

Go Down Moses

Contributed by [Smith College Jewish Community](#)

Source:

Go Down Moses

Chorus: Go down, Moses
Way down in Egypt land
Tell old pharaoh to
Let my people go!

When Israel was in Egypt land
Let my people go!
Oppressed so hard they could not stand
Let my people go!
chorus

The Lord told Moses what to do
Let my people go
To lead the Hebrew children through
Let my people go
chorus

The story of this song begins in the early days of the Civil War. In 1861, three slaves, Frank Baker, James Townsend and Sheppard Mallory, were sent to the Confederate Army to help with construction. They escaped at night and rowed across the harbor from Norfolk, Va., to Union-held Fort Monroe. They presented themselves to Union General Benjamin Butler, risking being returned to their enslavers and facing horrible punishment, as dictated by the law in effect before the war. Butler refused to return them, classifying them as "contraband of war." Laws were soon passed prohibiting returning them to their enslavers.

The Contrabands at Fort Monroe built housing from burned ruins. Their community came to be known as Grand Contraband Camp. Defying a Virginia law against educating slaves, the African-American humanitarian Mary Peake taught both adults and children to read and write. Inspired by this opportunity for freedom (albeit partial and haphazard) many escaped and made their way to Fort Monroe. By the end of the war, less than four years later, there were many Contraband camps and thousands of Contrabands.

A song that some of the Contrabands sang when they arrived at Fort Monroe was recorded and published by a chaplain, the Rev. L.C. Lockwood, as "The Song of the Contrabands: O Let My People Go." It was the

As Israel stood by the waterside
Let my people go
At God's command it did divide
Let my people go
chorus

Oh let us all from bondage flee
Let my people go
And let us all by God be free
Let my people go
chorus

first spiritual to gain national (i.e., white) popularity. President Lincoln visited Contraband camps frequently and on one documented occasion joined a prayer meeting and sang along, often overcome with emotion, to "Go Down Moses" and other songs. In Waskow and Phyllis Berman's book on the Passover story, "Freedom Journeys: The Tale of Exodus and Wilderness across Millennia," the African-American historian Vincent Harding poignantly describes this mutual influence as Jews' and African Americans' "joint ownership" of the Exodus story. He writes that he is unable to approach the story without mentally hearing "Go Down Moses."

The song made it into a Passover Haggadah as early as 1941, with The New Haggadah by Mordecai Kaplan, Eugene Kohn and Ira Eisenstein. In 1969 Arthur Waskow designed the "Freedom Seder," an event and a Haggadah to make explicit the connection in reverse, ritually connecting our Passover story to American slavery, the struggle for civil rights and our present-day obligations to end oppression.

- Excerpted and edited for formatting from Aurora Mendelsohn's article on "Go Down Moses" in the Jewish Daily Forward, April 2011