל כֵּן צִוָּה ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ לַעֲשׂוֹת אֶת יוֹם הַשַּׁבָּת.



TEXT 5 SHABBAT EVE KIDDUSH

The heaven and the earth were finished, and all their array. On the seventh day God finished the work that had been undertaken, ceasing on the seventh day from doing any of the work. And God blessed the seventh day and declared it holy – having ceased on it from all the work of creation that God had done. (Genesis 2:1-3)

5

On wine:

Blessed are You, ETERNAL our God, Ruler of the universe, who creates the fruit of the vine.

- 10 Blessed are You, ETERNAL our God, Ruler of the universe, who has set us apart through [the] commandments and has desired us. With love and desire, [God] has endowed us with the Shabbat that [God] has set apart, a reminder of Creation, for it is the first amongst the designated days that have been [so] set apart – a reminder of the Exodus from Egypt. [God], You have chosen us and set us apart from the
- 15 nations, and the Shabbat that You set apart You have bequeathed unto us with love and desire. Blessed are You ETERNAL, the One who sets Shabbat apart.

קִידוּשׁ לַיֵּל שַׁבָּת

וַיְכַל הַשָּׁמַיִם וְהָאָרֶץ וְכָל צְבָאָם: וַיְכַל אֱלֹהִים בַּיּוֹם הַשְּׁבִיעִי מְלֹאכְתּוֹ אֲשֶׁר עָשָׂה וַיִּשְׁבַּת בַּיּוֹם הַשְּׁבִיעִי
מִכָּל מְלֹאכְתּוֹ אֲשֶׁר עָשָׂה: וַיְבָרֶךְ אֱלֹהִים אֶת יוֹם הַשְּׁבִיעִי וַיְקַדְּשׁ אֹתוֹ כִּי בּוֹ שָׁבַת מִכָּל מְלֹאכְתּוֹ אֲשֶׁר בָּרָא
אֱלֹהִים לַעֲשׂוֹת: (בראשית ב:א-ג)

על היין:

ברוך אתה ה' אלהינו מלך העולם בורא פרי הגפן:

ברוך אתה ה' אלהינו מלך העולם אשר קדשנו במצותיו ורצה בנו ושבת קדשו באהבה וברצון הנחילנו זכרון למעשה בראשית כי הוא יום תחלה למקראי קדש זכר ליציאת מצרים. כי בנו בחרת ואותנו קדשת מכל העמים ושבת קדשך באהבה וברצון הנחלתנו: ברוך אתה ה' מקדש השבת:



TEXT 6

DEUTERONOMY (*DEVARIM*) 24:17-22

17 You shall not subvert the rights of the stranger or the fatherless; you shall not take a widow's garment in pawn. **18** Remember that you were a slave in Egypt and that the ETERNAL your God redeemed you from there; therefore do I enjoin you to observe this commandment.

19 When you reap the harvest in your field and overlook a sheaf in the field, do not turn back to get it; it shall go to the stranger, the fatherless, and the widow—in order that the ETERNAL your God may bless you in all your undertakings.

20 When you beat down the fruit of your olive trees, do not go over them again; that shall go to the stranger, the fatherless, and the widow. **21** When you gather the grapes of your vineyard, do not pick it over again; that shall go to the stranger, the fatherless, and the widow. **22** Always remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt; therefore do I enjoin you to observe this commandment.

דברים כד, יז-כב

יז לא תטש משפט גר יתום ולא תחבל בגד אלמנה. יח וזכרת כי עבד היית במצרים ויפדה ה' אלהיך משם על כן אנכי מצוה לעשות את הדבר הזה. יט כי תקצר קצירך בשדה ושכחת עמר בשדה לא תשוב לקחתו לגר ליתום ולאלמנה יהיה למען יברכה ה' אלהיך בכל מעשה ידיך. כ כי תחבט זיתך לא תפאר אחריו לגר ליתום ולאלמנה יהיה. כא כי תבצר כרמך לא תעולל אחריו לגר ליתום ולאלמנה יהיה. כב וזכרת כי עבד היית בארץ מצרים על כן אנכי מצוה לעשות את הדבר הזה.



TEXT 7

DEUTERONOMY (*DEVARIM*) 15:12-15

12 If a fellow Hebrew, man or woman, is sold to you, he shall serve you six years, and in the seventh year you shall set them free. **13** When you set them free, do not let them go empty-handed: **14** Furnish him out of the flock, threshing floor, and vat, with which the ETERNAL your God has blessed you. **15** Bear in mind that you were slaves in the land of Egypt and the ETERNAL your God redeemed you; therefore I enjoin this commandment upon you today.

