

MLK+50 Interfaith Freedom Seder: The First Cup

Contributed by [Shalom Center](#)

Source: Rabbi Arthur Waskow

The First Cup: We drink to Ending Racism and Poverty, and Birthing Racial and Economic Justice

We begin with the teaching of Dr. Martin Luther King 50 years ago, on the evening before his death. He came to Memphis, Tennessee to support the striking sanitation workers of the city, and he spoke to a gathered crowd:

“The issue is the refusal of Memphis to be fair and honest in its dealings with its public servants, who happen to be sanitation workers. One thousand, three hundred sanitation workers are on strike. Now we’re going to march again, and force everybody to see that there are thirteen hundred of God’s children here suffering, sometimes going hungry, going through dark and dreary nights wondering how this thing is going to come out. And we’ve got to say to the nation: We know how it’s coming out. For when people get caught up with that which is right and they are willing to sacrifice for it, there is no stopping point short of victory.”

This oppression of workers is nothing new. It is at the heart of the story of Pharaoh and the Exodus, 3,000 years ago:

“Now a new king arose over Mitzrayim, the Tight and Narrow Space [Egypt]. He said to his people, ‘Here, this people, the Godwrestling folk, the children of Israel, is many more than we and might make war against us. Come now, let us use our wits against it. So the Tight and Narrow Place made the Godwrestlers subservient with crushing-labor; they **embittered** their lives with hard servitude in clay and in bricks and with all kinds of servitude in the field, all their serfdom in which they made them subservient with crushing-labor. (*Exodus 1: 13-14*)

And so all of us remember and taste within ourselves the bitterness of slavery and the oppression of workers.

[Everyone takes a piece of raw horseradish.]

All join to say: “Blessed are You, Creative Interbreathing Spirit of the Universe, Who brings forth the fruit of the earth—the bitter and the sweet.”

[Eat a chunk of horseradish.]

[The community sings “Go Down Moses,” African-American spiritual.]

When Israel was in Egypt’s land, Let My people go; Oppressed so hard they could not stand, Let My people go; Go down, Moses, way down in Egypt’s land, Tell old Pharaoh: Let My people go!

The pillar of cloud shall clear the way, Let My people go; A fire by night, a shade by day, Let My people go. Go down, Moses, way down in Egypt’s land, Tell old Pharaoh: Let My people go!

As Israel stood by the water-side, Let My people go; At God’s command it did divide, Let My people go. Go down, Moses, way down in Egypt’s land, Tell old Pharaoh: Let My people go!

When they had reached the other shore, Let My people go; They sang the song of freedom o’er, Let My people go. Go down, Moses, way down in Egypt’s land, Tell old Pharaoh: Let My people go!

Oh, set all Earth from bondage free, Let all My peoples go; And let all life be free to Be, Let air and water flow. Go down, Moses, way down in every land, Tell ALL Pharaohs: Let My creation grow

And in our generation?

"I met with many people barely surviving on Skid Row in Los Angeles, I witnessed a San Francisco police officer telling a group of homeless people to move on but having no answer when asked where they could move to, I heard how thousands of poor people get minor infraction notices which seem to be intentionally designed to quickly explode into unpayable debt, incarceration, and the replenishment of municipal coffers, I saw sewage-filled yards in states where governments don't consider sanitation facilities to be their responsibility, I saw people who had lost all of their teeth because adult dental care is not covered by the vast majority of programs available to the very poor, I heard about soaring death rates and family and community destruction wrought by opioids, and I met with people in Puerto Rico living next to a mountain of completely unprotected coal ash which rains down upon them, bringing illness, disability and death."

- Philip Alston, United Nations special rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights

[Everyone gets "sheet" of matzah. Someone reads:]

"Why do we eat this pressed-down bread?" Because it begins as the bread of affliction, the bread of a pressed-down people—but becomes the bread of Freedom when we hasten toward Resistance. Hasten to bake it without time for the bread to rise, For then we lived and now we live, as Dr. King taught, in the "fierce urgency of NOW!"—swiftly moving toward our liberation."

[Each person breaks the matzah and hands one piece to a neighbor.]

"Why do we break and share the matzah?"

"Because if we do not share it, it remains the bread of affliction; when we share it, it becomes the bread of freedom."

Together say: "Blessed are You, Breathing-Spirit of the world, who through sun and soil, seed and human sweat, brings forth this bread from the Earth."

[All eat the matzah given them by someone else.]