STEPHEN
WISE TEMPLE

וְהִיא שֶׁעָמְדָה

V'HI SHE'AMDA —
WHAT HAS SUSTAINED US

***V'HI SHE'AMDA* — WHAT HAS SUSTAINED US**

An Introduction to our *Seder* Supplement

In a *seder* moment that was always a bit disappointing to my father of blessed memory, we raise our glasses once in the midst of the *maggid*—the telling of the story. Unlike the four glasses of wine, though, there is no blessing and no drinking. Instead, we raise a glass and recite these words:

וְהִיא שֶׁעָמְדָה לַאֲבוֹתֵינוּ וְלָנוּ...שֶׁלֹּא אֶחָד בִּלְבַד עָמַד עָלֵינוּ לְכַלּוֹתֵנוּ,
אֶלָּא שֶׁבְּכָל דּוֹר וָדוֹר עוֹמְדִים עָלֵינוּ לְכַלּוֹתֵנוּ, וְהַקָּדוֹשׁ בָּרוּךְ הוּא מַצִּילֵנוּ מִיָּדָם.

And it is this promise which has sustained our ancestors and us,
for not just once did somebody try to destroy us—
but rather, in every generation they try to destroy us and the Holy Blessed One saves us from their hands.

Known as *V'hi Sheamda*, this short segment of the storytelling appeared for the first time in an 8th century Haggadah. In the centuries following, it has become a theology, an anthem, and a rallying cry for Jewish resilience. These were the words sung time and again at Hostages Square as an entire nation prayed for their children to return home, to a sold-out crowd at Madison Square Garden and of course sung at *seder* tables around the world.

This year, still healing from the attacks of October 7, sitting in the shadows of Iranian and Hezbollah missiles, and sharing the pain of synagogue attacks all over the world, we need no reminder that there are those in our generation who would seek to destroy us. Perhaps what we need now, as our story brings us down into the bondage of Egypt, is the hope that will lift us out.

In these pages, we hope you will find that hope—along with struggle, challenge, pain, and joy; these are all hallmarks of the Jewish experience… and of the Passover festival. We hope these teachings from our clergy will inspire conversation around the *seder* table and beyond, and will bring meaning, connection, and a reminder of our resilience in this sacred season of liberation.

Wishing you and yours a *chag kasher v'sameach*—a meaningful and happy Passover holiday.

Rabbi Sari Laufer
Chief Engagement Officer

THE FOUR CHILDREN: אַרְבָּעָה בָּנִים

Rabbi Yoshi Zweiback

The Haggadah's Four Children represent more than personality types or stages of life; they reflect the different voices within a single community—the varied ways we respond when the world feels uncertain, or even hostile.

At this moment, I find myself deeply moved by this understanding of the Arba'ah Banim. Amongst us are:

- **The Wise:** Those searching for meaning, asking how to respond with integrity and responsibility.
- **The Skeptical:** Those who feel distant or disillusioned, wondering if they still belong in our collective story.
- **The Simple:** Those longing for clarity in a time that feels overwhelmingly complex.
- **The Silent:** Those who do not know how to ask—who feel silenced by fear, grief, or confusion.

Seen through this lens, the *Arba'ah Banim* teach us that these voices do not merely make up a community; **they form a family.**

In moments of crisis, we are often tempted to flatten difference—to insist on a single way of thinking, a single tone, or a single response. But the Haggadah offers a different vision. It insists that everyone has a place at the table, especially when we do not see the world the same way.

What holds a community together is not agreement, but a shared commitment to one another: a willingness to make room, to listen with patience, and to extend grace when it is most difficult.

We are living in a time when the world can feel as though it is turning against us. In such moments, the instinct is to narrow our circles, to draw lines, to decide who is "in" and who is "out." **But our strength has never come from sameness**. It comes from our ability to remain connected through complexity.

This year, perhaps the deepest question is not which child we are, but whether we can make space for all four.

We need each other now—in all our differences, all our questions, and all our complicated, courageous ways of showing up.

That is how we endure.

That is how we find our way forward.