דְּבָרִים טו, יב-טו

יב כִּי יִמְכַר לְךָ אֶחֱיוֹתָ הָעִבְרִי אוֹ הָעִבְרִיָּה וַעֲבַדְךָ שֵׁשׁ שָׁנִים וּבַשָּׁנָה הַשְּׁבִיעִת תַּשְׁלַחְנֹהוּ חֲפָשִׁי מֵעִמְךָ. יג וְכִי תַשְׁלַחְנֹהוּ חֲפָשִׁי מֵעִמְךָ לֹא תִשְׁלַחְנֹהוּ רֵיקָם. יד הַעֲנִיֵּק תַעֲנִיֵּק לוֹ מִצֹּאֲנֶךָ וּמִגִּרְנֶךָ וּמִקְבֹּכֶךָ אֲשֶׁר בֵּרַכְךָ ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ תִתֵּן לוֹ. טו וְזָכַרְתָּ כִּי עֶבֶד הָיִיתָ בְּאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם וַיִּפְדֶּךָ ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ עַל כֵּן אֲנִי מְצַוְךָ אֶת הַדָּבָר הַזֶּה הַיּוֹם.

BACKGROUND TEXT 8

The story of the Exodus from Egypt was used not only by Jews but by other groups who felt oppressed at one time or another. In the United States, the Exodus was evoked during the American Revolution (18th century), the Civil War (19th century), and the Civil Rights Movement (20th century). Dr. Scott Langston, professor of Religion and American History at Texas Christian University, writes,

A couple of months after American colonists declared their independence from Great Britain, a committee composed of Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Jefferson, and John Adams proposed a design for a national seal. It portrayed the Egyptian pharaoh leading his troops through a divided Red Sea in pursuit of the fleeing Israelites. Surrounding this scene were the words, "Rebellion to Tyrants is Obedience to God."¹

¹ Available at Teaching in the Bible, a newsletter from the Society of Biblical Literature. Viewed January 2025.

This is the seal seen in Text 8. Ultimately, Congress did not approve this design and the eagle became the central image of the national seal.

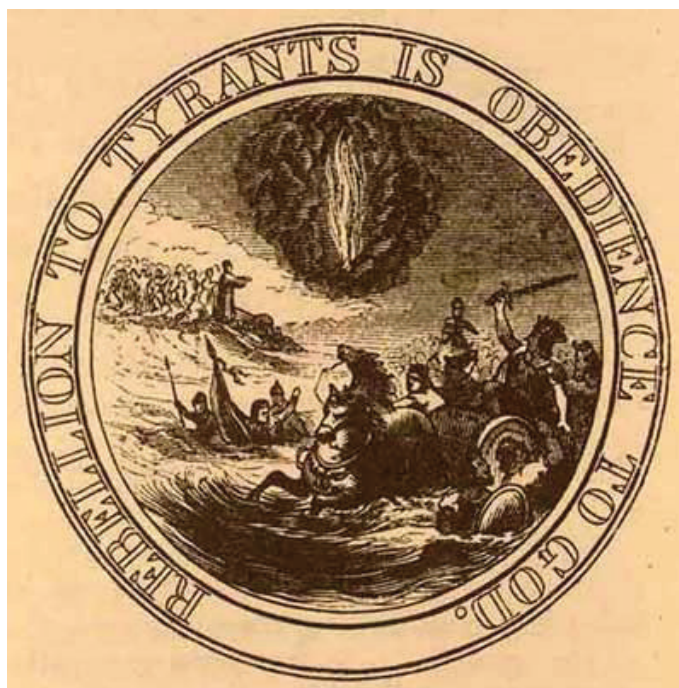
The committee did not make a drawing of their design, they only offered a written description of it. This description was penned by Franklin and edited by Jefferson. It read:

Pharaoh sitting in an open Chariot, a Crown on his head and a Sword in his hand, passing through the divided Waters of the Red Sea in Pursuit of the Israelites: Rays from a Pillar of Fire in the Cloud, expressive of the divine Presence and Command, beaming on Moses who stands on the shore and extending his hand over the Sea causes it to overwhelm Pharaoh. Motto: Rebellion to Tyrants is Obedience to God.²

The drawing itself was made only many years later, in 1856, by Benson J. Lossing (1813–1891), a prolific and popular American historian, and published in *Harper's New Monthly Magazine*. Note that Lossing did not interpret in his drawing the rays that were supposed to emanate from the pillar of fire.



TEXT 8 PROPOSED AMERICAN NATIONAL SEAL DESIGN



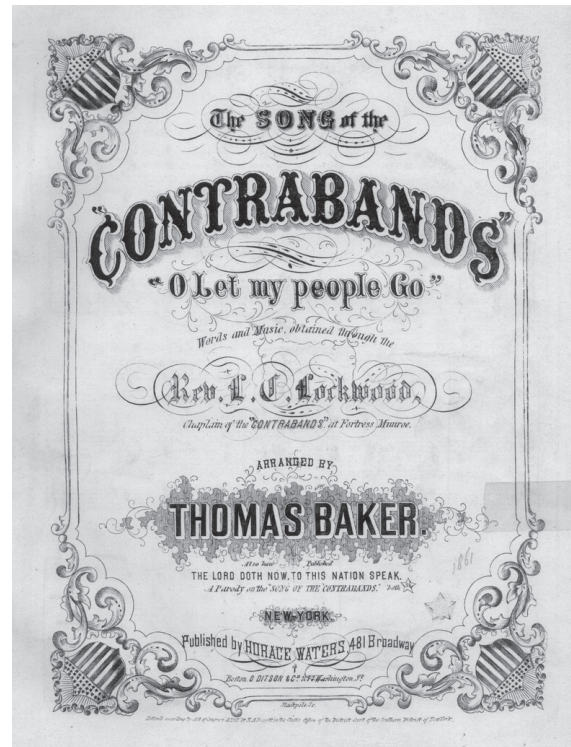
Benson John Lossing, Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons

² Available at greatseal.com. Viewed January 2025.

