

Passover: A Timeless Message for Everyone

Contributed by [Brandi Ullian](#)

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By Rabbi Marc Schneier and Russell Simmons, president and chairman respectively of the New York-based Foundation for Ethnic Understanding, founded in 1989. Edits by Brandi Thompson Ullian. Courtesy of [Huffington Post](#).

At the Passover Seder, when we recall the tale of the Ten Plagues visited upon the ancient Egyptians in the Bible, it is important to remember that not all of the plagues manifested themselves in the form of physical afflictions. Rabbinic sages explain that the ninth plague – the plague of Darkness – did not represent an actual darkening of the sky, but rather a darkness of the heart, a communal blindness, a plague which has afflicted human societies from time immemorial.

Exodus 10:23 states, "They saw not one another" – meaning the ancient Egyptians were blind to each other's needs, and that their gross insensitivity and inhumanity in relation to the suffering of the Hebrew slaves living among them ultimately led to the breakdown of Egyptian society. This biblical narrative of Passover has long inspired men and women of all faiths and nationalities to recognize the inherent justice of the struggles of oppressed people of other backgrounds, and to make those struggles their own.

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., who was assassinated on April 4, 1968, championed this ideal in his rhetoric and actions. Dr. King understood that those who fight for their own rights are most honorable when they fight for the rights of all people. While Dr. King's primary focus was certainly on the freedom struggle of his own African American community, he championed the needs of people of all faiths and backgrounds, including those of the Jewish community. Dr. King felt an abiding kinship with the Jewish people and found a special symbolism in Jewish history – especially in the Passover Exodus narrative of the ancient Hebrews from slavery in Egypt – which he understood to have deep parallels to the African-American struggle for liberation. American Jews strongly reciprocated the sentiment; there was no segment of American society which provided more consistent support to the black community as did the Jewish community.

The ancient Egyptians failed the test they faced in Exodus. They were unable to grasp that being fully human means the capacity to feel and display empathy toward people of diverse backgrounds, faiths and ethnicities; people with whom we may strongly disagree. In our modern era, the open question remains: How will we, as an ever-more diverse and often fractious nation, avoid the fate of the ancient Egyptians, and instead succeed in responding to the challenge of the ninth plague? If we hope to realize the dreams and ideals of democracy, if we hope to forge a more perfect union, we will have to learn to be more responsive to the needs and concerns of others across racial, ethnic and religious lines. The changing face of the world demands that we make each others' oppression our very own oppression.

If we as a society wish to avoid the devastating consequences of the ninth plague, we must say a collective "no" to the shameful campaign to stigmatize and scapegoat those who are different from ourselves. By taking this unequivocal stand, we re-affirm the historic lesson of the Passover season: that each and every person is worthy of human rights and liberties, regardless of background, and is entitled to be treated with dignity and respect. Certainly, the Jewish and African-American communities, which have stood by each other for decades in good times and bad alike, will be vigilant in fighting side-by-side for the rights of our brothers and sisters, no matter their race, religion, gender, sexuality or creed.

The Passover festival challenges us to see one another as full and equal human beings and, by doing so, to free ourselves from the shackles of indifference and to break the chains of prejudice. Let us celebrate this timeless message of Passover by keeping aglow the light of understanding in a society too often darkened by prejudice and bigotry.