WHO SITS WITH US AT OUR SEDER?

Eloheinu v’Elohei Kadmoneinu (Avoteinu, Avoteinu v’Emoteinu), our God and God of our ancestors, we are gathered around this seder table as b’nei khorin, free people commanded to remember our dark nights of oppression. We have vowed never to become oppressors ourselves, for we were strangers in the land of Egypt. Yet, when we are honest with ourselves, we know that we may be Pharaoh to other peoples, and to the disadvantaged among our own people. We sometimes are genuinely threatened, but our belief that "In every generation there are those who arise to destroy us" often causes us to harden our hearts, and perceive hatred where it does not exist. To be truly free we must not let our fears be our taskmasters. We must banish Pharaoh from our hearts and reaffirm our commitment to honor God's Image in every human being. Recalling the midwives of old, we know that the seeds of redemption are planted when we oppose Pharaoh's command.

"Even ma’asu habonim The stone rejected by the builders has become the cornerstone." As we joyfully recite these words of Hallel, we pledge to build a homeland with a place for all those who are today rejected, ignored or oppressed. Tonight, they have a place at our table.

As with the plagues of old, our joy is diminished when we hear of those whose lives remain embittered. We know that "Hashata Avdei," "This year we remain slaves because of their oppression " We remove additional drops of wine from our cup of celebration and renew our commitment to winning their freedom, thereby completing ours. We particularly remember (choose one or more):

- **Those in Need of Public Housing.** Rachel and her daughter have been evicted from their public housing apartment, and are moving from couch to couch. The evictions of Ovadia and Miriam, and Lili and Itzik, were averted at the last minute. They are sleeping again at night, but the trauma remains. Zahava and so many others live in fear of their pending evictions. Forty thousand Israelis are on the waiting list for public housing, some for 10 years or more. Restrictive criteria keep others off the list. Many of those "lucky" enough to get an apartment find that these apartments are not fit for human habitation, and may even wait for years for repairs such as water running into electrical outlets. Is housing for all a basic Jewish value worthy of investment, or do we expect public housing corporations to act like for-profit corporations?

As we sing Adir Hu this Passover night, and dream of the day when God's house will be built, we know that we must first build homes for all of our fellow citizens.

- **Residents of East Jerusalem.** The Ghawi, Hanoun and El-Kurd families of Sheikh Jarakh remain homeless, and additional families are in the midst of eviction proceedings. They have been expelled "legally" by court order because of alleged pre-1948 Jewish ownership, but no court will allow them to reclaim their pre-1948 homes. Families in Silwan risk eviction because their homes were declared abandoned, and ownership transferred to a KKL-JNF subsidiary. Rather than easing the desperate housing shortage in Issawiyat and A Tur, a new plan threatens to take most of their not yet expropriated lands for a "national park." As tensions rise, hundreds of children have been rounded up and arrested indiscriminately because the police can't identify those throwing stones"

Our ancestor was a wandering Aramean." This night we remember that all have the right to a home.

- **Farmers of El-Jenya.** Eight years ago the villagers of El-Jenya put aside scepticism and distrust, and joined RHR to petition Israel's High Court for justice. They simply wanted to safely harvest their olives and tend to their trees, and Court ruled in their favour. Throughout the land, farmers harvested and pruned and plowed. However, years passed and new officers arose who knew not the rulings of the past, or sought to cancel them. In El-Jenya, tens of trees were left unpicked this year on lands coveted by settlers. On Tu B'Shvat farmers were forcibly prevented from planting, while Israelis seeking to join them had to circumvent roadblocks barring their entry. Many Palestinian farmers look to El-Jenya, and wonder whether their new found access will last.

