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Embrace New Parts of the Haggadah
Rabbanit Leah Sarna
Class of 2018

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The Haggadah, the text that guides Jewish families through the retelling of the Exodus story at the seder night, is a long and complex composition. So long that many have argued for paring it back: too much to get through before dinner. But to me, its length provides promise.

Passover during a pandemic means families torn apart, grief, fear, loneliness and more. My advice? Let the texts take the lead, and not just because, with many fewer people and opinions around the table, there will be plenty of time to fill.

Instead, it's worth revisiting the Haggadah as a whole because in a strange year, some of the usual favorites might not resonate. They might be painful reminders of joyful seders past, or call for you to do activities that aren't possible at your miniature stay-at-home-seder. But if you can't find meaning or comfort in your usual favorites, trust that you will find solace somewhere in the texts you haven't focused on in previous years.

As I've been preparing for my own micro-seders this year, there's a certain line in the Haggadah that I keep coming back to. After the seder meal, we recite Psalm 118. Verse 5 reads: "From the strait I have called, Lord." In the context of the Haggadah, "the strait" is a pun in Hebrew: "meytzar" (strait) echoes the word "mitzrayim" (Egypt). In my family, this line is always sung to a boisterous, table-banging melody that fits well into the triumphant tone of Psalm 118 as a whole.

However, this line was recently set to a powerful — and more downbeat — [new tune](#) by musician [Deborah Sacks Mintz](#). Her song and these words, which typically have passed me by in the jumble of Psalm 118, feel appropriate to our moment. Stuck at home in the middle of a pandemic, we, like the Psalmist, call out from our own "strait" and pray for salvation. These ancient psalms have provided language for the Jewish people to pray throughout the many difficulties of our history. That very same language is serving me well today. I've never dwelled on this line at the seder night before, but I certainly will this year.

The length and complexity of the Passover texts are a promise of ever-unfolding meaning. Open yourself to them, and you will find that they open themselves to you.



Rabbanit Leah Sarna is the Director of Religious Engagement at Anshe Sholom B'nai Israel Congregation in the Lakeview neighborhood of Chicago, IL. Rabbanit Sarna holds a B.A. in Philosophy & Psychology from Yale University. She has studied Torah the Beit Midrash for Women at Migdal Oz, Drisha Collegiate Kollel and the Center for Modern Torah Leadership Summer Beit Midrash. Rabbanit Sarna was also a Wexner Graduate Fellow, a Hartman Rabbinical Student Fellow and a JOIN for Justice Rabbinic and Cantorial Leadership for Public Life Fellow. Rabbanit Sarna has worked at Camp Yavneh and the Dr. Beth Samuels Drisha High School Program, and she has been the clergy intern at Harvard Hillel, Ohev Sholom: The National Synagogue, and the Hebrew Institute of White Plains. She has completed a unit of Clinical Pastoral Education at Columbia Presbyterian Hospital and served as a visiting chaplain at the Bedford Hills Correctional Facility for Women.