BACKGROUND TEXT 9

This spiritual was composed sometime in the 19th century. Some scholars believe it had been used as a rallying anthem for the contrabands (slaves who had escaped from the South to Union lines during the Civil War) at Fort Monroe in 1861. The first known sheet music of the song was copyrighted in that same year under the title, “The Song of the Contrabands – O Let my people Go.” The chaplain of the contrabands, Reverend L. C. Lockwood, according to one source, stated that the song had been sung as early as 1853 in Virginia.

There are several different versions of the lyrics, but in all of them the Israelites of the biblical story represent the enslaved African Americans. According to some, the “going down” referred to “going down the river,” in this case, the Mississippi.



Available at [wikimedia.org](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:The_Song_of_the_Contrabands.pdf). Public Domain.

This lesson presents two recordings for the faculty, who can select which one they would like to share with the learners in their class:

The first is an audio recording by singer, actor, social and political activist, lawyer, and athlete, Paul Robeson (1898–1976). Robeson made the song famous with his rendition recorded in 1953. Aside from his major accomplishments, he is also known for singing in Yiddish and even sang a song about the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising.

[Recording by Paul Robeson](#)

The second recording is presented in a video by a Russian choir, originally established at the Moscow Choral Synagogue in 1990. They started out by singing Jewish music, both liturgical and popular, and have been instrumental in promoting interest in Jewish music and heritage throughout Russia. Over the years, their repertoire has expanded and now includes many genres in several different languages.

[Recording by Russian choir](#)



TEXT 9

GO DOWN, MOSES (C. 1850–1870S)

Go Down, Moses

When Israel was in Egypt land,
Let my people go!
Oppressed so hard they could not stand,
5 Let my people go!

(Chorus)

(So the Lord said)

Go down, Moses,

10 Way down in Egypt land,
Tell old Pharaoh
To let my people go!

So Moses went to Egypt land

15 He made old Pharaoh understand
“Thus spoke the Lord,” bold Moses said,
Let my people go!
“If not I’ll smite your firstborn dead!”
Let my people go!
20 Go down . . .

(Not in the recording suggested above)

Your foes shall not before you stand,
Let my people go!

25 And you’ll possess fair Canaan’s land
Let my people go!
Go down . . .

You’ll not get lost in the wilderness

30 Let my people go!
With a lighted candle in your breast.
Let my people go!
Go down . . .



TEXT 10

RABBI ABRAHAM JOSHUA HESCHEL, *RELIGION AND RACE*

(1907–1972) Religious philosopher in America, Professor of Jewish Ethics and Mysticism at the Jewish Theological Seminary. The speech below was delivered in 1963 as the opening address at the National Conference on Religion and Race in Chicago.

At the first conference on religion and race, the main participants were Pharaoh and Moses. Moses' words were: "Thus says the Lord, the God of Israel, let My people go that they may celebrate a feast to Me." While Pharaoh retorted: "Who is the Lord that I should heed his voice and let Israel go? I do not know the Lord, and moreover I will not let Israel go."

5

The outcome of that summit meeting has not come to an end. Pharaoh is not ready to capitulate. The exodus began, but is far from having been completed. In fact, it was easier for the children of Israel to cross the Red Sea than for a Negro to cross certain university campuses.

Heschel, A. J. 1975. *The Insecurity of Freedom*. New York: Schocken Books, 85.

BACKGROUND TEXT 11

In Deuteronomy (*Devarim*), the Torah contrasts the ideal state of the land full of bounty (8:6–10) with the danger that can result from this abundance (8:11–18). In the excerpted text below, Sacks explains the link between these two biblical passages.



TEXT 11

RABBI JONATHAN SACKS, *THE POLITICS OF MEMORY* (2019)

(1948–2020) Former Chief Rabbi of the United Kingdom and the Commonwealth, philosopher, author, and thought leader.

Good things, says Moses to the next generation, will happen to you. The question is how you will respond. Either you will eat and be satisfied and bless G-d, remembering that all things come from Him – or you will eat and be satisfied and forget to whom you owe all this. You will think it comes entirely from your own efforts: “My power and the strength of my hands have produced this wealth for me.” Although this may seem a small difference, it will, says Moses, make all the difference. On this alone will turn your future as a nation in its own land.

Moses’ argument is both brilliant and unexpected. You may think, he says, that the tough times are behind you. You have wandered for forty years without a home. There were times when you had no water, no food. You were exposed to the elements. You were attacked by your enemies. You may think this was the test of your strength. It wasn’t. The real challenge is not poverty but affluence; not slavery but freedom; not homelessness but home. Many nations have been lifted to great heights when they faced difficulty and danger. They fought battles and won. They came through crises – droughts, plagues, recessions, defeats – and were toughened by them. When times are hard, people grow. They come together. They bury their differences. There is a sense of community and solidarity, of neighbours and strangers pulling together. Many people who have lived through a war remember it as the most vivid time of their life.

