

Celebrating Unity and Liberation: The “Freedom Seder” as an Antidote to Black/Jewish Conflict

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1. Introductions

2. A Brief History of Black/Jewish Relations

- ... in the United States
- ... at the University of Massachusetts

3. Small group discussion...

- Previous experience with Black/Jewish or other interethnic conflict?
- What have you learned from that experience?

4. Passover and the Freedom Seder

- Passover Seder—Exodus story, rituals, structure, symbolism
- Freedom Seder—themes, purpose, relevance to African Americans

5. Organizing Challenges and Opportunities

- Cultural exchange
- Diversity within our communities
- Language woes: “Cotton on the Seder plate”
- Balance—race, ethnicity, gender
- Kosher, ethnic foods
- Outside pressures

6. Evaluation and Handouts

- workshop evaluations
- handouts (Freedom Seder haggadah, “Shofar”)

Brief history of Black/Jewish relations in the U.S.

Jews came to “America” voluntarily, to escape poverty and persecution in the “Old Country” (mostly from the lands of the old Russian and Hapsburg Empires—the “Pale of Settlement” in what is now Russia, Poland, Lithuania, and the Ukraine). For these immigrants, America was “*di goldene land*” (the “Golden Land”). The vast majority—more than 3 million—emigrated from Eastern Europe between 1890 and the first World War, when immigration quotas halted the immigration of Jews from E. Europe. Most of these Jews were poor, and many were socialists (or trade unionists)—so it’s natural that they later flocked to progressive movements in the U.S. Most settled in the large northern cities—New York, Baltimore, Philadelphia, Chicago. A much smaller number of Jews had emigrated from Germany in the mid-19th century. Even fewer “Sephardic” Jews had emigrated to the U.S. from Spain and Portugal in the 15th-16th centuries, to escape the Inquisition (forced conversion, burning at the stake, and later expulsion). These few Sephardic Jews comprised the bulk of the Jewish population in the U.S. before the Civil War.

By contrast, millions of African Americans came to America *involuntarily*, as slaves, 150-400 years ago. Most lived on plantations or (later) as sharecroppers in the South. Even after slavery was formally abolished in 1863 (around the time German Jews were arriving in America), African Americans were still denied most social, political, and legal rights. Indeed, it was 100 years before the right of African Americans to vote was formally guaranteed by the Voting Rights Act.... **Holocaust** (“over there” in Europe; past) vs. slavery/racism (“here and now”).

Contact between Jews and African Americans was sporadic until the late 19th and early 20th centuries, when African American migrants from the South and Jewish immigrants from Germany and Eastern Europe encountered one another *en masse* in the northern industrial cities. Thereafter, these two groups had increasing contact, often as landlord and tenant, employer and employee (or social worker/client or teacher/student).

There’s an upside and a downside to these inherently unequal relationships:

On the “upside”... Jewish businesses were more likely to hire blacks than non-Jewish businesses; and Jewish landlords (many of whom had lived in these formerly Jewish neighborhoods—such as Harlem or the South Side of Chicago—before moving to the suburbs) were more likely to rent to blacks, while most other white ethnic groups refused to allow blacks to move into their neighborhoods.

On the “downside”... *the two communities came to know each other, to a large extent, not as equals but as employer and employee, or landlord and tenant. Even the best of Jewish intentions couldn’t alter what was fundamentally an unequal (and economically exploitive) relationship.*

Neither community, however, is monolithic or homogeneous (politically, religiously, culturally)...

Many Jews take great pride in our tradition of “*tikkun olam*” (“repairing the world”)—the belief that God has commanded us to do everything in our power to correct the world’s imperfections. No doubt this explains the large numbers of Jews involved in social change movements such as socialism, trade unionism, and the Civil Rights Movement (cf. photos of Abraham Joshua Heschel and other rabbis marching alongside M.L. King; Jewish support for the NAACP; Jews in SNCC; *Tikkun*).

Until recently, the Jewish community has also tended to support Affirmative Action (of which Jewish women are a significant beneficiary)—but the growing affluence of the Jewish community has spawned a backlash of Jewish neo-conservatism—most notably in the pages of *Commentary* magazine. (Dramatizing this ideological split, *Tikkun*’s byline reads: “All the rest is [C]ommentary”)

Similarly, many African Americans take great pride in the accomplishments of the Civil Rights Movement, and the ideals of social justice and equality on which that movement was based. Many African American leaders have welcomed Jewish support (e.g., M.L. King/SCLC; NAACP; SNCC [pre-1968]); while others (e.g., Minister Louis Farrakhan, Tony Martin) have repudiated such Jewish involvement .

Brief history of Black/Jewish relations at UMass

Campus conflict is not merely a **reflection** of what's happening nationally, but an **extension** of that wider conflict (via outside organizations, social pressures, families, etc.)