***HA LACHMA ANYA* - THE BREAD OF AFFLICTION**

Rabbi Josh Knobel

הָא לַחְמָא עַנְיָא דִּי אֲכָלוּ אַבְהָתָנָא בְּאַרְעָא דְמִצְרָיִם. כָּל דִכְפִין יֵיתֵי וְיֵיכֹל, כָּל דְצָרִיךְ יֵיתֵי וְיִפְסַח. הָשַׁתָּא הָכָא, לְשָׁנָה הַבָּאָה בְּאַרְעָא דְיִשְׂרָאֵל. הָשַׁתָּא עַבְדֵי, לְשָׁנָה הַבָּאָה בְּנֵי חוֹרִין.

This is the bread of affliction that our ancestors ate in the land of Egypt. Let all who are hungry come and eat. Let all who are in need enter and celebrate Passover. This year we are here; next year let us be in the land of Israel. This year we are slaves; next year let us be free people.

This opening passage from the *magid* — the retelling of the Passover story – completely reframes our Passover celebration, turning our focus away from liberation and toward servitude, away from freedom and toward all the ways in which we remain enslaved. In doing so, the sages present Passover as both a moral imperative and a communal hope.

"Let all who are hungry come and eat…" reminds us that our suffering carried a purpose — an everlasting reminder to remain attentive to the needs of others, especially those who are vulnerable. Our freedom is measured not only by what we have gained, but by how we use it to care for those around us. The bread of affliction is meant to provoke action, to remind us that ethical awareness is inseparable from historical memory.

Meanwhile, "This year, we are slaves…" reminds us freedom is not fully realized until it is shared by all our People, until others, too, are invited to partake in sustenance and dignity, safely in their homeland. The *Seder* insists that celebration is not simply personal—it is relational. Redemption is a process, and it remains contingent upon how broadly we extend its reach.

As a people, we have faced countless hardships, challenges, and setbacks throughout the millennia, but we have persevered by infusing these trying circumstances with meaning. Each disappointment… each sorrow… imparts a lesson, a reminder of the People we are meant to be. When we acknowledge the bread of affliction, we commemorate not just the birth of our People, but the birth of our moral resilience, which has enabled us to reach this day and will sustain us through all the trials yet to come.

THE FOUR QUESTIONS – CURIOSITY AS SURVIVAL

Cantor Lauren Blasband-Roth

The Four Questions at our Passover *Seders* begin not with an answer, but with a question.

Before the Exodus story is fully retold, before the meal begins, a child asks: *Mah nishtanah hahaila hazeh mi kol haleilot?* – מַה נִּשְׁתַּנָּה הַלַּיְלָה הַזֶּה מִכָּל הַלֵּילוֹת? – "Why is this night different from all other nights?" Jewish tradition places this moment of curiosity at the very center of the *Seder*. Our story of freedom does not begin with certainty. It begins with wondering.

But why?

Perhaps because questioning has always been one of the ways the Jewish people have survived. For centuries, Jews lived in changing lands, under shifting rulers, often without stability or power. What endured was not a single place or moment in history, but a living conversation. Our texts have recorded countless debates and disagreements. The rabbis of the Talmud preserved generations of arguments, questions layered upon questions, sometimes without a final answer. Our tradition did not survive because it avoided questions. It survived because it made space for them.

