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## **A Survivors Haggada - Survivors of Childhood Sexual Abuse**

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### **Background information on the Survivors Haggadah:**

This Seder grew out of an experience Evy Gershon had in November of 1985. A rabbi came to Kansas City to visit and gave workshops. One of the workshops was called "Scripture as dream, Midrash (Midrash is what comes between the lines of scripture) as therapy." The story in scripture that they worked with was the story of the Israelites leaving Egypt, crossing the Red Sea, wandering in the desert, and finally coming to the Promised land. Those who participated were asked to play parts in the same way that Gestalt therapists sometimes have clients play parts when interpreting a dream.

Evy Gershon volunteered to play the Jewish people who were fleeing from Egypt. Evy told the group that she couldn't go back because the Egyptians were chasing her, and she was afraid to go forward because the sea was in front of her. Evy felt weighted down by her worldly possessions. She felt vulnerable and mistrustful. The situation did not look good.

As Evy played her part, She thought how fitting the symbolism was for incest survivors. The ritual that goes with the story of the flight from Egypt is the Seder, the ritual dinner normally held on the first night of Passover. Evy decided to write a Seder for survivors of childhood sexual abuse who may still be struggling out of bondage, out of the narrow painful places in their minds. "Sometimes it feels that we have been wandering in the desert for a long time". She hopes that this ritual will remind us of the Promised Land of health and freedom; freedom from fear; freedom from engulfing rage; freedom to love and be whole.

Traditionally, the Seder consists of telling the story of the release from slavery in Egypt. The Bible instructs Jews to tell their children, "It is because of that which the Lord did for me when I came forth from Egypt," and explain the symbols on the Seder table in terms of the story.

The leader of the Seder introduces everyone at the table. Not everyone needs to be a survivor of childhood sexual abuse. Some are supportive friends and relatives.



## The Seder Table

### 1. Plate with three sheets of matzo, covered

### 2. Seder plate

- Roasted egg
- Roasted bone
- Horseradish root
- Parsley springs
- Charoset (a mixture of nuts, apples, raisins, cinnamon, and grape juice)

### 3. A cup for each person

### 4. A cup for Elijah in the middle of the table

### 5. Unlit candles in candle holders

### 6. A bowl of salt water

### 7. A bowl for washing hands

### 8. Flowers

### 9. Pillows to lean on

Leader: We are gathered together to celebrate a festival of liberation. The Passover is a holiday that celebrates the release of the Israelites from slavery in Egypt. We can celebrate that release while thinking of and celebrating our own release.

This dinner is a Seder. Seder means order of the service accompanying the meal. There are traditions that we follow in that order. We discuss the foods and symbols on the table and relate them to the past as well as to our own lives now. We will explain the symbols, eat the food, drink the grape juice, tell the story of Passover, and answer some of the questions that might be in some of our minds.

Each of you should have a copy of the Haggadah, which is the book used at the Seder. We will take turns reading. I will read when the Haggadah says "leader" Each participant may read until the Haggadah says "leader" or "next participant". Anyone may pass the reading on to the next person if he or she does not want to read. Reading will pass to your left.

## Candles



Participant: We light the candles to welcome the Passover. We light candles as a symbol of our struggle to bring light into the dark places of our lives, of our struggle toward the light, away from darkness, pain, and fear.

The dark has had power over us

for too long. We light candles to reaffirm our commitment to the forces of good and light.

Leader: Blessed are you, Creator of the Universe, who has commanded us to kindle the holiday lights. (The candles are lit.)

Blessed is the spirit of freedom in whose honor we kindle the lights of this holiday, Passover, the season of freedom.

Blessed is the force of life that brings us to this year's spring, to this renewal of our quest for freedom.

Blessed are you, Creator of the Universe, who has protected us, preserved us, and brought us safely forth to this happy time when we can be together.

## Grape Juice (replacing wine)

Participant: At a traditional Seder, with four glasses of wine, people sometimes get tipsy and have a good time. At this Seder, we drink grape juice.



Wine is a traditional symbol of joy. For many of us, joy has been spoiled.

Sexuality should be a joy. The abuse we suffered spoiled that joy, made what should be joyful, confusing, frightening, painful, or risky.

For some of us, wine and all alcoholic drinks have been spoiled. What should have been joyful became evil in our lives, a source of pain and confusion.

Out of respect to those survivors for whom alcohol is now hurtful, we drink grape juice together. We share the fruit of the vine, but only before it is changed by aging.

Each cup represents an aspect of our healing. The first cup symbolizes trust. Trust is willingness to take a chance on the goodwill of others, to take a risk on our own luck. (All pick up cups).

Leader: Blessed are you, Creator of the Universe, who created the fruit of the vine. (Drink grape juice.)

