

# Expanding the Telling: A Passover Seder Supplement

**Pesach 5776/2015**

**Rabbi Brant Rosen**

**“And we cried out to God...”**

Earlier in our seder, we proclaimed, *The more one expands upon the telling of the story of the departure from Egypt, the more praiseworthy that person.*

One way of understanding this teaching is that the more we broaden our understanding of who “we” are in this story, the more sacred will be our telling.

And so we gather this evening to acknowledge that the Exodus story is not only about Israelites or Jews, but *all* who have cried out to God from the pain of persecution and oppression.

We also gather to affirm that our telling of this story cannot be complete unless we include the experience of the Palestinian people, whose Exodus story is all too real and all too ongoing.

As we tell their story, we ask ourselves:

*- Are we ready, as Jews, to honestly acknowledge that in this Exodus telling, we have, in fact, become Pharaoh?*

*- Are we ready, as Jews, to open our hearts to the cry of the Palestinian people as God did to the ancient Israelites in Egypt?*

*- Are we ready, as Jews, to do what we must so that the Palestinian people may realize their own dream of return?*

(Seder participants now read from any or all of the following):

**From "Strangers in the House: Coming of Age in Occupied Palestine"  
by Raja Shehadeh**

(My father) climbed the steps to his own house and opened the door. It was dark and stuffy inside. His wife had closed all the windows and shutters and draped the new furniture with white sheets. It was strange to be alone in this empty house, moving from room to room without the usual sounds of his family. He could not stop thinking about what this house meant to him. It represented years of very hard work. It was the first house he had established. Until he had married he had lived at the Continental Hotel, which was owned by his uncle, my mother's father. But after twelve years as a successful lawyer in Jaffa he had been able to establish himself, marry, and furnish this attractive home, where he would finally live a happy settled life with his young wife and two-year-old daughter. Images came to him of his wife in her pink satin dressing gown, moving elegantly from room to room, peering at him with her Greta Garbo look. Had he come to bid all this farewell?

*What should I take back with me?* he asked himself. *Nothing. Nothing at all. He was resolute: I want it to stay as is, covered and preserved during our short absence so that when we return we will undrape the furniture, air the place, and resume our happy life.* At this point his eye rested on the porcelain statue of Buddha. It was the only object that had been left uncovered. It stood on a wooden ledge in one corner, presiding benevolently over the scene below. He came close and saw the calm, squinting eyes, the mocking smile, the fat round belly with the aquamarine belly button. It comforted him to look at it. Perhaps this would be the best thing to take, he thought. He placed it under his arm and walked out.

This porcelain statue of Buddha has remained in my family's house ever since. We have taken it to every house we have moved to and kept it prominently displayed. And it has remained on its wooden base exuding a calm presence in the midst of the many disorders and tragedies that have befallen us. How furious my grandmother was when she saw that he had returned without a truck full of her expensive furniture.

"I lend you my car and this is all you bring? I told you I wanted my china tea set back. Did you forget? And my silver cutlery, you forgot this too?"

"What did you bring with you?" my father said in his defense. "Only a sack of lemons from your tree in the backyard." He could not count on her sympathy.

The only person who bid Jaffa a proper farewell was my grandfather, Saleem. How often I heard the description of the way he lingered by the gate of the house as they were leaving, seemingly lost in reflection.

"What are you doing?" my mother asked him.

"Bidding this house farewell," he answered.

"But why?"

"Because we shall never return," he said with a finality that left no room for doubt.

"How wise he was, how perceptive," my mother would say. I always wondered what he knew that the others did not, why he left his family and went to settle alone in Beirut. Perhaps that silent moment when he stood by the gate taking a last look at his house was the only moment of closure. Everyone was rushing about, thinking of trivial matters, and there was my grandfather with his self-absorbed, distinguished look, his thick round spectacles, and pipe, taking the time to bid farewell to his house in Jaffa and to the life he had enjoyed in it. He alone seemed to have the resilience to refuse to be led by the voice around him calling this a two-week departure. In his quiet, self-assured, almost mystical silence, he seemed able to experience the final flight from the city, which he had insisted they were seeing for the last time.

**From "In Search of Fatima: A Palestinian Story"**  
**By Ghada Karmi**

My father got back in the car and my mother said, "Why can't they make up their minds? One minute they tell us all the women and children are to leave and now they're saying we shouldn't. And anyway, what's the point now with everyone already gone?" My father told her to keep her voice down. As we started to move off, I twisted round on Fatima's knee and looked out of the back window. And there to my horror was Rex standing in the middle of the road. We can't have closed the gate properly and he must somehow have managed to get out. He stood still, his head up, his tail stiff, staring after our receding car.

"Look!" I cried out frantically, "Rex has got out. Stop. Please, he'll get killed." "Shh", said Fatima, pushing me down into her lap. "He's a rascal. I'll put him back when I return and he won't come to any harm. Now stop worrying."

But I stared and stared at him until we had rounded the corner of the road and he and the house disappeared from view. I turned and looked at the others. They sat silently, their eyes fixed on the road ahead. No one seemed aware of my terrible anguish or how in that moment I suddenly knew with overwhelming certainty that something had irrevocably ended for us there and, like Rex's unfeigned, innocent affection, it would never return.

