

out of Egypt as a multifaceted and multilayered journey in which caring for ourselves, supporting other women, and actively engaging in the repair of the world are equally important, interconnected parts.

The power of women's seders lies, in part, in their ability to address these many layers of liberation and redemption. Each year, we give ourselves permission to recline and relax for one evening, serving ourselves rather than others. But we do not let ourselves forget our responsibility and capability as free women; we also rededicate ourselves to the work of repairing the world. A women's seder motivates us to nurture ourselves, inspire one another, and respond to those who are in need of our help on their journey to liberation. For women's seders to further the journeys of individual participants and the community, they must continue to evolve, confronting the new challenges posed by the reflections presented here in this part.

Sanctified by Ritual

PHYLLIS CHESLER

Passover teaches us that freedom is a miracle, but that with God's help this miracle is possible no matter what one's earthly, historical circumstances might be. Whether a Jew has just survived the ancient destruction of Jerusalem or a European or Arab pogrom, is imprisoned in an Iranian jail or in a Nazi concentration camp, she is still commanded to celebrate her freedom from slavery. Passover teaches us that there are many kinds of slavery and that earthly jails do not have the power to imprison our Jewish souls. Passover also teaches us that obtaining one's freedom is both immanent and transcendent, a part of the human historical process and outside it. The ongoing dialectic between slavery and liberation is, like the world, a work in progress. Once we achieve

Dr. Phyllis Chesler is an emerita professor of psychology and women's studies, a psychotherapist, and an expert courtroom witness. She is also a board member of the International Committee for Women of the Wall. She was a member of the original New York women's seders and is the author of eleven books, including *Women and Madness* and most recently *Woman's Inhumanity to Woman and Women of the Wall: Claiming Sacred Ground at Judaism's Holy Site* (Jewish Lights Publishing).

one level of freedom, it becomes the basis from which to struggle for the next level.

Is a story this monumental, a message this universal, meant for Jews of one gender only? Or even for Jews only? Can only religiously learned Jewish men officiate at a seder—or can any Jew, male or female, learned or not, also do so? Indeed, in what sense is Passover a holiday of women and slaves, an opportunity to wrest freedom from fundamentalist Judaism? Is freedom a Jewish religious value meant for all people, all faiths? If so, should Jews make it a point to invite non-Jews to seders? What will be lost in translation? Is it really possible to transmit what we have learned about slavery and freedom to children, strangers, and slaves, to those who dwell within our midst? This is precisely what we are commanded to do.

Over the years, I have learned many things about slavery and freedom from reading secular books and by leading, participating in, and observing the very earliest feminist seders. I have organized and attended seders that were run by and for women only, feminists only, lesbians only. I believe that such separatist, political, and secular seders have—or rather had—their place. They are the first steps out of the Egypt of patriarchy, but not, ultimately, the steps that will bring us into the Promised Land.

Leaving Egypt is hard to do. We must continue the journey every year—and by the long route, no less. The short route will not do; the vegetation must change; new people must be born and brought into our tradition. But it takes time for slaves to become free enough to enter the Promised Land; the first generation may have to die out first.

I have learned some important things from studying the Torah itself. For example, slavery shortens the human spirit and makes risk-taking and collective resistance difficult, perhaps impossible. It is precisely because the Israelites suffer from impatience and shortened vision that Moses seems dangerous to them. They fear and resent him. After Moses kills the taskmaster, it is the fearful, resentful Jews, not the Egyptians or the taskmaster's compatriots, who want to turn him in. This is why Moses flees Egypt. Being a liberator is dangerous work; one

does not choose this honor/burden but is chosen. Understandably, Moses resists it, but he comes to accept God's will.

This is the reason that, although Moses—the liberator—is a central figure in the Passover story, he is not mentioned even once in the hagadah. Feminist seders often elevate Miriam, thus minimizing or missing entirely the hagadah's point, which is to emphasize God's centrality to the liberation. It is a form of paganism, it is religiously childlike, this hunger to see one's own gendered human image writ large. I once had this hunger, and I also insisted on satisfying it. In the beginning, after so many centuries of God-the-father, Jewish feminist women hungered for God-the-mother. We needed to wrestle her free into being; it was the beginning of our exodus from fundamentalist misogyny within Judaism.

In the beginning, women who had been rendered invisible to themselves demanded that a human being just like themselves occupy center stage: they did not want to share the space with any man (Moses, Elijah, the rabbis of B'nai Brak). Thus, the earliest women's seders were created in Our Own Image.

