



A Special Reading for a Jewish World in Crisis

PASSOVER SUPPLEMENT

TO BE READ BEFORE MAGGID BEGINS:

The Passover Haggadah asks us to imagine ourselves as having personally been delivered from Egypt — to quite literally see ourselves in the story. This year, as we recount the Jewish people's journey from despair to hope, and from constriction to a moment of new possibilities, let us lift up the voices of Jews around the world navigating today's challenges with determination and faith.



Omer Rafaeli, 37 **Community Resilience Builder;** **Gvulot, Israel**

I was taking my daughters to pick strawberries when a siren pierced the air — that's when we knew that rockets were being fired from Iran.

I've lived through rocket strikes before. It feels like the end of the world. Everything gets blown to pieces.

Though I was scared, I smiled and told my little girls — ages 6, 4, and 3 — that everything would be OK. And then we went to the shelter.

This was on Purim, the day when Jews celebrate our triumph over the evil Haman. Between each siren, we left the shelter and tried celebrating. Then, when the alarm went off once more, we again fled to safety.

For us, an alarm is never just an alarm. It takes us back to October 7, 2023, when terrorists stormed our kibbutz and I had to shield my young daughters from them. After that horrific day, we were evacuated to Eilat, and when I returned, I couldn't go back to my teaching

career. I'd lost so many students I loved so much.

In the months after October 7, I just sat on my couch, traumatized, ashamed that I survived and too bereft to teach.

Then I received a message from JDC — like an angel extending its hand. They told me about a program they'd developed called Back on Track.

Through Back on Track, I turned my passion — physical fitness — into my life's work. That's how Balance Gvulot was born. Founded in memory of Yotam Haim z"l, a resident of Kibbutz Gvulot who was taken hostage and then died in Gaza, Balance Gvulot is a fitness center that helps build resilience through physical activity.

That's how we're healing here in Gvulot — one step at a time, through movement.

Moses never waited for a miracle. He acted, leading B'nei Yisrael out to the desert, one step at a time. Today, Jews face immense challenges — and like Moses, we must act, too.

When you help somebody, you also help yourself. That's the real miracle.

I want to thank JDC and its generous supporters. You didn't just enable me to open a fitness center. You helped me rebuild spirits, save souls, and in the process, save myself, too.

Omer Rafaeli is the founder of Balance Gvulot in Gvulot, Israel, where he works with individuals and communities to build resilience through physical training.



Hannah Sarkin, 23

Student Leader;

Amsterdam, The Netherlands

As I prepare for Passover this year, I find myself relating more and more to an unexpected character in the Haggadah: the child who does not know how to ask. And I doubt I'm alone in that. I think that's where we Jews are sitting right now — overwhelmed and cautious, not sure of where to start, each of us looking for a sign that better days are still ahead.

Though I'd rather we were coming together in uncomplicated celebration, there's a power that comes from connecting in the midst of uncertainty — letting our guard down instead of always putting on a brave face. In these complicated times, knowing so many global Jewish communities are navigating the same challenges gives me a feeling of hope and wholeness. We're all sitting around the same Seder table.

We'll all face our own Exodus at one point or another, and for many of us, it's happening now. We've seen a lot of darkness and evil, but Passover beautifully teaches us how absolutely vital it is to believe in your values and stand together proudly with your community — put simply, to find the light.

Passover tells the story of a journey from slavery to freedom, and we recite it every year so that we never forget. JDC's work empowering and partnering with Jewish communities in Europe like mine showcases other critical stories we don't often hear — stories of resilience and potential, yearning and growth. These are lessons that are passed down, through JDC's work, from generation to generation, from individuals to communities, and from family to friends.

I dream of a world where we no longer have to worry about security at our events or the future of the Jewish community — and I will continue to work to build it.

Antisemitism asks the question, "How much do you want this? Are you going to stay connected to your Jewish identity even when it's hard?" This year, my answer is that our turbulent world will only further ignite my Jewish pride.

Hannah Sarkin, 23, is the treasurer of the European Union of Jewish Students and lives in Amsterdam, The Netherlands.



Maria Mylnikova, 80

JDC Client; Almaty, Kazakhstan

My Jewish name is Miriam — like Moses's sister. When I consider the difficult path I've walked, this name seems all too fitting.

Before I was even born, my mother's then-husband was called to the front lines of the Second World War. She was left alone with her three-month-old baby girl, my half-sister — living in a dark basement while bombs rained down outside.

Understandably, she was under severe stress and had no milk. One day, she was cooking porridge on a kerosene stove when a bomb fell right where her baby was lying.

Though she was never able to talk about her daughter's death, my mother found healing in Jewish traditions. From the age of 4, I'd accompany her to our friends' home each Shabbat. The adults spoke in hushed tones and shut the curtains so neighbors couldn't see — in the Soviet Union, Jewish life was something to keep hidden. Together, we'd light candles, eat, and hum *niggunim*.

Besides a love of Jewish life, my mother gave me an equally precious gift — the belief that I must give back to my fellow Jews and never expect anything in return.

Today, that's exactly what JDC does for all of us. Without them, my life would be much, much worse — I don't even want to think about it.

I used to love to sew, knit, embroider, and read, but I'm no longer able to do any of these things. My eyesight is too weak, and I spend an arm and a leg on medication.

Thankfully, JDC has given me a homecare worker — as well as food and medicine — and that certainly makes life easier. Yes, I know she'll do the household tasks I can no longer complete and that she'll bring me groceries from the store because I'm homebound and have no family nearby.

But she's so much more than that, too — she's my constant source of human connection.

Passover reminds us of how much we Jews have endured. JDC cares, and I have only gratitude for them. Like Moses parting the Red Sea and my namesake Miriam leading the women through it in song, I know we'll overcome whatever obstacles come our way — together.

Maria Mylnikova, 80, is a JDC client in Almaty, Kazakhstan.



A Special Reading for a Jewish World in Crisis

PASSOVER SUPPLEMENT

TO BE READ AFTER WE RAISE THE MATZAH THE FIRST TIME:

Matzah is not only the bread of our affliction but also the *lechem oni*, the bread of those in dire need.

Matzah is called that because of its purposeful lack of ingredients — only unleavened flour and water, nothing to make the dough rise, and it must be baked in haste ... the food of those with nothing, those who have left everything, in desperate need of a miracle.

This is the bread we took with us when we rushed out of Egypt to pursue our destiny and our peoplehood — to pursue life.

We think of the hardest-hit Israelis, the Jews of Ukraine, impoverished Jews in Argentina, and Jews facing rising antisemitism and need throughout the world who share in our desire for peace and better days.

We stand in solidarity with our Jewish family across the globe as we brave these painful times, finding resilience by standing with and supporting each other.

As we hold and acknowledge all of this at our Seder tables, let us do all we can to help and comfort one another and to build a future whose course we shape with every act of kindness.

We do this because we are responsible for one another, embodying the mighty hand and outstretched arm that has delivered our people throughout time.