"V'He Sh'Amda" This night, we recall that the One who stood with our ancestors stands With all who are oppressed. We recommit to being God's partners to protect, replant, and again make the olive tree a symbol of peace.
African Refugees. "No Ammonite or Moabite shall be admitted into the congregation of the Lord...because they did not meet you with food and water on your journey after you left Egypt...You shall not turn over to his/her master a slave who seeks refuge with you. He shall live with you in any place he may choose...you must not ill-treat him/her" (Deuteronomy 23:4, 16-17) Fleeing from killing fields in their homelands, African refugees have found closed Israeli borders. Demonized as "infiltrators," refugees and asylum seekers allowed in are forbidden to work. They are free, to starve. Some coming to renew their permits are taken out and beaten. The joy of independence has turned to fear for Southern Sudanese refugees told they must return. But, the reign of terror continues, and some of those who have returned have already met their deaths.

As we open our doors to invite all who are hungry to come and eat, we remember the many doors closed to us over long years of persecution. This Passover, may we open our hearts and our borders to those fleeing for their lives. For, we were strangers in the land of Egypt.

Al Arakib. Their homes have been demolished almost 40 times in less than two years. KKL-JNF forests close in from all directions, even though courts have yet to determine who owns the land. The cemetery of this "unrecognized" Bedouin village may soon stand alone in the heart of a forest, offering silent testimony that families lived here for generations. The families of Al Arakib are but some of the 30,000-45,000 Bedouin in danger of being forced from their homes if government plans are approved by the Knesset.

Celebrating the seder in the security of our homes, we commit ourselves this night to guaranteeing a home for all. May we work in the coming year so that our national home rests on a foundation of justice.

The Palestinian Villagers of Susya. They moved into nearby caves after being expelled from their homes, only to see the army demolish their caves and try to expel them again. Israel's High Court returned them to their lands, but they were told that everything built to replace their caves was illegal. Now "Regavim" claims that the State discriminates against settlers, and demands the demolition of their homes and new school. In other communities, even solar panels are threatened with demolition.

Our ancestors were at least allowed to dwell in the land of Goshen. This night we invite to our table those who are told they can have no place to call home.

DISTURBED BY THE INJUSTICES ABIDING IN OUR MIDST, WE ALSO GIVE THANKS THIS NIGHT.

Last year we prayed that Gilad Shalit would spend this seder with his family, and our prays have been answered. The KKL-JNF has temporarily frozen the planned eviction of the Sumarin family from Silwan and agreed not to plant over Al Arakib before a court decision on land ownership. The army has committed to not demolishing the school of the Jahalin Bedouin between Jerusalem and Jericho, nor to moving them yet again without consultation. The Hushiya family is working their land again after four years. Some Israeli families in public housing have been spared eviction and have had their homes repaired. After eight years on the waiting list, Maya now has a home. Last summer's protest movement showed us that the demand for justice yet burns in the hearts of most Israelis.

MAY THESE GLIMPSES OF WHAT COULD BE STRENGTHEN OUR RESOLVE TO STRIVE FOR WHAT MUST BE:

NEXT YEAR IN A JERUSALEM REDEEMED THROUGH JUSTICE

Rabbis For Human Rights * info@rhr.israel.net * www.rhr.org.il/eng
The Four Children at the Seder Table: Which Child Am I?

As we celebrate this Holiday of Freedom, the ending of slavery, we ask, "Who am I, when I hear of human rights abuses? Who will I choose to be when I know that others are suffering?"

Will I be one who does not ask? Will I close the newspaper or turn off the television, the computer or the mobile device so that I do not hear or see? Will I turn my head and heart away?

Will I ask only simple questions? "What is this?" Will I ask what, but never why?

Will I let the evil impulse, my yetzer hara ask: "What has this to do with me?" Will I let the problem belong only to the victims and the do-gooders? Will I distance myself from those in need?

Or will I strive to act in wisdom, to ask: "What are the underlying causes of the problem and what needs to be done to stop the abuse and free the oppressed? What are the laws and what does Gd expect of me?"

May Gd open the eyes of those who do not see, the mouths of those who do not ask, and the hearts of those who do not care, and grant us the wisdom to open our hands to our fellow humans when they are in need - the hand of generosity, the hand of support, the hand of peace and friendship.

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