Although we were not slaves—all were educated, independent, women with professions, reputations, and ideals—the women in early feminist seders still resembled the just-freed Jewish slaves. For example, we were ambivalent about leaving Egypt: most still did our "real" seder with our biological families. The feminist seder was done on another night, suggesting that it was a social or political event or a luxury, not a necessity. Lesbian seders were more often done on a "real" seder night, suggesting a more serious break with persecutory and rejecting families and a greater need for new ritualized families.

Like the Jewish slaves who had left Egypt, some of the women at our seder behaved in spiritually bedaggle ways. They used no religious sources but instead relied on feminist critiques of monotheism, wonderful feminist poetry, odd bits of learning, political tracts. Many also talked about their own achievements a good deal. Some used the seder to make speeches about current events, not about the miracle of redemption or God's role.

I certainly understand the need to use the seders to discuss our political lives. In 1971, I first encountered anti-Semitism among leftists, progressives, and feminists. From that moment on, I devoted myself to raising consciousness about this. I formed pioneer organizations, spoke at countless conferences and rallies, wrote articles, visited (and brought others to) Israel. However, what I was doing was secular politics; what I was missing was Jewish religious nourishment for my soul.

In 1976, the first-ever feminist Passover seder in North America was held in my apartment. An extraordinary time was had by all. Afterwards, we were high for weeks. Over the next few years, we evolved into a core group, with high-profile politicians, writers, scholars, artists, media personalities, and feminist icons among our oft-returning guests. For a time, our greatest pleasure was to please and delight one another. Looking back, I would characterize what we did as a combination of feminist consciousness-raising, group therapy, and a Broadway show—Judaism lite.

At the time, I thought of us as a small group of feminists who wanted to retain our connection to Judaism in a celebratory manner. We also wanted to create a World of Our Mothers, and a faith-oriented community. But our faith turned out to be more secular than religious; our unspoken "givens" were liberal, left, feminist principles. In the historical era of the first feminist seders, it was easy for us to explode into being an amorphous, joyful, spontaneous lot, who quickly came to be perceived as leaders and pioneers.

We began to evolve a counter-haggadah, one in which the previously hidden and silenced world of women—of our personal and collective mothers and grandmothers—became dominant. We devised a different, parallel, mirror universe of a haggadah and a seder—one filled with only mothers and daughters. At the time, what we did was absolutely necessary and the first step out of Egypt. But, in my view, too many feminist seders continued to repeat taking only the first step, year after year. As we shall see, they—and we—languished there.

One might argue that this *was* our tradition. Fair enough. But it is not enough. Of course what we did was important. We created the

ritual of verbal matrilineage, and introducing ourselves this way was—and remains—psychologically powerful and liberating. We feminized rituals, reciting plagues that were specific to women, devising evocative and psychodramatic rituals. We discussed the civil disobedience and sisterhood-in-deed modeled by the women of the Exodus story.

Once, we were as silent as slaves at our own seders; now, we were as free as Jews at our own feminist seder. This is no small achievement. However, a madcap feminist secularism and zeal for political correctness often overtook our Judaism. And while there is nothing wrong with being primarily secular, political, and atheist, there is something very confusing about dressing up in religious garments and presenting oneself as rabbinical figures in order to do so. In my opinion, we were not transforming a patriarchal ritual. We were, instead, creating a minor cult of our own celebrity.

Some perfectly memorable, moving, feminist seders faced and sometimes failed at least five challenges: first, that of gender separatism versus gender integration. In 1978, I had given birth to my son Ariel. I needed and wanted to include him in my seders. I also felt it was important for Jewish boys as well as girls to have fond, firm memories of adult Jewish women officiating at seders. I tried reasoning. I also begged. It was like trying to reason with Orthodox Jewish men to include women in a *minyán*. Over an eighteen-year period, I was only allowed to bring Ariel once, to one seder, when he was about six or seven years old. My seder sisters, most of whom were (or had once been) heterosexual married women and who were mothers themselves, refused to include sons as well as daughters.

They were not wrong, but they were not right.

It is true that the psychological dynamics in an all-female group can change instantly, profoundly, with the introduction of even one perfectly nice man. Women do not behave in the same way toward each other when a man or men are present. Many women have a hard time developing leadership skills or feeling authoritative in a gender-integrated setting. The realities of male domination and of female collaboration with it make asserting one's opinion or taking charge harder

for some women when men are present. Some women cannot bear to see their strong female friends simpler and compete for male approval and attention, or withdraw their maternal gaze from women and transfer it to men.