The real test of a nation is not, can it survive a crisis? but, can it survive the lack of a crisis? Can it stay strong during times of ease and plenty, power and prestige? That is the challenge that has defeated every civilization known to history. Let it not, says Moses, defeat you.

Moses’ foresight is little less than stunning. The pages of history are littered with the relics of nations that seemed impregnable in their day, but which eventually declined and fell and lapsed into oblivion – and always for the reason Moses prophetically foresaw. They forget. Memories fade. People lose sight of the values they once

- 30 fought for – justice, equality, independence, freedom. The nation, its early battles over, becomes strong. Some of its members grow rich. They become lax, self-indulgent, over-sophisticated, decadent. They lose their sense of social solidarity. They no longer feel it their duty to care for the poor, the weak, the marginal, the losers. They begin to feel that such wealth and position as they have is theirs by right. The bonds of fraternity and collective responsibility begin to fray. The less well-off feel an acute sense of injustice. The scene is set either for revolution or conquest. Societies succumb to external pressures when they have long been weakened by internal decay. That was the danger Moses foresaw and about which he warned.

Available online at rabbisacks.org. Viewed July 2020.



TEXT 12

RABBI IRVING (YITZ) GREENBERG, *JUDAISM AS AN EXODUS RELIGION: PASSOVER*

(b. 1933) Contemporary Orthodox theologian and writer in America; served as the Chairman of the US Holocaust Museum.

- Exodus morality meant giving justice to the weak and the poor. Honest weights and measures, interest-free loans to the poor, leaving part of the crops in the field for the stranger, the orphan, and the widow, treating the alien stranger as a native citizen – these are all applications of the Exodus principle to living in this world. Thus, the
- 5 Exodus, as articulated at Sinai, transformed the Jewish people and their religious ethical system. Inasmuch as Christianity and Islam adopted the Exodus at their core, almost half the world is profoundly shaped by the aftereffects of the Exodus event.
- 10 In modern times, the image of redemption has proven to be the most powerful of all. The rise of productivity and affluence has heightened expectations of the better life. Widely disseminated scientific ideas and conceptions of human freedom carry the same message: Do not accept disadvantage or suffering as your fate; rather, let the world be transformed!

Greenberg, I. 1988. *The Jewish Way: Living the Holidays*. New York: Touchstone, 64–65.



TEXT 13

RABBI SHARON BROUS, *DON'T TELL ME, SHOW ME* (2015)

(b. 1973) Ordained by the Jewish Theological Seminary, founding rabbi of IKAR, on the faculty of the Hartman Institute-North America, Wexner Heritage, and REBOOT, and is a Senior Fellow at Auburn Theological Seminary.

(9:50) Religious communities also need at their heart, a narrative, a *raison d'être*, something beyond historical obligations and communal commitments and demographic fear and parental guilt. We need a story, a story that ultimately helps us articulate what it means to be alive in the world, what it means to be a human being . . . (10:13)

5

(10:24) We need a story that helps remind us what it means to actually dream of something that's bigger than us. And Jews have so many stories. We tell these stories all the time, and we tell them not to relay historical events, but we tell them to convey critical ideas, to instill values, to offer a sense of purpose in a chaotic world.

10 (10:45)

(11:16) This is the story of our redemption, the Exodus from Egypt, *yetziat mitzrayim*.

Yetziat mitzrayim – coming out from a narrow place, the triumph of freedom over slavery, of dignity over degradation, the movement from darkness into light, from

15 paralysis into possibility, to self-determination from systematized oppression. The exodus is a story of plagues and wonders, but the central feature of this story that we tell and retell is actually an extraction process, it is a *Yetziya*, a story of people going on a journey, leaving behind tyranny and persecution, reclaiming their humanity.

20 The Exodus story is a testament to the inextinguishable yearning both human and divine for freedom. And it's timeless because it speaks to all people. It speaks to the powerless, telling those who are vulnerable, you matter, your struggle matters. (12:24)

25 (15:24) The single most important commandment in the Torah, by weight of verse alone, would clearly be the central obsession that our text has with the *ger*, with the stranger, the other, the vulnerable, mentioned 36 times throughout the Torah. Why

is this stranger the centerpiece of Biblical legislation and imagination? Because the treatment of the vulnerable offers a newly freed slave the chance to create
 30 a counterculture, a counter-Egypt, to build a society that honours dignity, and recognizes humanity, and entrusts us with caring for one another.

The work of leaving Egypt is ongoing, it doesn't end once the Egyptian armies drown in that sea. It's an extraction process, it's ongoing, which is why one very powerful young Jewish woman once wrote the following words: "Until we are all
 35 free, we are none of us free."*

That later became the bedrock of the Civil Rights movement in the United States, when Martin Luther King wrote in Letter from a Birmingham Jail, "injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere." (16:32)

* "Until we are all free, we are none of us free," is from Emma Lazarus (1849–1887) and appears in her series of articles titled "An Epistle to the Hebrews," in which she discusses the Jewish problems of her time.

This is an excerpt from a transcript of an oral presentation. The oral presentation can be heard and the entire transcript read at jdov.org. Viewed July 2020.