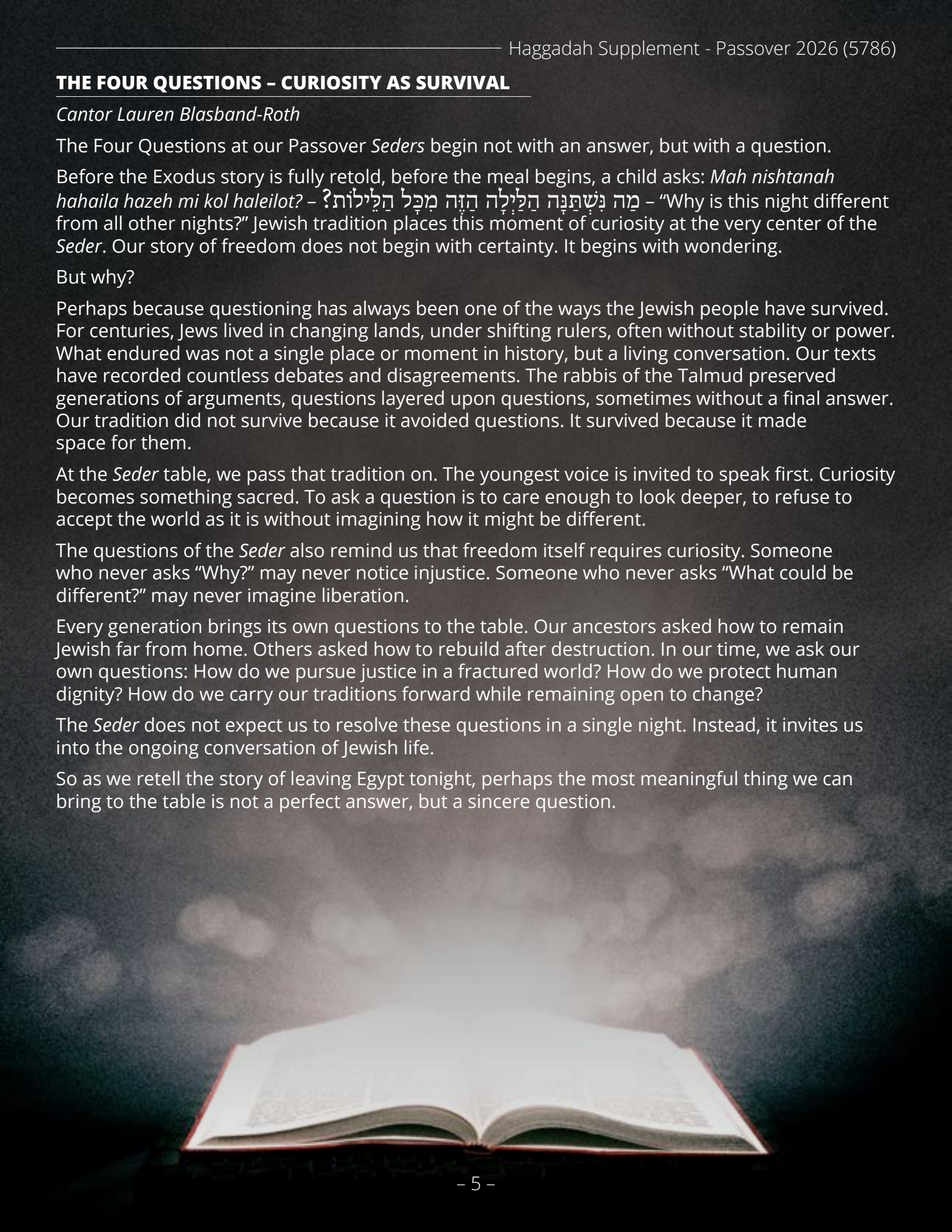
At the *Seder* table, we pass that tradition on. The youngest voice is invited to speak first. Curiosity becomes something sacred. To ask a question is to care enough to look deeper, to refuse to accept the world as it is without imagining how it might be different.

The questions of the *Seder* also remind us that freedom itself requires curiosity. Someone who never asks "Why?" may never notice injustice. Someone who never asks "What could be different?" may never imagine liberation.

Every generation brings its own questions to the table. Our ancestors asked how to remain Jewish far from home. Others asked how to rebuild after destruction. In our time, we ask our own questions: How do we pursue justice in a fractured world? How do we protect human dignity? How do we carry our traditions forward while remaining open to change?

The *Seder* does not expect us to resolve these questions in a single night. Instead, it invites us into the ongoing conversation of Jewish life.

So as we retell the story of leaving Egypt tonight, perhaps the most meaningful thing we can bring to the table is not a perfect answer, but a sincere question.



READING THE PLAGUES FOR OUR TIMES

Rabbi Ron Stern

My essential question of Jewish sources that have come to us out of the dark recesses of history is: "Why might our ancestors have written this story as they did?" While the temporal distance means the answer to that question will always elude us, framing the challenge as I have opens the door to a compelling and often enlightening way of reading ancient texts. Every writer has a perspective and agenda. What might have driven our ancestors to frame the stories as they did?

