

Who Sits With Us At Our Seder?

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Source: Rabbis for Human Rights Hagaddah Supplements--5773

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Eloheinu v'Elohei Kadmoneinu (Avoteinu, Avoteinu vEmoteinu), our God and God of our ancestors, we are gathered around this seder table as b'nei khorin, free people commanded to remember our dark nights of oppression. Your Torah warns us never to become oppressors ourselves, reminding us, "For you were strangers in the land of Egypt." Yet, when we are honest with ourselves, we know that we have been Pharaoh to other peoples, and to the disadvantaged among our own people. Our awareness that "In every generation there are those who arise to destroy us" often causes us to harden our hearts, and perceive hatred where it does not exist.

We therefore turn to You, as in days of old. Stand with us, so that our fears not rise up to be our taskmasters. Help us to banish Pharaoh from our hearts, and let others in.

With Pharaoh at bay, we become more painfully aware of the desecration of Your Image found in every human being. As with the plagues of old, our joy is diminished when we hear of those whose lives remain embittered. "Hashata Avdei," "This year we remain slaves because of their oppression " We remove additional drops of wine from our cup of celebration and renew our commitment to winning their freedom, thereby completing ours. We make room in our hearts and at our table for

· **Gabriel Kuol** fled for his life from South Sudan to Egypt. Again feeling his life in danger, he tumbled over the border into Israel with an Egyptian bullet in his leg. His love and gratitude to Israel faded as the situation deteriorated. First asylum seekers were forbidden to work, then they suffered beatings when they tried to renew their residency permits, which were eventually revoked. Gabriel was detained and deported, leaving all of his possessions behind. He nearly died of malaria back in South Sudan" The African asylum seekers remaining are demonized and our border is now closed. The "anti infiltration law" allows them to be imprisoned for over three years, and even those from countries so dangerous that the law prevents their deportation have been encouraged to "leave voluntarily" *As we open our doors to invite all who are hungry to come and eat, we remember the many doors closed to us over long years of persecution. This Passover, may we open our hearts and our borders to those fleeing for their lives. Like Gabriel, our ancestor was a wandering Aramean, and we were strangers in the land of Egypt.*

· **Sheikh Sayakh.** The exhaustion shows on the Sheikh's face. His tribe's homes in El-Arakib in the Negev have been reduced to pitiful lean-tos, and even these have been demolished over 40 times. RHR has helped to temporarily halt JNF forests closing, and thankfully the High Court has overruled the State and ordered the District Court to hear their ownership claims. However, the judges warned that it would not be easy to explain why they didn't challenge the expropriation of their lands in 1953, an expropriation they claim they only discovered in 2000. There is less certainty in Sheikh Sayakh's voice when he says that he is counting on us, and he no longer expresses faith in Israeli justice. Perhaps he has visions of the cemetery of his "unrecognized" Bedouin village in the middle of a JNF forest offering silent testimony that his tribe lived here for generations. The families of Al Arakib are but some of the thousands of Israeli Bedouin in danger of being forced from their homes if government plans are approved by the Knesset. *Celebrating the seder in the security of our homes, we commit ourselves this night to guaranteeing a home for all. We must make sure*

that Sheikh Sayakh has a place at our table, and must work in the coming year so that our national home rests on a foundation of justice.

· **Nasser Nawaje.** Nasser was a young boy in 1986 when he, his family and all the Palestinian villagers of Susya in the South Hebron Hills were expelled because their home was declared an archaeological site. They moved into nearby caves on their lands, only to see the army demolish their caves and try to expel them again. Israel's High Court returned them, but they were told that everything built to replace their caves was illegal. Nasser is known and hated by the area's settlers for his work documenting human rights abuses, helping RHR to prevent and even roll back land takeovers. In response the settlers and "Regavim" have gone to court demanding that the army demolish almost the village. Nasser told us, "When they came to demolish our homes in 1986, there was nothing we could do because we were all alone. We are again in great danger, but we are not alone any more." *As God has stood with our ancestors, we resolve this night to stand with Nasser.*