TEXT 14

BERL KATZNELSON, *THE INEXHAUSTIBLE WELLSPRINGS* (1934)

(1887–1944) One of the intellectual founders of Labor Zionism, instrumental to the establishment of the modern state of Israel, and the editor of *Davar*, the first daily newspaper of the workers' movement.

From parents to children, [down] through the generations, the Exodus from Egypt was transmitted as a personal memory that does not fade or dim. "In each and every generation, a person is obligated to see oneself as if they had [personally] come out of Egypt." In the world and through time, you have no grander historical consciousness than this, nor a greater merging of the individual and the collective
 5 than the one present in this ancient pedagogic instruction. I know of no other literary

creation that teaches the abhorrence of slavery and the love of freedom more than the story of the subjugation and [subsequent] exodus from Egypt. And I know of no ancient memory that is entirely focused on the future, that is wholly symbolic of our present and our future, as “a reminder of the Exodus from Egypt.”

10

How deep-seated is the impulse for freedom in the heart of this nation that was able to fashion such a brilliant creation in the flower of its age and to [succeed in] transmitting it down the generations! And this creation has no small share in the destiny of all those Jewish-born rebels and freedom fighters that hold freedom sacred.

15

בְּרַל כְּצִנְלָסוֹ, מְקוּרוֹת לֹא אֶכְזָב

מֵאֲבוֹת אֶל בָּנִים, דֶּרֶךְ כָּל הַדּוֹרוֹת, נִמְסַר דְּבַר יִצְיָאָת מִצְרַיִם כְּזִכְרוֹן אִישׁ, אֲשֶׁר אֵינָנו מַחֲוִיר וְאֵינָנו יִדְהָה. "בְּכָל דּוֹר וָדוֹר חַיֵּב אָדָם לִרְאוֹת אֶת עֲצָמוֹ כְּאִלוֹ הוּא יֵצֵא מִמִּצְרַיִם". אֵין לָהּ שִׂיא שֶׁל הַכֶּרֶה הִיסְטוֹרִית מְרוֹמֵם מִזֶּה, וְאֵין לָהּ הַתְמַזְגוּת שֶׁל יְחִיד וּכְלָל - בְּרַחֲבֵי כְדוּר־הָעוֹלָם וּבְעַמְקֵי הַדּוֹרוֹת - גְּדוּלָּה מֵאֲשֶׁר בָּצוּ פִּדְגוּגֵי עַתִּיק זֶה. אֵינָנִי יוֹדֵעַ יִצְיָרָה סְפְרוּתִית יוֹתֵר מִחֲנֻכָּת לְתַעֲוִב הָעֲבָדוֹת וּלְאַהֲבַת הַחֲרוּת כְּסִפּוֹר הַשְּׁעָבוּד וְיִצְיָאָת מִצְרַיִם. וְאֵינָנִי יוֹדֵעַ שׁוֹם זְכוֹרֹן עַתִּיק שֶׁמֶלּוֹ מִפְּנֵה לְקִרְאָת הָעַתִּיד, שֶׁמֶלּוֹ סִמֵּל לַהוּיָהּ שֶׁלָּנוּ וְלַעֲתִידָנוּ, כִּי "זֵכֶר לִיִּצְיָאָת מִצְרַיִם".

אֵיזָה יִצְרָחִירוֹת עֲמוּק טְבוּעַ מִלֵּב עִם שִׁיכּוֹל הָיָה בְּאֶבֶיב יָמָיו לִיצוֹר יִצְיָרָה גְּאוּנִית כְּזֹאת וְלִמְסוֹר אוֹתָהּ מְדוֹר לְדוֹר. וְלִיצְיָרָה זֶה חֵלֶק לֹא קָטָן בְּגוֹרְלָם שֶׁל כָּל הַמּוֹרִידִים וְלִוְחָמֵי הַחֲרוּת וּמִקְדָּשֵׁי שְׁמָה, אֲשֶׁר נוֹלְדוּ עַל בְּרַכֵּי שְׂרָאֵל . . .



TEXT 15

RACHEL TRAVIS, *PARSHAT SHMOT 5771* (2010)

A consultant in PwC's Public Sector Practice, she believes that art can serve as a vehicle for social change.

“In every generation one is obligated to view him [or her] self as though s/he personally came out of Egypt.” Though we recite these words at the Pesach seder each year, I find them difficult to practice. So too, as I studied *Parshat Shmot* and

5 read about the descent of the Children of Israel into slavery and their immense suffering under Pharaoh, I struggled to envision myself in their place. As an American Jew, blessed to live in comfort and security and having never experienced true oppression, try as I might, I could not genuinely imagine what it would feel like to be a slave.

10 I was troubled by this realization, because personally relating to the Exodus from Egypt is a core tenet of Judaism, as well as a foundation for the assertion that social justice is an inherently Jewish value. The Torah reminds us dozens of times that we have the moral obligation to help others because we were slaves in Egypt. We are commanded to love the stranger precisely because we were strangers in
15 Egypt. We are directed to aid the oppressed because we, as a people, understand what it means to suffer. The Torah seems to imply that understanding suffering is a prerequisite for remedying it.

