

## Beyond the Four Questions

1. "In Judaism law is holy, but not all laws. The laws of man must be subjected to a vigorous test: whether or not they conform to moral law as set forth by God ...  
Passover is the most politically radical of all holidays in part because ... the Book of Exodus contains the first known example in ancient literature of civil disobedience. Shifra and Puah were instructed by Pharaoh to kill the sons of the Israelites. Pharaoh was the law. But the law was unjust. So these two heroic midwives broke one law ... in order to honor a higher law."

*The Question: "Are there times when we should have resisted an unjust man-made law, and did not?"*

2. "The rabbis teach us that in order to have Torah, we must first have bread; in order to sustain our souls, we must first sustain our bodies ... Matzah is bread, but just barely. Anything less would be mere flour and water; anything more would become the unleavened bread that we eat during the rest of the year ... Just as our ancestors only needed the "bread of the poor" as they made their way out of Egypt to receive the Torah, so too we should ask ourselves how much bread is enough and how much is too much to make an honest and soulful life possible today."

*The Question: We're all pretty good at deciding when somebody else has too much stuff. How do we stay mindful of when our own stuff gets in the way - either by virtue of its quantity or our attention to it - of "an honest and soulful life?"*

3. "With your mouth full of matzah, try to say the Shema, and watch the particles of oppression scatter across the table. Slavery spreads like a spray of crumbs, and it is very difficult to rid ourselves of slavery's great moral shame, which is why, even thousands of years after the Exodus, there are so many people enslaved, and why, even weeks after Passover, there are so many matzah crumbs in the house."

*The Question: Which of the world's too-many slaveries troubles you most this year? What can you (and what would you like the rest of us to) do about it?*

4. The Haggadah gives us two core descriptions of servitude: right after the Four Questions, we read, "We were slaves to Pharaoh in Egypt"; right after the Four Children, we read, "From the beginning our forefathers were beholden to idols."

*The Question: Which do you think is a greater threat to the Jewish people today - the physical threat of antisemitism or anti-Israel violence; or the spiritual threat of idolatry? Is the notion of threat still a valid category for us to consider?*

4. "And God heard their wailing, and God remembered God's covenant."

"God, who supposedly knows everything, needs to be reminded of a covenant He made with our ancestors. This is disconcerting, but not surprising. All of us have forgotten about promises we have made, even promises that are very important to us, and that are still very important to the people to whom we've promised them."

*The Question: Is there a promise you have made and not kept, or that you should have made but did not? Does wailing remind us? And how can we remember in the absence of wailing?*

5. On the Ten Plagues: "This is a political story, yes, but one with a harsh and morally problematic lesson about the price of freedom. There is no such thing as an immaculate liberation ... it is naive to think that the defeat of evil comes without cost ... And don't we sometimes behave today as the God of Exodus behaved? Don't we impose sanctions on dictatorships and by so doing cause hardship for the guiltless? Haven't we made heroes of men who have deliberately taken the lives of thousand of innocents? Abraham Lincoln, Franklin Delano Roosevelt, Harry Truman - the causes they stood for were just, but did the innocent sufferers deserve their fate? ... The Exodus story ends in freedom for Jews; the Civil War ended with freedom for African-Americans; World War II ended with fascism utterly vanquished, and the death camps liberated."

*The Question: "Can we say that the ends didn't justify the means?" Why or Why not?*

6. "In every generation each person must see him/herself as if he/she went forth from Egypt."

The tradition wants us to make the Exodus a formative element in our personal journey so that it will shape our view of the world. And whether we do or not, the wisdom still stands - our personal journeys shape our religious views. Or, as our teacher David Ellenson taught, "All theology is biography."

*The Question: What event or events in your life have most shaped your religious/spiritual/Jewish outlook?*

(All quotations not from the text of the Haggadah itself are from the commentary in *The New American Haggadah*, Jonathan Safran Foer, ed.)