

D'VAR TORAH BY RABBI HEATHER MILLER

During the holiday of Pesah, we challenge ourselves to hold two definitions of “journey” in our hearts and bodies—one that asks us to examine the barriers in our lives that are keeping us from becoming free (both individually and communally/societally) and one that asks us to envision the world we are escaping to. Jewish mysticism suggests that moving from esoteric ideas to physical reality is connected with the number four—four elements, four cardinal directions, even four legs of a table. On Pesah, we are anchored by drinking four cups (that sanctify our ritual, honor our relationship with the Divine, show gratitude, and reflect on our hopes) and four questions (theoretical/rhetorical, self-centered, unworldly, and existential).

So too on Juneteenth, where we engage with the color red as a symbol of the bloodshed during enslavement and during the journey to freedom, and the perseverance of the descendants of enslavement in our current world. On Juneteenth, we bind ourselves to the history of enslaved people who deeply identified with the promise of the G-d of Moses who would take them out of bondage, save them from enslavement, redeem them, and claim them as a people created in the Divine image. On Juneteenth, we continue to ask ourselves questions in sets of four to manifest the world we want to live in: What is the biggest question we have about the creation of a just society—the question that you know can't be answered? If it were solely up to your needs, what question is the most pressing to you in this pursuit? What question about our society might you imagine through a child's eyes? What is the biggest and simplest existential question about our society that gets to the heart of what we need?

A SHORT INTRODUCTION TO THE JUNETEENTH HAGGADAH

In 2022, Rabbi Miller created a Conservative/Masorti Juneteenth Haggadah, with help from Sasha King and Guilenne Rollins-Rishon. This Haggadah, which draws on the Jewish tradition of re-telling the journey from enslavement to freedom, centers the voices of descendants of freed Texan slaves. We must recognize that every person has the right to live, worship, and create families as they see fit.

Read the full Juneteenth Haggadah [here](#)

ASKING FOUR QUESTIONS ABOUT JUNETEENTH

1. How is this seder different from all other seders?
2. We usually celebrate national holidays with the American flag. Why do we use a different flag on this holiday?
3. Why do we call this holiday Juneteenth when it used to be called Jubilee?
4. Why is this holiday celebrated on June 19th rather than any other day slaves were freed?

APPRECIATING TRADITION: A RED DRINK

One important tradition during the Juneteenth holiday is to drink something red. The color symbolizes both the bloodshed of slaves on their journey to freedom and the perseverance of their descendants.

As you say the following prayer, we invite you to consider the labor that went into the creation of your beverage, from planting the seed to farming the land to harvesting the crop to extracting your juice.

בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה יי, אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם שֶׁהַכֹּל נִהְיָה בְּדַבְּרוֹ.

Blessed are you G-d, protector of the universe, shield us with your mercy and grant rest to those who made this meal possible. May we take on their burdens this day as we remember that we were once slaves in the land of Egypt and that through your miracles, you set us free. Through our actions, may we help others be set free.

In his writing, Martin Luther King Jr. often contrasted the politics of recognition with the politics of redistribution. In other words, putting something in words is different than turning those words into tangible change. Being recognized as free in the Emancipation Proclamation in 1863 is not the same as being able to live in the world as a free person. On this Juneteenth, may you have the strength to stand up for all others who are still not free. It's one thing to reflect, but it's another to put actions into practice and make a real difference in people's lives.

In order to move from reflection to practice, we offer the following resources as pathways for grounding these questions in how we witness, respond to and show up in the world around us:

- [Juneteenth Haggadah: 5783 Update](#)
- [PBS Show | Black and Jewish America: An Interwoven History](#)
- [Black and Jewish America: Watch/Facilitator Guide for Jewish Communities](#)
- [Black and Jewish America: Watch/Facilitator Guide for Intercultural Groups](#)
- [Sorrow, Psalms and Freedom](#)
- [Slavery, Social Justice and Family History](#)