## Washing of the Hands



Leader: could I please have two people to help us ceremonially wash our hands? (Helpers pass to each person with pitcher, bowl, and towel.)

We wash our hands together to remind ourselves that we can become clean in normal ways, that we are not permanently dirty or tainted because of what happened to us, no matter how strongly that illusion persists.

## The Salt Water



Participant: The salt water traditionally represents the tears that the Israelite and Egyptian parents cried when their children were killed.

The Jewish children were killed by order of the Pharaoh. The Egyptian children were killed in the last of the ten plagues.

For us, the salt water may represent the tears we cried, and those tears we couldn't cry, for ourselves. Incest and sexual abuse can be a kind of murder, soul murder. We cry for the death of our childhood, the death of our innocence, the death of our trust.

Salt water also represents the tears of those who care for our pain. For some of us, this includes parents, for others, it includes brothers, sisters, friends, and therapists.

## Parsley



Participant: Parsley represents spring. It represents the green of new life. It is slow growing. Sometimes when we plant parsley, we practically forget that we planted the

seeds, it takes so long to grow. Sometimes the seeds of our healing are slow growing, almost forgotten, to spring forth when we've almost given up hope.

We dip the parsley in salt water to remember our sorrow from the past at the same time as we hope for the future. (Everyone takes a sprig of parsley and

dips it into the bowl of salt water that is passed from person to person.)

Leader: Blessed are you, Creator of the Universe, who created the fruit of the earth. (Eat parsley.)

## Eggs



Participant: The egg is another symbol of spring, of the rebirth we want for ourselves and for each other.

Every spring, life is renewed. We hope for that renewal ourselves. It is as if we were also slaves. Slavery can represent enslavement to another person, or to painful memories. We can journey out of slavery, out of bondage, out of the narrow place in our spirit, into the freedom of wholeness and health. (Pass eggs and salt water to each person. Pour salt water over egg in bowl and eat).

## Flowers



Participant: Flowers are symbolize spring and joy. They represent the gifts that we can give to ourselves to brighten our days. Flowers with their beauty offer a gift to the inner spirit. (Pass around one or more of the flowers on the table fore each person to enjoy.)

Leader: Blessed are you, Creator of the Universe, who has made your world lack nothing, but have created in it beautiful creatures and beautiful blossoming trees and plants to give delight to the children of Adam and Eve.

## Matzo



Participant: Matzo is the bread of affliction. It represents the bread that the Israelites made in haste. They did not have time to let it rise, in their haste to flee from Egypt

We have had to grow up without the leaven of honesty, about our lives and feelings. Some of us had to grow up without the love and caring of those whose parenting we

needed. In some ways, our lives were left flat like these matzos because of the abuse we suffered. (The leader breaks the middle matzo from the three matzos covered by the napkin, and sets the broken part aside for the affikomen, the dessert. Traditionally, after the affikomen is eaten, no more food is taken until the next morning.)

(Share pieces of matzo from the table.)

Leader: Blessed are you, Creator of the Universe, who brings forth food from the earth. (Eat matzo.. Pour grape juice for everyone.)

Participant: This is the second cup of grape juice. For us, it represents love, the ability to give and receive love, the openness and caring of love. It represents the willingness to pay attention to each other and ourselves and to share with one another.

Leader: Blessed are you, Creator of the Universe, who created the fruit of the vine. (Drink grape juice)

The Four Questions from Some of Us who are New to the Tradition (Traditionally the four questions are asked by children.)

Participant who is new to the tradition: Why on this night do we eat only matzo?

Leader: We eat matzo to remember the haste of the past, the haste to get the abuse over with, so we can feel how different it is now when we have time to take care of ourselves and grow with the leaven of love and support.

Next participant who is new to the tradition: Why on this night do we eat only bitter herbs?

Leader: We eat bitter herbs to give us a chance to remember our bitterness, with the support of caring people.

Next participant who is new to the tradition: Why on this night do we dip our food in salt water two times?

Leader: We dip the first time to remember the times we cried alone. We dip the second time to think of the cleansing tears of grief cried in company with others of similar experience.

Next participant who is new to the tradition: Why on this night do we rest and relax on pillows while

eating dinner?

Leader: We do this to remember that now we can rest and relax, to remember that we now have enough time to do whatever we need to do for ourselves. We no longer have the same reasons to be tense and anxious. When I was young, mealtimes were often a time of threats subtle and no so subtle. This may have been true for others of you. Now we can relax; the threat is gone.

Participant: Some say at the Seder, "Next year in Jerusalem." We can say, "Next year health, next year wholeness, next year the ending of our plagues." Blessings upon us all.