20 But can we satisfy the Torah's commandments to aid the oppressed if we ourselves cannot relate to their suffering? Moreover, can we still find a meaningful social justice message in the Exodus story if we cannot identify with the experiences of our ancestors?

I believe we can

25 . . . The true *raison d'être* of the Exodus was to reach Sinai and to receive the Torah, thereby forming a nation with responsibilities toward God and toward each other – a nation bound no longer by slavery, but obligated by the mitzvot to create a just society . . .

30 Perhaps then, our contemporary social justice lesson is this: Because we are free, as the Israelites were once freed from Egypt, we are obligated to help the oppressed. Because we do not know what it feels like to be a stranger, we must love the stranger. In many ways, this is a more challenging imperative than the one culled
35 from the traditional reading of the text. It requires that we continuously infuse our freedom with meaning through action.

Available on the website of the American Jewish World Service, ajws.org. Viewed July 2020.



TEXT 16

RABBI AMNON RIBAK, *EVERY PERSON NEEDS EGYPT*

(b. 1955) Ordained in Hebrew Union College in Jerusalem and faculty at the Shalom Hartman Institute.

Everyone needs to have their own

Egypt

That they can draw themselves out of

With a strong hand

5 Or with the grinding of the teeth.

Everyone needs terror and great darkness,

And comfort, promise, and rescue,

That they should know to lift their eyes to the Heavens.

10 Everyone needs that one prayer

That would always be on their lips.

A person needs to give in [at least] once –

Everyone needs a shoulder.

15 Everyone needs to have their own

Egypt,

To redeem themselves from it, from the house of slaves,

To go out at midnight into the wilderness of fears,

To march straight into the waters,

20 To see them part before him unto both sides.

Everyone needs a shoulder,

To carry Joseph's bones upon it,

Everyone needs to stand erect.

25 Everyone needs to have their own

Egypt

And Jerusalem,

And one long trek,

Forever to remember it

30 In the soles of their feet.

Trans. A. Weschler

אֲמַנּוּן רִיבִי, כָּל אָדָם צָרִיךְ מִצָּרִים

כָּל אָדָם צָרִיךְ שְׁתַּהֲיָה לוֹ
אִיזוֹ מִצָּרִים,
לְהִיּוֹת מִשָּׁה עֲצָמוֹ מִתּוֹכָהּ
בְּיַד חֲזָקָה,
אוֹ בַּחֲרִיקַת שָׁנִים.

כָּל אָדָם צָרִיךְ אִמָּה וְחֻשְׁכָּה גְדוֹלָה,
וְנִחְמָה, וְהַבְטָחָה, וְהַצְלָה,
שִׂידַע לְשֵׁאת עֵינָיו אֶל הַשָּׁמַיִם.
כָּל אָדָם צָרִיךְ תַּפְלָה
אַחַת,
שְׁתַּהֲיָה שְׁגוּרָה אֲצִלּוֹ עַל הַשְּׁפָתִים.
אָדָם צָרִיךְ פֶּעַם אַחַת לְהִתְכַּוֵּף-
כָּל אָדָם צָרִיךְ כְּתָף.

כָּל אָדָם צָרִיךְ שְׁתַּהֲיָה לוֹ
אִיזוֹ מִצָּרִים,
לְגֵאוֹל עֲצָמוֹ מִמְּנָה מִפִּית עֲבָדִים,
לְיֵצֵאת בְּחֻצֵי חֲלִיל אֶל מִדְּבַר הַפְּחָדִים,
לְעֻזֹּד הַלָּשֶׁר אֶל תּוֹךְ הַמַּיִם,
לְרֹאוֹתָם נִפְתָּחִים מִפְּנֵי לְצַדִּיקִים.
כָּל אָדָם צָרִיךְ כְּתָף,
לְשֵׁאת עָלֶיהָ אֶת עֲצָמוֹת יוֹסֵף,
כָּל אָדָם צָרִיךְ לְהַזְזִיקָה.
כָּל אָדָם צָרִיךְ שְׁתַּהֲיָה לוֹ
אִיזוֹ מִצָּרִים.
וִירוּשָׁלַיִם,
וּמִסַּע אֲרוֹךְ אֶחָד,
לְזִכּוֹר אוֹתוֹ לְעַד
בְּכָפּוֹת הָרָגִלִים.

KEY TERMS

Kiddush. (קידוש, Lit. sanctification) Prayer recited over wine or bread proclaiming the sanctity of Shabbat and festivals.

Pesach. (פסח) The Hebrew term used to refer to Passover. It is the first of the three pilgrimage festivals, and it commemorates God's passing over the homes of the Israelites during the plague striking the Egyptian firstborn. The biblical festival was celebrated on the day of 14 Nissan and the following evening, and it was marked by the sacrifice of the paschal lamb (*korban Pesach*). Today, however, *Pesach* refers to the festival that starts on 15 Nissan and lasts until 21 Nissan; it is marked by the eating of *matzah* (unleavened bread), and the prohibition against *chametz* (leavened products).

Tefillin. (תפילין) Black, leather, cube-shaped boxes containing four biblical passages, worn on the arm and on the forehead during weekday morning prayers.