So, let's ask that question of the story of the Ten Plagues. What might the writer's intent have been? First, a few relevant features of the story:

- Aaron initiates the first three plagues (blood, frogs, lice). Pharaoh's magicians were able to replicate the first two. Failing to do so on the third they warn Pharaoh that "This is the finger of God!" He fails to see the significance.
- Though not every plague is preceded by Moses' demand to "Let my people go!" because, either God, Moses or Aaron initiates them, the purpose of the plagues remains clear. Pharaoh remains intransigent.
- Plagues 6-9 (boils, fire & brimstone, locusts, darkness) are initiated by Moses. Pharaoh's magicians are unable to offer any remediation.
    - Pharaoh witnesses the suffering of his people as fire and brimstone falls all around him (but not on his dwelling, nor those of the Israelites) and still refuses Moses' request.
- At first Moses asks for permission for the Israelites to travel a short distance away to worship God and then return, not full freedom. Pharoah accedes to the request but reneges before the Israelites can depart. It is not until the eighth plague that Moses requests full freedom for the Israelites.
    - When Moses finally demands freedom, the Torah says that God hardens Pharaoh's heart so that God's signs will be displayed before all Egypt.

- It is only after Pharaoh's first born is killed (the final plague) that he finally relents and lets the Israelites go.
- Here's a chart that details the structure of the plagues if you'd like to go deeper.

This progression of the plagues speaks to an audience of one: Pharaoh. He is the autocrat that holds the fate of his own people and that of the Israelites in his hands, and yet, it's not until the suffering is brought into his own house that he acquiesces and grants freedom to the Israelites. He remains unmoved by the afflictions of animals, the suffering of his own people, or even the decimation of his land. The message is clear, the signs are obvious, yet Pharaoh remains blind, though he has the power to stop it all.

That's the powerful insight that I believe speaks to our times. We are surrounded by modern plagues: they are warnings about the state of our society and world. Plagues of hatred, poverty, disease, animal extinction, climate change, war, the list goes on. When we read the Exodus story and hear of Pharaoh's intransigence, we are shocked at his willingness to ignore the obvious. The signs are around us as well. Why do so many in our society ignore them?

At your *seder* table, take some time to reflect on the modern plagues that you and your guests can identify. To what extent are they conditions of our world that demand action? What can we do as individuals to heed the signs? Where can we be more forceful in our advocacy for those with power to take action? As these ancient texts compel us to confront the dilemmas of our own time, the voices of our ancestors acquired renewed meaning in our lives.

DAYENU – GRATITUDE FOR PARTIAL REDEMPTION

Rabbi Sari Laufer

The cover of poet Katie Farris's collection, *Standing in the Forest of Being Alive*, features a hand holding a braid of hair, cut from its attendant head. Her author photo shows her bald, taken during treatment for breast cancer. But long before I knew those details, it was her words that stayed with me—and that feel especially resonant right now, in our world and at our *seder*. Facing uncertainty, she wrote:

Why write love poetry in a burning world?
To train myself, in the midst of a burning world,
to offer poems of love to a burning world.

And here we are. Not even halfway through the *seder*, having just named the plagues—our future murky at best. And still, we are asked to sing. To offer an ancient version of love poetry in a burning world.

As we sing *Dayenu*, we pause to give thanks—not for a completed journey, but for the stops along the way. Not for arrival, but for what has sustained us so far. For the small, necessary moments that help us keep going.

Tonight, we might notice those moments—easy to miss—when something softens just enough for us to say: this is enough. *Dayenu*.

The Hasidic teacher known as the *Sfat Emet* teaches that with every breath, life itself is renewed—not once, at the beginning, but again and again, in each moment. Which means that even now, even here, life is still meeting us—breath by breath.

And maybe that is the quiet wisdom of *Dayenu*: not that we stop longing for wholeness, but that we don't overlook what has already been given. That we learn to gather these moments of enoughness—small, sometimes hard-won—and let them steady us, again and again, on the long road toward freedom.

What is your moment—tonight? This year? In this season of life? What moments of unexpected "enoughness" have gotten you through? Where have you heard love poetry in a burning world?