1. *A history of campus racism*, highlighted by a series of incidents in the mid-1980s (an anti-black riot following the 7th game of the 1986 World Series, when white Red Sox fans attacked a group of black Mets fans; a series of assaults on interracial couples; and the allegation that a black woman was responsible for a series of dormitory arsons)... “Hearst Report” (2/87) called on the University administration to address various racial problems... It was followed, every few years, by more “reports,” “studies,” and “recommendations” which many ALANA students believe have never been (and perhaps were never intended to be) implemented. To empower themselves and draw attention to the hostile racial climate, black students brought several well-known and controversial speakers to campus—notably Minister Louis Farrakhan (2/89, 2/94), CCNY professor Leonard Jeffries (11/92) and Wellesley professor Tony Martin (12/94). Among other consequences, this strategy resulted in far greater access to the chancellor, who—as one black student put it—“never used to return our calls, but when we invited Farrakhan, the chancellor started calling *us*”).

2. *Jewish students (and for the most part, only Jewish students) protested* when these black speakers came to campus, denouncing them as “anti-Semitic” and “hate-mongers.” These two very different communities—separated by race, religion, and economic class, and with little day-to-day connection to each other—now found themselves locked in a cycle of protest and denunciation, debating the role of Jews in the slave trade and whether Minister Farrakhan, Jessie Jackson (“hymietown”), and other black leaders were “anti-Semitic.” Angry black students responded with allegations of Jewish racism. The problem was compounded by the generally well-meaning intervention of alumni, donors, community members, taxpayers [public university], students’ families, and outside organizations such as the ADL, Nation of Islam, AIPAC, NAACP, and JCRC. It ceased to be a conflict only (or even primarily) of black and Jewish students.

3. *In response to each wave of black/Jewish conflict* (which routinely made its way into the national press), the University administration organized “dialogues” for black and Jewish students. But these programs were doomed to fail, because they attempted the impossible—to bring these *previously unrelated* groups together *in the midst of conflict*. Without any real prior relationship, let alone friendship, and lacking even the most basic knowledge of their complex history, black and Jewish students were cast in an inherently *reactive* drama—forced to respond to each other’s protests and allegations, but without the benefit of the relationship (for better or worse) that had existed for earlier generations of blacks and Jews. Black and Jewish students *met each other in the midst of, and only because of, the conflict*. It was a terrible way to meet.

4. Where does the “Freedom Seder” fit into this mosaic of conflict and distrust?..

In the midst of conflict, internal and outside pressures tend to bring to the fore student leaders who are more militant and less compromising... By contrast, the Seder brings to the fore those student leaders with a vision of mutual understanding and respect, willing to compromise and collaborate... It is “proactive” rather than “reactive”—created in *friendship* rather than *conflict*, stemming from the desire to *understand* rather than the desire to *defeat*. It draws on and cultivates student leaders who want to learn about each other, who want to work together toward a common goal (e.g., understanding and fighting racism *and* anti-Semitism).

Structure and themes of the Seder

The concept and structure of the Freedom Seder are adapted from the Seder which the Jewish people celebrate every spring during the week-long festival of *Passover*. The Passover Seder commemorates the redemption of the Jewish people from Egyptian slavery 3,000 years ago. The basic story comes from the Book of Exodus in the Hebrew Bible (which Christians call the “Old Testament”)—essentially the story told in the movie “The Prince of Egypt.” But the *themes* of the Passover Seder—slavery, oppression, exile, diaspora, redemption, freedom, and liberation—resonate with the historical experience of many peoples. Thus the Freedom Seder commemorates the experience of all peoples who have been enslaved or exiled, while praying for the unity and liberation of all humanity.

The Passover Seder consists of a series of rituals, involving various *prayers*, the consumption of *ritual foods, reliving the experience of slavery and redemption by retelling the story of Exodus*; and the sharing of a *festive meal*.

Participants eat various ritual foods including...

...*bitter herbs* and *salt water* — symbolizing the bitter tears of slavery;

...*a roasted egg* — symbolizing the fertility of spring (and reminding us of Passover’s pagan origins);

...*matzoh [unleavened bread]* — recalling the Exodus from Egypt and the Israelites’ forty years of wandering in the Sinai desert;

...*four cups of wine (or grape juice)* — symbolizing the four stages of liberation described in the Exodus story: freedom, deliverance, redemption, and acceptance.