Yetziat Mitzrayim. (יציאת מצרים) The Hebrew term used to refer to the Exodus of the Israelites from Egypt.

KEY NAMES

Brous, Rabbi Sharon. (b. 1973) Prominent American rabbi ordained by the Jewish Theological Seminary, and served as a Rabbinic Fellow at Congregation B'nai Jeshurun in New York City. She is the founding leader of IKAR, a vibrant Jewish community in Los Angeles and a member of the International Council of the New Israel Fund and the rabbinic advisory council to American Jewish World Service. In 2013, The Daily Beast ranked her first on its list of America's most influential rabbis. She is a leading voice in reanimating religious life in America, working to develop a spiritual roadmap for soulful, multi-faith justice work.

Greenberg, Rabbi Irving. (b. 1933) Leading Orthodox theologian, founder of the Center for Learning and Leadership in New York, and author of a popular book on the Jewish holidays called *The Jewish Way*. He served as Chairman of the US Holocaust Memorial Museum.

Heschel, Rabbi Abraham Joshua. (1907–1972) A religious philosopher, he served as professor of Jewish ethics and mysticism at the Jewish Theological Seminary of America. Author of numerous books on philosophy, Tanakh, *kabbalah*, and Hassidism including *The Prophets*, *A Passion for Truth*, *The Earth Is the Lord's*, *Man's Quest for God*, *The Sabbath*, and *God in Search of Man*.

Katznelson, Berl. (1887–1944) Leader of the Zionist Labor movement and a central figure of the Second Aliyah. Born in Belorussia, he was the son of a member of Hovevei Zion, and from childhood grew up with dreams of *aliyah*. He was strongly imbued with the ideal of physical labor and when he arrived in Israel in 1909, he worked on farms and served on several labor councils. He helped found the consumer cooperatives for the sale of food, known as “Hamashbir.” He helped initiate Kuppas Holim, the Sick Fund. He was the editor of the Histadrut's newspaper *Davar*. He was one of the few voices in non-religious labor circles to press for the observance of the Sabbath and festivals, dietary laws in Histadrut kitchens, and the circumcision of children in the kibbutzim. He was instrumental in pressing for “illegal” immigration to Palestine and, under his guidance, his disciples parachuted into Nazi-held territory to try to aid Jewish survivors.

Lerner, Michael. (1943–2024) American political activist, psychotherapist, and author, renowned for his progressive views and efforts to integrate spirituality with social justice. In 1986, Lerner founded *Tikkun* magazine, serving as its editor. The publication became a leading voice for liberal and progressive Jewish thought, emphasizing the integration of spiritual wisdom with social and political activism.

Moses. Lawgiver and prophet to whom the authorship of the Torah is traditionally attributed. Also called Moshe Rabbenu in Hebrew (מֹשֶׁה רַבֵּנוּ, Lit. “Moses our Teacher/Rabbi”), he is the most important prophet in Judaism, his prophetic abilities being unsurpassed by any other, and is also considered an important prophet in Christianity and Islam, as well as a number of other faiths. According to the Torah, he led the Israelite nation out of Egyptian slavery and to Mt. Sinai where he facilitated their receiving of the Torah (known as the Five Books of Moses), and then continued as their leader during their forty years of wandering in the desert, but was not permitted to lead them into the Land of Israel.

Ribak, Rabbi Amnon. (b. 1955) A fellow in the Beit Midrash for the Israeli Rabbinate of the Hartman Institute and the Midrash in Oranim. He also serves as the rabbi of the reform community ‘Ma’alot Tivon’ in Kiryat Tivon. Before that, he served as acting rabbi in the Or Hadad community in Haifa. Before he turned to rabbinical pursuits and Judaism, he was a high-tech person and worked for over 26 years in the industry, most of them in the IBM research laboratory. He was ordained to the rabbinate at Hebrew Union College in Jerusalem in 2021.

Sacks, Rabbi Lord Jonathan. (1948–2020) An international religious leader, philosopher, award-winning author and respected moral voice, he was awarded the 2016 Templeton Prize in recognition of his “exceptional contributions to affirming life’s spiritual dimension.” He was a frequent and sought-after contributor to radio, television, and the press both in Britain and around the world. After stepping down as the Chief Rabbi of the United Hebrew Congregations of the Commonwealth – a position he served for twenty-two years between 1991 and 2013 – he held a number of professorships at several academic institutions including Yeshiva University, New York University, and King’s College London. He authored more than 30 books. He received numerous awards for his contributions to presenting Judaism in a fresh and meaningful way.

Travis, Rachel. Consultant in PwC’s Public Sector Practice, with a background in Jewish art and visual culture. She earned a master’s degree from the Jewish Theological Seminary and has worked at various museums and Jewish institutions, reflecting her belief in art as a vehicle for social change. She has contributed to American Jewish World Service (AJWS) as an author, writing insightful pieces that explore the intersection of Jewish teachings and social justice. Her writings are featured in AJWS’s Dvar Tzedek series, where she delves into weekly Torah portions to extract lessons on justice and human rights.

