



Back issues of and single articles published in *New York Folklore Quarterly*, *New York Folklore*, and *Voices* are available for purchase. Check the tables of contents for availability and titles. To request an article for purchase, contact us at info@nyfolklore.org. Please be aware that some issues are sold out, but most articles are still available.

Copyright of NEW YORK FOLKLORE. Further reproduction prohibited without permission of copyright holder. This PDF or any part of its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv or website without the copyright holder's express permission. Users may print or download article for individual use.

NEW YORK FOLKLORE
129 Jay Street
Schenectady, NY 12305
518/346-7008
Fax 518/346-6617
Email: info@nyfolklore.org
<http://www.nyfolklore.org>

Time All at Once

BY CAROLINE HARRIS, GUEST COLUMNIST

Introduction by Steve Zeitlin

After celebrating a family Seder in Philadelphia for almost a hundred years, my coterie of cousins so dispersed that the celebration gradually dwindled, faded away. So, I was delighted when Carrie Harris, my close friend and City Lore board member, invited me to celebrate her family Seder in Manhattan in 2019. (As a sign of these times, our Seder was reinstated in this year of the COVID-19 pandemic on Zoom.) As Carrie led the symbol-laden ritual meal, we were told the story, as retold in the familiar Haggadah booklets handed to each of us. We read aloud about the Jews escaping slavery in Egypt, giving thanks for God who “passed over” the Jews during the ten plagues, parted the Red Sea, led them to freedom, and as noted in the accompanying Seder song, “Dayenu,” gave the Jews the Ten Commandments on Mount Sinai, and after 40 years, brought them to the Promised Land.

As is traditional at the Seder, the youngest child reads the four questions, beginning with “Why is this night different from all other nights?” After a few glasses of wine, a different set of questions crossed my mind. Considering the current situation between the Israelis and the Palestinians, is it productive for us to annually retell a story that points to Israel as a promised land for the Jews? Was the promise of a Promised Land actually a promise of land? When did the metaphor of a righteous escape become a right to real estate? (Thousands of years later, politicians in Israel regularly make that claim.) Is it helpful, given the situation, for Jews all over the world to exclaim, “Next year in Jerusalem”? Jesus is said to have been crucified in that city and, adding to the contested claims, centuries after the Second Temple was destroyed, the Al-Aqsa Mosque in Jerusalem became a holy site for Muslims. When the Christians talk about “home,” they think about heaven; Jews often think about Israel. Is the Seder adding fuel to the fires?

Like the lamb shank and the bitter herb on the Seder plate, I thought about these questions as food for thought. In conversations with Carrie growing out of her Seder, she suggested that I am shortchanging the story. “It’s primarily a story

about freedom from oppression. It does express the hope that “next year,” we will be in Israel, but it has expressed that hope for thousands of years when there was no state of Israel and still hopes for it now that there is one.” Here’s how Carrie tells it.

Time All At Once

The *Haggadah* tells a story within a larger story, within an even larger story. On Passover, at the *Seder*, we transcend time. In one night, we journey into the past through the present to the future—time all at once. These time frames are tracked in the *Seder*: the past before the meal, the present at dinner, and the future after dinner. The past is very deep, reaching back not just to Egypt and Jacob, and Abraham before, but to the beginning of time.

The *Haggadah* reminds me of my mother. As my mom is getting older and may be afflicted with some dementia, her stories, like the *Haggadah*, always begin further and further back in time. You ask my Mom a simple question, and you might find out where she—or even her father—was born to get to your answer.

Past

The *Seder* is supposed to tell us the story of the Hebrews’ escape from slavery in Egypt. Like my mother’s answers, the *Haggadah* goes back to the beginning of time, to Creation, remembered as we first light and bless the holiday candles, separating light and darkness to start the story.

The *Maggid*, the section of the *Haggadah* in which the official narrative is recited, also doesn’t get right to the point either. It incorporates portions of Abraham’s and Jacob’s stories, which describe the growth of a tribe into a nation.