I myself sometimes prefer to *pray* in a group of only women. Our energy is different; something changes when men join us. The Women of the Wall pray in a women-only group. We have no alternative, not if we want to include Orthodox women—and we do. But a feminist Passover that takes place in one's own home and follows new rules is another matter. It seemed to me that a group of strong feminist women might, after four or five years of journeying together, begin to invite *some* carefully selected men and male children.

Second, feminist seders have a responsibility to teach others about what we are doing so that they will continue our work. Each feminist haggadah that has been published has had this in mind. Some haggadahs include scholarly material; most do not. There is another way to pass on a legacy, namely by cultivating a "hands-on" connection to other similar grassroots groups around the country or around the world.

Many feminist seder groups preferred each other's company—this is our right—to the task of reaching out to serious newcomers who had made an express commitment to return to their own communities where they would initiate similar feminist seders. In my opinion, we were failing an important obligation.

The third challenge is that of size. Some people prefer a very large and public seder with charismatic leaders, *rebettes*, performers. Others prefer a more intimate seder so that every Jew, each woman, can be a participant, not a passive observer. Early on, some of us wanted to turn our feminist seder into a huge public event. I resisted doing so. Perhaps I was wrong. I certainly did not stop anyone from pursuing this, but the amount of time and money necessary was prohibitive for us. Most of us had to work hard to survive financially. Perhaps we were each temperamentally incapable of institutionalizing something, given our artistic and independent spirits.

Fourth, most feminist seder communities, including mine, did not collectively create an evolving haggadah, complete with specific rituals. We were so creative, so madcap, that each year we dared to have different rituals and focus on different themes. Nor did we collectively write down and attempt to share the many other life-cycle rituals that we had begun to celebrate, such as Jewish feminist Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur rituals, as well as rituals for giving birth, having a hysterectomy, and losing a loved one.

The fifth challenge is that of acknowledging, questioning, and refining one's own motivation and intentionality. Were we maintaining such seders in order to advance our own careers and reputations? In order to create secular communities? Were we doing any of this for the sake of Heaven, because as Jews we are commanded to do so?

As the years went on, I began to demand that we invite fewer people, fewer celebrities; that we invite sons, husbands, and male friends; and that we stop focusing so much on ourselves and on how important we are. We had guests whom we were obliged to serve. To lead these seders, I believe that we must serve God as well and that we have an obligation to be minimally learned in Judaism. For me, the thrill was gone. But, I stayed on. I did not disconnect. I dared not disconnect. These women represented *the* Jewish feminist world. If I left, I feared I would have nowhere else to go.

On December 1, 1988, that changed. On that day, I was among the women who prayed with a Torah at Jerusalem's Western Wall for the first time in history. I uncovered the Torah for us—an honor that will never be surpassed in my lifetime and that wedded me to the struggle for Jewish women's religious rights and to the study of Torah. Early in 1989, I helped form the Women of the Wall (WOW) and its International Committee (ICWOW). This group, and its important religious and political struggles, provided me with a new Jewish feminist world to immerse myself in.

Finally, after eighteen years, I left the seder group. Afterwards, others did too. Some returned, some did not, but it would never be the same. Over the years, I think we have each mourned the loss of "us":

our friendships, our love, our idealism, a header moment in time.

Once, a lifetime ago, we were all laughing girls together, radiant with hope. I loved us all, I miss us still. One can forever miss Paradise before the Fall; one can also mourn one's exile from simpler times and from illusion itself.



Reflections on the Feminist Seder as an Entry Point into Jewish Life

LILLY RIVLIN

Dear reader, where were you when you first participated in a feminist seder? By that, I mean what was your relationship to Judaism, to feminism, to your career, to your family, and what were the opportunities for women in the world around you?

It has been more than a quarter century since two secular women, Naomi Nimrod and Esther Broner, wrote a feminist version of the haggadah. In 1976 I was invited to the first feminist seder in the United States, which used this haggadah. In 1977 I officially became a "seder sister" along with Broner, Letty Cortin Pogrebin, Phyllis Chesler, and Bea Kretloff. This meant that for the next several decades, a few weeks before Pesach, I would be on the phone with these women, planning and brainstorming on the theme of the seder for that year.

Feminism was the wellspring from which our seder sprang. Who were we when we started the feminist seder? What was the need, and why did secular feminists give birth to the feminist seder? In Bob Dylan's words, the answer was blowing in the wind. It was a time when freedom was in the air. Civil rights. Freedom riders in the South. Demands for freedom in South Africa. The patriarchy was challenged,

Lilly Rivlin is an author, activist, and filmmaker. She was a member of the original New York women's seders, and is the coeditor of *Which Ladies? Feminist Writers React to the World's First Woman*.