Because even here—especially here—hope keeps fi nding language. As modern theologian Kate Bowler writes in her *The Lives We Actually Have*:

Blessed are we, awakening from the boredom of routine,
desiring to drink in the beauty around us once again,
full of the love You have given us,
the joy hidden among the reeds of the ordinary.
Blessed are we who ask: for hearts that are soft,
for eyes that are awake,
for ears that are open,
for hands to hold the wonder that is here, now.

Dayenu.

***HALLEL* – SINGING WITH JOY IN AN UNFINISHED WORLD**

Cantor Emma Lutz

Near the end of *Maggid*—the section of the Passover *Seder* when we retell the story of the Exodus—the evening turns unexpectedly toward song. We sing *Hallel*, psalms of praise, even though the story is not truly finished. The Israelites have crossed the sea, but the wilderness still lies ahead.

Why sing at that moment?

Perhaps because Jewish tradition teaches that gratitude does not wait for life to be fully resolved. The *Seder* ritual invites us to notice goodness even while the journey continues. In the words of Hallel: "*Hodu L'Adonai ki tov, ki l'olam chasdo* — הוֹדוּ לַיי כִּי טוֹב כִּי לְעוֹלָם חַסְדּוֹ. — Give thanks to Adonai, for God is good; God's steadfast love endures forever."

The psalm does not claim that life is simple or that the path is easy. Instead, it reminds us that gratitude can rise even in uncertain moments. The Israelites sang at the sea not because the journey was complete, but because they had glimpsed the possibility of freedom—and felt God's presence with them as they stepped into the unknown.

Music has always carried our people through uncertain times. When we sing around the *Seder* table, we join generations of Jewish voices that rose even when the future was unclear. Miriam sang with abandon at the sea just after liberation, before the wilderness journey had begun. In exile in Babylon, our ancestors composed melodies for the psalms—music that could carry their grief. In medieval Spain, poets like Judah Halevi wrote timely sacred words that communities sang in synagogues. Even in the Warsaw Ghetto, Jews gathered quietly to sing Hebrew songs, sustaining courage and dignity through music. Even in our darkest times, song endured.

And so—before the meal, before the wandering, before we even know what will unfold in our chapter of Jewish history—we sing anyway. And in that song, we strengthen the spirit that will carry us forward. *Chag Pesach Sameach*.

ELIJAH'S CUP AND MY HOPE FOR THE NEXT GENERATION

Rabbi David Woznica

There is a Passover *Seder* tradition of opening the door to welcome the Prophet Elijah. Some families include a special cup of wine (*kos Eilyahu*) should Elijah decide to make an earthly visit. Elijah represents hope.

Here are a few of my hopes for the next generation:

I hope you live with a sense of purpose. Appreciate the tradition you inherit—profound, beautiful, and so important that it takes a central place in your life.

I hope you embrace the miracle of our people. The Jewish people introduced God to the world and shaped it with values rooted in Torah. You are part of a people and a religion that have brought, and continue to bring, unparalleled good.

I hope you feel pride and a deep connection to the State of Israel and the people of Israel.

I hope you live with wonder every day — sensing the extraordinary in the ordinary, appreciating the daily wonders around you. Perhaps it includes the unprecedented growth in technology, or the amazing choices in the supermarket. It may be a sunrise or a sunset. The more you do not take for granted, the richer your life.

I hope you live with gratitude—for loved ones who are gathered around the table and for those there in spirit, for your country with its freedoms despite flaws, and for our ancestors who endured centuries of slavery before freedom. Our *seder* is a testament to God's role in liberating them.

I hope you feel God's presence—a God who knows and cares for you in hard times and who celebrates with you in good times. God cares for all creation, so how we treat others is central in showing our faith in God. If we see God in this light, it should influence the way we act every day.

After all, God freed us from Egypt for a reason. May you carry the light of our tradition forward, letting Passover deepen the meaning of Judaism in your life and the lives of those you hold dear.

STEPHEN
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15500 Stephen S. Wise Drive
Los Angeles, CA 90077
310.476.8561 | WiseLA.org