More significantly, the *Maggid* introduces monotheism to the Passover narrative. God’s promise of a great nation is predicated on Abraham’s and the Hebrews’ acceptance of the one God. The *Haggadah* recounts all of the wonders that God

performed to free the Hebrews from slavery, showing the one God’s might over the polytheistic Egyptians’ gods, through the plagues and the parting of the Red Sea.

Throughout the centuries, the *Haggadah* has incorporated what were then contemporary references to make the story relevant to the day, intimating that the *Haggadah* isn’t only about a particular place, Egypt, at a particular time but about all *Mitzrayims*—all “narrow” places, at all times.

Today, many *Seders* emphasize that the celebration is not only about freedom from slavery in Egypt thousands of years ago, or just about Jewish history; it’s about freedom from oppression anywhere for everyone. In the 1970s, some added a fourth *matzah* to bring attention to the plight of Soviet Jews. Modern anti-Semitism is recalled with a reading from the writings of a Holocaust survivor, and this year, anti-Semitism and all hatred undoubtedly were recalled by reading about the slaughters at the Tree of Life Synagogue in Pittsburgh and the Al Noor Mosque and Linwood Islamic Centre in Christchurch, New Zealand. A chalice of water has joined the *Seder* table, symbolizing Miriam’s well and the role of women in the Passover story. Along with the shank bone, the bitter herbs, and the egg, an orange on the *Seder* plate now stands for diversity, a tomato, for migrant workers’ rights. Thus, “Egypt” is a metaphor for any place where there is slavery, oppression, or hatred.

Present

Before dinner, three different themes of change have been introduced: from slavery to freedom; tribe to great nation; and polytheism to monotheism. This, the past, with efforts to make the past meaningful by reference to more recent events. With dinner, we are fully in the present.

The *Haggadahs* are tucked away, tossed on a couch or dropped to the floor. There is no script during the meal. We erupt in conversation. Adults find out what’s



Seder, 1946. Photo courtesy of Steve Zeitlin.

happened in each other's lives since the last *Seder*. Kids run around, or play with plastic frogs jumping into wine glasses. We eat heartily, the smells and tastes reminding us of our family's and friends' sweet past, with a dash of bitterness about the brother who won't join us, sadness about the aunt who died. Yet, here we are together again, linking the past and the present.

Then the kids (in my *Seder*, adults, too) scramble around to find the *Afikoman*. That piece of matzah, raised aloft at the beginning of the *Seder*, will let us begin to end the *Seder*, once again merging the past with the present, present with the future.

When we bite the small broken piece of matzah from the *Afikoman*, we bite reality—the reality of oppression and hardship, the reality of a broken world. Yet, we taste our dreams, our dreams of freedom and justice for us and all people.

Future

We open the door for Elijah, the prophet who is supposed to resolve all conflicts before the Messiah comes, and we pray God will once again redeem us, hoping that whatever Jewish or humanitarian crisis we are facing this year will be resolved by next year.

The *Haggadah* doesn't end with our hope that the immediate problems of the Jews and the rest of the world will be resolved by next year, though; indeed that would be, as the beloved Jewish folksong goes, "Dayenu!"—It would be enough. The *Haggadah's* vision extends further.

Where does the story end? A story that begins with Creation can only end in the far distant future beyond time, after Elijah, in the world to come—*ha'olam ha'ba*. The concluding line of the *Haggadah*, "Next Year in Jerusalem!" is, in part, the hope for the physical place that Jews consider home. ("Hope," in Hebrew, is *Hatikvah*—the



Seder, 2018. Photo courtesy of Caroline Harris.

name of Israel's national anthem.) It also is the hope that the problems we experience today will be resolved next year. Beyond that, "Next Year in Jerusalem!" is the existential hope that someday—in the world to come—all of us will enter the Promised Land, the land of milk and honey. "The Promised Land" is a metaphor for universal freedom, the perfect world of peace and justice.

Just before he was assassinated in Memphis, Martin Luther King echoed the Passover story, on April 3, 1968, in an address at Bishop Charles Mason Temple, when he declaimed, "I've been to the mountain-top...and I've looked over, and I've seen the Promised Land. I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight, that we, as a people, will get to the Promised Land!"