The short journey to the taxi depot in the Old City opposite the Damascus Gate passed without much incident. We were stopped again at the checkpoint outside the zone, and my father explained once more why we were leaving. When we reached the depot, we got out and transferred our luggage to a taxi which would take us to Damascus by way of Amman. To reach Damascus from Jerusalem, one would normally have taken the northern route through Ras al-Naqura. But all that part of Palestine was a raging battleground and no car could travel that way. Hence we had to take the longer and more roundabout route through Amman. The taxi depot was bustling with people leaving Palestine like us. There was a different atmosphere here to the one we had got used to in Qatamon. As it was a wholly Arab area, there was no sound of gunfire and, though it was full of crowds of people crying and saying goodbye, it felt safe and familiar.

Fatima stood by the car which would take us away. For all her efforts at self-control, tears were coursing down her cheeks. She embraced and kissed the three of us in turn. My father said, "Mind you look after the house until I come back," and she nodded wordlessly. I clung desperately to the material of her caftan but she gently disengaged my fingers. As we got into the taxi and the doors were shut, she drew up close and pressed her sad face against the window. We drove off, leaving her and Muhammad looking after us until they were no more than specks on the horizon, indistinguishable from the other village men and women who were there that day.

No doubt my parents thought they were sparing us pain by keeping our departure a secret from us until the very last moment. They also believed we would be away for a short while only and so making a fuss of leaving Jerusalem was unnecessary.

But in the event, they turned out to be woefully wrong. We never set eyes on Fatima or our dog or the city we had known ever again. Like a body prematurely buried, unmourned, without coffin or ceremony, our hasty, untidy exit from Jerusalem was no way to have said goodbye to our home, our country and all that we knew and loved.

**From "Justice and Only Justice"  
by Naim Ateek**

Our town was occupied on May 12, 1948. (The State of Israel was proclaimed two days later.) We lived under occupation for fourteen days. On May 26, the military governor sent for the leading men of the town; at military headquarters, he informed them quite simply and coldly that Beisan must be evacuated by all of its inhabitants within a few hours. My father pleaded with him, "I have nowhere to go with my large family. Let us stay in our home." But the blunt answer came, "If you do not leave, we will have to kill you."

I remember vividly my father's return from headquarters to give us the bad news. With great anguish he said, "We have been given no choice. We must go." The next two hours were very difficult. I can recall with great precision what happened, almost minute by minute.

My father asked us to carry with us whatever was lightweight yet valuable or important. The military orders were that we should all meet at the center of town in front of the courthouse, not far from my father's shop. My oldest brother and sisters had each carried a few items to the center of town, hoping to leave them there and return for more. Yet when they got to the courthouse, they found the soldiers had fenced in the area so that whoever reached there was not allowed to leave again. I recall that my father and mother were quite upset because my brother and sisters had not returned. I was asked to run and hurry them back. So I ran to the center of town, only to be caught with them; the same thing happened to both my father and mother when they came themselves. I discovered later – I was not told at the time – why my parents were so terribly anxious: they realized that in one of the baskets left in front of our house to be picked up later was some of the gold we were trying to take with us. In another basket was some fresh bread my mother had been baking that morning when my father came home with the bad news. My brother Michael was worried about a small Philips radio – one of his most precious possessions – that he had bought just before his marriage. When the soldiers occupied Beisan, they ordered people to turn over their radios. It was so difficult for my brother to part with his radio that he hid it in our garden.

My father and brother pleaded with the troops to let them go back to the house to pick up a few more things, but to no avail. Later, however, when we were on the bus passing our house on the way to Nazareth, my father asked the driver to stop for a minute. He did, and we saved the fresh bread, the gold, and the radio. My brother, taking with him a wool blanket from one of the beds, wrapped it around the radio and so smuggled his treasure out of Beisan.

**From “My Father was a Freedom Fighter: Gaza’s Untold Story”  
By Ramzy Baroud**

After months of bombardment, (my grandfather) Mohammed and his family, along with many of Beit Dara’s villagers would finally and frantically scour their little mud-brick homes, dividing their possessions into those items they would have to part with and those that would be of use on the mysterious journey upon which they would soon embark. The latter amounted to a few old blankets, tea, sugar, rice, cheese, olives... and the scant necessities with which they could afford to burden their one faithful donkey. Coming to this grave decision took months, and resolving once and for all by no means brought a sense of relief. Mohammed sharpened his kitchen knife, the only implement he would have to protect his family should they be ambushed by Jewish militias along the unforeseen journey. Zeinab argued with herself in her mind whether they could afford the weight of packing a second pair of clothes for their five children. She gazed around her modest kitchen, with its soft, earthen floors and simple wooden table in the center of the room. Garlic, peppers, dried mint, thyme and chamomile were all tied in bundles and adorned the earthen walls. At that moment, she felt she would trade her home in Beit Daras for a palace. Mohammed and Zeinab had built this house with their own hands, and while it was humble, it was the place their children were born, where they had escaped poverty and gained prominence and merit among those in the community. Zeinab reminisced, worried about the future, and above all, felt an overwhelming sense of thankfulness for the life she and Mohammed had shared there. In that moment, she realized that the peace and simplicity of life in Beit Daras was something to be coveted by kings.

Spring was one of the most beautiful times of the year in the Palestinian countryside. With apricots, almonds, oranges and lemons in full bloom, the perfume carried itself on the wind for miles. As the villagers embarked on this rite of passage, many grasped a long moment to breathe in the fragrance of the fields and orchards, to snatch a large handful of the earth of Beit Daras, and wrap it in a small piece of cloth and tuck it away for safekeeping. Deeds and keys were also stored safely.

Grandpa Mohammed mounted his faithful donkey with a few of the family’s belongings and his young daughter Mariam. Ibrahim was in his mother’s arms. Ahmad walked alongside his father, and my father, Mohammed, barefoot and confused, trotted behind. It was another trail of tears of sorts.