

Acknowledging and Releasing the Burdens

An Old/ New Ritual for Breaking the Middle Matzah

In Syrian and Moroccan Jewish families, there is a moment in the Passover seder when a piece of matzah is placed on the shoulder, recalling the experience of bondage.

After the middle of three sheets of matzah is broken, the larger piece—which later will be used for the afikomen*—is passed around the room. Each guest places it on their shoulder (using the right hand and left shoulder) while reciting a line from the Book of Exodus:

**וְיִשָּׂא הָעָם אֶת-בִּצָּקוֹ, טָרָם יֶחֱמָץ;
מִשְׁאֲרֵתָם צָרָת בְּשִׁמְלָתָם, עַל-שִׁכְמָם**

And the people took their dough before it was leavened, their kneading-troughs being bound up in their clothes upon their shoulders.

Each guest then feels for a moment as if they are an enslaved Hebrew, carrying the burdens of bondage as they flee Egypt.

Matzah is both the bread of affliction and the bread of freedom. This year, as we mark the second Passover of the pandemic, we are taking time to acknowledge the burdens that the pandemic has placed on people's shoulders.

Think about all the people who took on extra burdens this year, by choice or by necessity. People you know and people you do not know. Burdens that were economic, that were emotional, that were reflective of systemic injustices. People close by and people far away.

Step 1: Break the matzah. Everyone takes a turn placing the larger piece on your shoulder and sharing who you are thinking about and the burden that person or people carried this year. (Guests on camera can use their own piece of matzah!)

Step 2: Ask someone to read the following contemporary blessing:

May our eyes be open to each other's pain.
May our ears be open to each other's cries.
May we live with greater awareness.
May we practice greater forgiveness.
And may we go forward as free people
able to respond to ourselves and each other
with compassion, wonderment, appreciation, and love.

- Rabbi Yael Levy

Step 3: Ask everyone to imagine what liberation from the pandemic will look and feel like for them, their friends and family, and the world. Take a moment of quiet to acknowledge the losses of the past year. Then share a hope or vision of liberation.

Step 4: Ask everyone to think of the time when we will be liberated from the pandemic. Reach out your hands (either to the camera or to those around you) and say:

May these burdens be lifted and may all who eat the bread of affliction taste the bread of freedom.

Step 5: Hide the afikomen!

*The afikomen is hidden by one of the seder leaders during dinner, found at the end of the seder, often by children, and then eaten as dessert.