In one night, we journey together from Creation, through all time in between, to the future, beyond our imagination, in the world to come. We form a bond that unites us with other Jews now, with Jews in the past and in the future, linking us with all humanity to create a better world. In the words of the 19th-century American Transcendentalist and Unitarian minister, Theodore Parker (quoted in the 20th century by, and sometimes credited to, Martin Luther King), "The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends towards justice."

The message uncovered is deeply optimistic and challenging. From the time of the Creation of humankind, we have been on a trajectory toward the Promised Land of justice, compassion, and peace. The *Haggadah* teaches us: The light of Creation illuminates our path to redemption.

Yet, we cannot sit by idly. We must walk on that path. We must take action, like Abraham and Jacob, Yoheved, Puah, Miriam, and Moses, continuously owning our freedom, striving for freedom and an end to oppression for others, and pursuing justice, as we march together through human history to the Promised Land.

And then we sing.



This year on Passover, we journeyed through time, and with Zoom as our vehicle, we journeyed through space in a way we never could have imagined before. People gathered for "Z'eders" from places near—down the street—and far, from other states and countries, forming a bond, despite this terrible pandemic, with our hopes of a better, healthier world.

The Plague

The Jews have seen it all—
waters of the Nile turn blood red
frogs
lice
flies
 pestilence
boils
hail
locusts
darkness
 and the killing of the firstborn child.

But now we are all quarantined
as if an X in lamb's blood were
 drawn upon our doors.

May this plague spare us all—
the good people of the planet.
Let our people go—
Christian, Hindu, Muslim, Jew.

May the Angel of Death
 pass over our houses
May the Red Sea part.
May cities and towns reopen.
May we all pass through.

—Steve Zeitlin

Please email your thoughts, stories, and responses about the poetic side of life to steve@citylore.org. Steve Zeitlin is the Founding Director of City Lore. He is the author of *The Poetry of Everyday Life: Storytelling and the Art of Awareness* (Cornell University Press, 2016). ▼



Zoom Seder, 2020. Photo courtesy of Caroline Harris.

Caroline Harris was born in New York as a Reform Jew, affiliates as a Conservative Jew, and is always seeking the deeper meaning of her heritage for herself and to share with others. She serves on the Board of Directors of City Lore and is also a partner in the zoning and landmark preservation law firm of GoldmanHarris LLC. She is delighted and thankful to Steve Zeitlin for the opportunity to share as a guest columnist. Photo courtesy of the author.



Send Your Story to Voices!

Did you know that Voices publishes creative writing, including creative fiction (such as short stories), creative nonfiction (such as memoirs and life/work stories), and poetry? If you are one of New York's traditional artists or working in a traditional occupation, please consider sharing with our readers. For more information, see our Submission Guidelines on page 47, or contact the Editor at tdegarmo@sals.edu

New York **FOLKLORE**

Join or Renew your New York Folklore Membership to Receive *Voices* and other Member Benefits

For the General Public

Voices is a peer-reviewed scholarly journal, published twice annually. Join New York Folklore and become part of a community that will deepen your involvement with folklore, folklife, the traditional arts, and contemporary culture. As a member, you'll have early notice of Gallery special exhibits and NYF-sponsored key events. Members receive a discount on NYF Gallery items.

For Artists and Professionals

Become a member and learn about technical assistance programs that will get you the help you may need in your work:

Mentoring and Professional Development
Folk Artists Self-Management Project
Folk Archives Project
Consulting and Referral
Advocacy
A Public Voice

Membership Levels

Individual

\$ 50.00	Basic Membership
\$100.00	Harold W. Thompson Circle
\$150.00	Edith Cutting Folklore in Education

Organizations/Institutions

\$ 75.00	Subscriber
\$100.00	Partner
\$150.00	Edith Cutting Folklore in Education

Please add \$20.00 for non-US addresses.

For payment, choose the option that works best for you:

Use our website, www.nyfolklore.org

or mail a check to us at 129 Jay St., Schenectady NY 12305;

or call the NYF business office, 518-346-7008, to pay with a credit card over the phone.