Participant: The wise people speak to us of the four kinds of children who view the Seder and wonder about it in different ways. There are a number of ways for us to think about what happened to us.

The intellectual survivor asks: What does it all mean? We suggest that this person read the literature about sexual abuse, and study the statistics to come to one kind of understanding.

The survivor still in denial asks: What does this mean to you? She or he does not say "us", but "you". It is hard to know how to answer. The denial isolates her or him from the support of those with similar experience and from the truth of her or his own life.

The survivor still in confusion and pain asks: What is this? We can answer that we are remembering the experiences of long ago, to help us remember that we are free now, we are safe now, we can help ourselves now to move toward and appreciate our freedom.

To the survivor who is too overwhelmed to ask, we can offer our patience and the example of our continuing survival.

Participant: We will now tell the story of the flight of the Israelites from Egypt. This is a traditional part of every Seder.

Participant: The Israelites went to Egypt to live. They lived for many years in peace with the Egyptians. Eventually, the Pharaoh became afraid that the Jews would rise up against the Egyptians if an enemy attacked them. The Jews were enslaved. They were forced to build the pyramids. They were required to gather their own straw to make the bricks for building. Slavery was bitter to them.

The Pharaoh became more afraid of the Jews and ordered that all sons of Jewish mothers be killed. One son who was saved was Moses, who was raised and protected by Pharaoh's daughter. He knew of his heritage and, once, when he came upon a taskmaster beating one of the Jewish slaves, he stopped the taskmaster and killed him in his anger. He fled from Egypt. After a period of time, HaShem convinced Moses to return to Egypt to lead the Israelites away from their slavery.

Participant: Moses went to Pharaoh to persuade him to release the Israelites, but HaShem Hardened Pharaoh's heart. Then HaShem sent the ten plagues. As each plague appeared, Pharaoh would consent to the Israelites' leaving, but after each plague disappeared, the Pharaoh would change his mind and not let them go. After the tenth plague, in which the first-born children of the Egyptians were killed, Pharaoh finally relented. The Israelites did not trust that the Pharaoh would keep to his decision. They felt that they must leave as quickly as possible. They didn't even take time to let their bread dough rise. They baked it in haste, and left.

Pharaoh had let them go, but as they feared, he reconsidered. The Israelites soon found themselves with the Egyptians, in chariots, chasing after them across the desert, and with the Red Sea in front of them. HaShem divided the Red Sea so that the Israelites could cross on dry land. The Egyptians followed the Israelites, but the chariots got stuck in the mud. The Red Sea closed over the Egyptians, and they drowned.

The Israelites wandered for forty years in the desert before they came to the Promised Land.

Participant: Some people might interpret the Hebrew word for Egypt to mean narrow place, or what we might call a tight spot.

Some of us were sent into families that were not the warm, protective places we needed. Some of us found ourselves in a tight spot with no way out but growing up. We were forced to try to grow without the proper nurturance.

Our deliverers or helpers out of the tight spots took various guises. Sometimes they were friends, sometimes therapists, sometimes support groups, self-help groups, or therapy groups.

We are still wandering, some of us, in the desert, at various distances from the Promised Land.

Participant: When the Jews first went to Egypt during the life of Joseph, they were welcomed and protected. The royal family in power changed, and the Jews became despised and feared. They were so prolific that the Pharaoh became afraid of them. He became afraid that if Egypt were attacked, the Jews would join with the enemy and rise up against the Egyptians.

The Pharaoh ordered that all newborn male Jewish children be killed. Some of the midwives would not do it and saved the children.

Participant: Later, when Moses returned to Egypt and HaShem brought down the last of the ten plagues on the Egyptians, it was the first born sons who died. The children of the Jews were spared. Tradition has it that the Jews sacrificed a lamb and put its blood on their door posts. The angel of death "Passed Over" the homes of the Jews marked with the blood of the lamb and spared their children.

Participant: It has been said that HaShem hardened Pharaoh's heart.

Some of us have felt that HaShem must have hardened the hearts of our abusers. There could have been no other reason for their cruelty. Some of us begged, pleaded, fought: Nothing worked. For others of us, the cruelty was more of a blindness to the hurt they were causing. For some, the cruelty looked like kindness. For some of us, only time could begin to set us free.

It has been written that the Seder is a moment to experience liberation in the present, not just remember it in the past.

This Seder is a ritual for us to focus on our liberation, to help us continue the struggle for our liberation.

### **Ten Plagues**

Participants: There were ten plagues visited on the Egyptians before the Israelites finally were freed. These plagues went against many things that were dear to the Egyptians.

There was the plague of blood, in



which the sacred river Nile seemed to turn to blood.

There were the plagues of frogs, gnats, flies, and lice, which went against the Egyptians' strong habits and concern for cleanliness.