The Freedom Seder echoes the traditional Passover Seder’s *themes* (as well as its structure)...

slavery

diaspora

freedom

oppression

redemption

liberation

exile

Using the themes of the Passover Seder, the Freedom Seder expands the Passover Seder to commemorate the experience of other communities such as African Americans, Latino/as, Native Americans, Cambodians, Vietnamese, and others). The Freedom Seder has several goals:

- Reconnect to our own historical experience of slavery, exile, redemption...
- Recognize the themes of Passover as they manifest themselves in the historical experience of our ancestors and in our own lives;
- Reaffirm our commitment to challenging and overcoming oppression and embracing freedom and redemption for all peoples;
- Learn about the experience of other peoples through their own voices, so as to build bridges between different communities;
- Affirm the common humanity of all peoples.

Organizing a “Freedom Seder”— Challenges & Opportunities

Initial challenges:

- breaking the ice; “strangers” getting to know each other
- building trust and safety...
 - ...in the context of a history of antagonism (i.e., a conflictual relationship), OR
 - ...when there is no conflict, but also no relationship (i.e., segregation, ignorance)
- be selective in choosing student leaders; emphasize common values and experiences

Cultural exchange opportunities...

- a. music (live, recorded) — traditional Passover, Negro spirituals, hip hop, etc.
- b. poetry (James Weldon Johnson’s “Let My People Go”; Yiddish/Israeli/Holocaust)
- c. traditional foods

Kosher / Ethnic Foods

- a. Kosher food? (Can we *afford* it? Can they *provide* it?—before, during, after Passover)
- b. “kashrut” vs. “soul food”— Can we *eat* it? (pork, lard)
- c. ethnic foods — If they cook it, will we *like* it? (gefilte fish) ... *Can* they cook it? (felafel)

Racial/Ethnic/Gender Balance — planning committee, Haggadah, co-sponsors (\$\$\$)

- a. quotes, photos, music, food, leadership
- b. Jews & non-Jews; African Americans & other ALANA students
- c. gender

Diversity *within* our communities

- a. Jews—secular/“cultural”/Reform/Conserv./Orthodox/“observant”/Israeli; liberal/conservative)
“Conservative” (denomination) ≠ “conservative” (politics)
- b. ALANA (domestic) vs. International students of color (“black” ≠ African American)
- c. Blacks (not all “African American” or Christian or Muslim) [e.g., Trinidad; Jews of color]
- d. Jews of color (“Jew” ≠ “white”)

Language Woes... anxiety, awkwardness, faux pas, trust

- a. “Jew” / “Jewish”
- b. “black” / “African American” / “Negro spirituals”
- c. “kosher” / “soul food”

Example: “Cotton on the Seder plate?”

... We may not be able to see through the other’s eyes, nor may that be necessary. But it’s essential to understand that the other’s experience and perceptions are different from ours:

—The Exodus is an *ancient, mythologized experience*, having occurred more than 3,000 years ago. The Holocaust, although relatively recent, happened “over there” in Europe (and before most students *or their parents* were born)—“in the past” and “somewhere else” from an African American perspective.

—By contrast, racism is a *tangible, ongoing, day-to-day experience* for African Americans—“here and now.” Slavery in the U.S. was abolished only 135 years ago, and racism continues unabated to this day.

Example: “Barebones” Theater Project – performed skits based on the actors’ own personal experience. It worked well for *students of color*—who’d had direct experience with racism (police brutality, ghettos, poverty, discrimination, etc.)—but not for *Jewish* students, who had no comparable personal experience of anti-Semitism, and who were frustrated by the black students’ unwillingness or inability to take anti-Semitism seriously...

Questions to Ponder:

- What ethnic or racial conflicts have occurred on your campus?
- Would a Freedom Seder work on your campus? Why or why not?
- How might you adapt it to your particular circumstances?
- Is the Freedom Seder an “antidote” to existing conflict, a long-term cure, or both? (or neither?)
- Are the roles of Jewish and Black organizers of the Freedom Seder inherently unequal, since this program is based on a Jewish ritual? Can this disparity be overcome?
- What’s the relative size of the Jewish and ALANA populations on your campus and in your larger community?
- What are the implications of this? (if small, large, unequal, etc.)
- Are outside organizations active on your campus? What role have they played in interethnic conflict?
- What about alumni, community members, and taxpayers [if a public university]?
- Which racial, ethnic, and religious groups have experienced overt conflict?
- Is there a *pattern* to their conflict? Does it occur in *cycles*? If so, how would you characterize it?
- What about conflicts *within* various racial, religious, and ethnic communities? (i.e., *among* Jews, African Americans, Vietnamese, Indians and Pakistanis, Muslims, etc.)
- How might you address those conflicts?

Remember: African Americans and Jews are separated by race, class, and religion. That’s a wide gulf to cross, and it takes a well-built bridge to support the weight of those willing to attempt a crossing!

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Coalition-Building Organizations: NAACP, National Coalition-Building Institute, National Conference for Community and Justice (formerly the National Conference of Christians and Jews)

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