

Tikkun Haggadah Supplement: Introduction

Contributed by [Rabbi Michael Lerner](#)

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AS WE SIT AT THE SEDER TABLE we need to discuss how ancient liberation for the Jews can inspire liberation today for all people.

In fact, we know it is the ongoing spiritual inspiration and Jewish cultural and psychological resonance of that ancient struggle that led many Jews today to cheer on the Tunisian and Egyptian uprisings against their oppressive dictatorial regimes. Yet we also know that many Jews responded with more fear than hope, a residue of the ongoing post-traumatic-stress disorder generated by 1,700 years of Christian oppression culminating in the Holocaust. The result: too often the high ethical values of the Jewish tradition can get subordinated to the fearful psychology that leads some of the most wealthy and politically powerful Jews in the world to still feel insecure and to see the world through the framework of the need to control, rather than through the religious frame of hope, love, and generosity that was a the cornerstone of Jewish consciousness for many centuries. Without putting down those who are still traumatized and fearful, our task is to rebuild and reaffirm a Judaism committed to building a global transformation toward a world of love, generosity, peace, social justice, environmental sustainability, and genuine caring for each other and for the planet. It is toward this goal that we assemble at our Passover table as we rejoice in our freedom and affirm our commitment to spreading that freedom to all humanity.

Seventy-eight percent of American Jews voted for Barack Obama in 2008, and a majority of non-Jewish Americans joined them. The message was clear: end the war in Iraq and let our troops come home, end the war on the poor and the environment, and stop favoring the rich and corporate interests.

No wonder, then, that as we sit around the Passover table in 2011 there is a widespread sense of disappointment at the way President Obama moved far away from the hope for “change we can believe in.” Some will say Obama was never who he said he was, that he was always just a clever manipulator of our hopes while actually being a centrist corporate-oriented politician, and that is why he chose advisers such as Geithner and Summers as soon as he was elected, and why he chose to retain Bush’s secretary of defense, rather than balancing his cabinet with people like Paul Krugman or Robert Reich and representatives of the GLBT, environmental, human rights, immigrant rights, peace, and women’s movements, and the other progressive movements that made his nomination possible in the first place. Others will suggest that he had no options, that he couldn’t do more than he did (and some will then say that he should have told the truth about what was happening and that he should have stopped trying to appeal to the people on his right while failing to appeal to his own base). Still others will say the whole idea of a U.S. president being able to stand up to the complex of corporate interests, military-industrial powers, insurance and health care companies, pharmaceutical firms, fossil fuel promoters, environmental polluters, and their banks and investment companies was ludicrous from the start. Some will argue that to counter such forces Obama would have needed to mobilize his own constituency, from the first moments of his presidency, into an independent movement present in the streets and in the balloting – a movement able to go door to door to advocate for a new kind of social and economic order and willing to push him away from the temptation of betraying his highest vision through backroom deals.

Well, that’s the kind of discussion that is needed on Passover this year – because Passover is not meant to be merely a celebration of the Jewish victory for liberation in our past, but is rather meant to stimulate us to extend that liberation to the whole world. Such liberation would bring an end to the destruction of the environment. It would bring an end to the cheapening of cultural life by the dominance of an ethos of “looking out for number one.” It would bring an end to rampant materialism and our society’s belief in salvation through mechanical objects and technological fixes.

It is not only a new kind of president that we need but also a new kind of movement. We need a movement that has a spiritual dimension and affirms and builds on what the 2008 election revealed: the deep yearning of Americans (and really all people on the planet) for a world in which love, kindness, generosity, ethical and ecological sanity, awe and wonder at the grandeur of the universe, and commitment to a higher meaning for our lives are valued over the pursuit of money, power, sexual conquest, and fame, which have been extolled as central values by corporate media and enshrined in the workings of the global capitalist system. At the Seder table, we invite you to ask how you can help get this kind of spiritual consciousness introduced into the discourse of secular liberal and progressive social change movements, NGOs, and liberal political parties. We invite you to make this discussion a central part of your Passover Seder this year.