There was the plague of murrain, a cattle sickness, which attacked the cattle that were sacred to the Egyptians.

There was the plague of boils, which attacked the Egyptians' bodies.

There were the plagues of hail and locusts, which destroyed the Egyptians' food as it was growing in their fields.

There was the plague of death of the first born, which went against the Egyptians' desire for family to continue after them, and the healthy, loving parents' desire for the safety and well-being of their children.

Participant: Sometimes the consequences of the abuse in our childhood seem to be plagues visited upon us:

- Denial of the Truth
- Fear and Anxiety
- Physical Pain
- Alienation from Our Bodies
- Rage
- Disruption of Our Daily Lives
- Loss of Meaningful Relationships
- Painful Memories of the Past
- Emptiness in Our Hearts
- Loss of Self-Esteem
- Grief
- Self-Hatred
- Incapacity at Work or School
- Tears

(Fill the cups with grape juice)

Participant: We drink the third cup of grape juice. It represents hope for ourselves and for each other, that our lives can be good again, that all the work we are doing will lead us to the life we want.

Leader: Blessed are you, Creator of the Universe, who created the fruit of the vine.

### **Roasted Egg and Roasted Animal Bone**



Participant: Long ago in Israel, there were sacrifices of animals and

crops at the Temple of the Creator. The roasted egg and chicken bone (sometimes lamb bone) represent those sacrifices in ancient times.

We have had to make other kinds of sacrifices. We have had to sacrifice many things to heal ourselves. Some of us have had to sacrifice relationships that were important to us, jobs, education, money we had wanted to use for other purposes, time, attention, stability in our lives.

We hope that the sacrifices that we've made will be enough. We hope that we have offered up enough to the process of healing.

### **Horseradish Root**



Participant: The Horseradish Root or Bitter Herbs stand for the bitterness of slavery.

We have all known bitterness and anger at abuse that seemed inescapable. We felt as trapped in our situation and its aftermath as if we had been slaves to them. We eat the bitter herbs to remind ourselves, to acknowledge how bad we felt then. We feel and acknowledge in freedom what some of us couldn't express while the abuse was occurring. Now we have friends to be with us and support us while we acknowledge our bitterness.

(The leader breaks the upper matzo and the remainder of the middle matzo from the set of three under the napkin into smaller pieces, which are distributed to everyone.)

### **Charoset**



Participant: Charoset is a mixture of apples, dried fruit, nuts, cinnamon, and grape juice. The sweetness of the Charoset reminds us of the sweetness of freedom

and friendship.

Traditionally, Charoset symbolized two very

different experiences. First, it represents by its taste those things that are sweet in life. Second, by its appearance, it represents the clay out of which the Israelites made bricks for the Pharaoh. It represents difficult work without reward, without adequate support, as slaves under the control of uncaring taskmasters.

We, as survivors, were not asked to make bricks and gather our own straw to do so, nor were we asked to build pyramids. We were asked to grow from abused children into healthy adults, sometimes without proper support, without safety, without self-esteem.

We mix the bitter with the sweet, eat bitter herbs with the Charoset, to remind ourselves that we are free now, that even though bitterness remains, life can be sweet.

Leader: Blessed are you, Creator of the Universe, who brings forth bread from the earth and has commanded us to eat the bitter herbs. (Pass bitter herbs and Charoset. Mix together on matzo and eat.)

### **Cup of Elijah**



Participant: The prophet, Elijah, traditionally represents good tidings, His task will be to usher the world into a time of permanent peace and tranquility.

We set a cup for Elijah to let him know that he is welcome at our table, to let him know that we are ready to accept peace into our lives.

(Participant goes to the door to open it for Elijah, waits a moment, then closes the door.)

(Fill cups with grape juice.)

Participant: This is the fourth cup of grape juice. It represents life. It represents the willingness to choose life, day after day, in the face of our past and our pain. It represents our hope that our lives can be good and whole. It represents the promise of healing, the promise of a whole and healthy life.

Leader: Blessed are you, Creator of the Universe, who created the fruit of the vine. (Drink grape juice.)

Leader: We have gathered together to celebrate the Passover. We have told the story of the liberation from Egypt and related it to some of our own feelings and experiences.

We have shared the symbols of the Passover and spoken of their meanings as related to some of our lives.

Now we can share a meal together in friendship.

(After the meal, we share the Affikomen which had been set aside at the beginning of the Seder.)

### **Grace After The Meal**

Participant: Let us give thanks for the food we have eaten.

(Others participants may offer prayers, if they wish.)

**NOTE:** Some of the ideas and prayers were from the book: *The Shalom Seders: Three Haggadahs*, compiled by the New Jewish Agenda.