SUGGESTED READINGS

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APPENDIX



[A] FRED HELLERMAN AND FRAN MINKOFF, *MAN COME INTO EGYPT*

Hellerman (1927–2016): American folk singer, guitarist, producer, and songwriter, and an original member of the American folk group The Weavers, together with Pete Seeger, Lee Hays, and Ronnie Gilbert. Frances “Fran” Minkoff (1915–2002): American lyricist.

ABOUT THE SONG:

This song was recorded by the American folk trio Peter, Paul, and Mary and was released in January 1963, as part of the album *Moving*, as a civil rights song. [Click here to hear the song.](#)

There is a man come into Egypt, and Moses is his name
When he saw the grief upon us in his heart there burned a flame
In his heart there burned a flame, oh Lord, in his heart there burned a flame
When he saw the grief upon us in his heart there burned a flame

5

There is a man come into Egypt, his eyes are full of light
Like the sun come up in Egypt, he's come to drive away the night
Come to drive away the night, oh Lord, come to drive away the night
Like the sun come up in Egypt, come to drive away the night

10

There is a man come into Egypt, he's come for you and me
On his lips a word is singing, and the word is “Liberty”
And the word is “Liberty,” oh Lord, and the word is “Liberty”
On his lips a word is singing, and the word is “Liberty”

15

There is a man come into Egypt to stir the souls of Man
We will follow him to freedom, never wear those chains again
Never wear those chains again, oh Lord, never wear those chains again
We will follow him to freedom, and never wear those chains again.

BACKGROUND APPENDIX TEXT B:

The following text is an excerpt from a sermon King delivered on May 17, 1956, Service of Prayer and Thanksgiving, Cathedral of St. John the Divine in New York City. He delivered this sermon in an ecumenical program commemorating the second anniversary of the Supreme Court's decision in the case of *Brown v. Board of Education* concerning the desegregation of schools.



[B] MARTIN LUTHER KING JR., *THE DEATH OF EVIL UPON THE SEASHORE (1956)*

(1929–1968) An American Christian minister and activist who became the most visible spokesperson and leader in the civil rights movement from 1955 until his assassination in 1968, he is best known for advancing civil rights through nonviolence and civil disobedience, inspired by his Christian beliefs and the nonviolent activism of Mahatma Gandhi.

... You will remember that at a very early stage in her history, the children of Israel were reduced to the bondage of physical slavery under the gripping yoke of Egyptian rule. Egypt was the symbol of evil in the form of humiliating oppression, ungodly exploitation and crushing domination. . . .

- 5 . . . There are approximately 2,400,000,000 people in the world today. The vast majority of these people are found in Africa and Asia. More than 1,400,000,000 of the peoples of the world are found on these two continents. Fifty years ago most of these people were dominated politically, exploited economically, segregated and humiliated by some foreign power. There were 400,000,000 persons in India
- 10 and Pakistan under the iron feet of British rule. There were 600,000,000 persons in China under the gripping yoke of British, Dutch and French rule. There were 100,000,000 persons in Indonesia under the oppressive hands of Dutch rule. There were 200,000,000 persons in Africa dominated and exploited by the British, the Belgium, the French, and the Dutch. The great struggle of the Twentieth Century has
- 15 been between these exploited masses questing for freedom and the colonial powers seeking to maintain their domination. . . .

. . . Many years ago the Negro was thrown into the Egypt of segregation, and his great struggle has been to free himself from the crippling restrictions and paralyzing effects of this vicious system. For years it looked like he would never get out of this Egypt. The closed Red Sea always stood before him with discouraging dimensions. There were always those Pharaohs with hardened hearts, who, despite the cries of many a Moses, refused to let these people go. But one day, through a world shaking decree by the nine justices of the Supreme Court of America and an awakened moral conscience of many White persons of good will, backed up by the Providence of God, the Red Sea was opened, and the forces of justice marched through to the other side. As we look back we see segregation caught in the rushing waters of historical necessity. Evil in the form of injustice and exploitation cannot survive. There is a Red Sea in history that ultimately comes to carry the forces of goodness to victory, and that same Red Sea closes in to bring doom and destruction to the forces of evil.

This is our hope. This is the hope and conviction that all men of goodwill live by. It is at bottom the conviction that all reality hinges on moral foundations and that the whole cosmic universe has spiritual control. It is therefore fitting and proper that we assemble here, just two years after the Supreme Court's momentous decision on desegregation, and praise God for His power and the greatness of His purpose, and pray that we gain the vision and the will to be His co-workers in this struggle.

Let us not despair. Let us not lose faith in man and certainly not in God. We must believe that a prejudiced mind can be changed, and that man, by the grace of God, can be lifted from the valley of hate to the high mountain of love.

Let us remember that as we struggle against Egypt, we must have love, compassion and understanding goodwill for those against whom we struggle, helping them to realize that as we seek to defeat the evils of Egypt, we are not seeking to defeat them but to help them, as well as ourselves.

God has a great plan for this world. His purpose is to achieve a world where all men will live together as brothers, and where every man recognizes the dignity and worth of all human personality. He is seeking at every moment of His existence to lift

men from the bondage of some evil Egypt, carrying them through the wilderness of discipline, and finally to the Promised Land of personal and social integration. . .

Available at the Martin Luther King, Jr. Papers Project. Viewed January 2025.