

Nirtzah

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By: Rabbi Ari Weiss At the close of the Haggadah, after moving from past humiliations to future hopes, a surprise! A piyut, or liturgical poem, first quoted in Sefer Rokeach (1160-1238), that returns to the Haggadic theme of retribution but on a deeper, more fundamental register. Nature is a "war of all against all." [1] The cat that attacks is attacked just as the Egyptians who oppressed are oppressed. "Nature red in tooth and claw." [2] And so it goes. Violence always escalating, always returning. The possibility for change is abandoned. The only escape from the cycle of violence is an end to the natural order: "and death shall be no more; death shall die." [3] Perhaps there is another option. Instead of locating redemption only in eschatological times and abandoning this world to violence, we can find geulah by transforming our essential natures through self-improvement and concerted action. We can move from violence to love. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s writing on this topic is instructive. He writes: The ultimate weakness of violence is that it is a descending spiral, begetting the very thing it seeks to destroy. Instead of diminishing evil, it multiplies it. Through violence you may murder the liar, but you cannot murder the lie, nor establish the truth. Through violence you may murder the hater, but you do not murder hate. In fact, violence merely increases hate. So it goes. Returning violence for violence multiplies violence, adding deeper darkness to a night already devoid of stars. Darkness cannot drive out darkness: only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate: only love can do that. [4] Justice perceived as retribution can only go so far. In order to create a flourishing society, we must change our vision from pessimism to hope by moving beyond justice conceived only as "an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth." [5] We must create a justice based on love. The great Jewish philosopher Emmanuel Levinas describes love as "the proximity of the other-where the other remains other. I think that when the other is 'always other' there is the essence of love...Love is an excellence, that is to say, the good itself." [6] Taking this definition of love as a starting point, a justice based on love takes as a start that all humans are created "in the image of God" and therefore have infinite worth, are plural, and are unique. It embraces the command to "love the stranger," which is mentioned in the Torah thirty-six times. The commentary found in this Food and Justice Haggadah Supplement is only a beginning of this greater project of loving the stranger by focusing on food security, a basic freedom necessary for human beings to flourish on this earth. We ask that you join with us in creating our next steps on this journey through engaging in the action points recommended in this supplement and by contacting us to get involved. 1. Thomas Hobbes, Leviathan, Chapter 16. 2. Alfred Lord Tennyson, Memoriam A.H.H., Canto 56. 3. John Donne, Holy Sonnet X. 4. Martin Luther King, Jr., Strength To Love. (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress, Publishers, 1983). 5. Shemot 21:24. 6. Emmanuel Levinas, Is It Righteous to Be: Interviews with Emmanuel Levinas, (Stanford University Press, Stanford, 2001), 58.