

Good morning.

What amazing stories of Exodus we have heard today. We are indeed a community of immigrants!

When you came into the Sanctuary this morning, you may have received a sign that said, "I am an immigrant." If you are comfortable and **you** made **your** Exodus to North America, I ask you to stand with your sign as you are able. Those of you on Zoom, please raise your hands if you emigrated. If your parents or their parents emigrated, please stand now. On Zoom, please raise **your** hands.

Look around. We have arrived from so many points to be here today, each of us a thread woven into this our tapestry.

I'm the granddaughter of immigrants - Carpathian Jews. If people were to ask, I'd say that I am a social-justice-minded, spiritually curious kind of Jew **AND** I'm a seven principles Religious Education kind of Universalist. With these roots, I've always had a soft spot in my heart for Passover - the child-centered original Festival of Freedom.

I didn't get, for many years, any of Passover's contradictions. But I do now. And so, I want to begin by saying that reflections on Passover, like mine today, might well need a trigger warning. Oppression is hard to talk about, hard to hear.

In a time when wars of aggression fill our screens, when civilians - at home and abroad - are senselessly killed, when US residents are detained and deported, speaking about ancient struggles for freedom can feel almost cruelly ironic.

Every single day the world breaks my heart - and I think your hearts too. To speak of deliverance in days of old while people suffer **now** can feel hollow.

But perhaps now is exactly when sacred stories of liberation matter most.

So we gather as a Beloved Community - to tell this story truthfully. Because telling the truth is a **spiritual act**.

The Passover ceremonial meal, the Seder, makes the Exodus story feel real - and children have a starring role. The youngest child begins the Seder with four ritual questions, "Why is this night different from all others?" to be answered, "Because we were slaves in Egypt." As if it were **yesterday** that **we** - not our forebearers - were in bondage - and **today now we are free** people, who can recline at our own Seder table.

For more than 3,000 years, Passover has been the most widely celebrated of all Jewish holidays. This holiday has endured because it marks a turning point: the **moment** a people emerged from generations of slavery and became free.

The holiday - the story - is not about history - it is about **transformation**. It is the birth cry of a people **discovering** freedom.

That is why Passover speaks **far** beyond the Jewish community. Its lessons belong to **anyone** who has known injustice - or who cares about those who do.

As Unitarian Universalists, we affirm something essential: **every person has inherent dignity and worth**. Oppression is not only cruel; it is a violation of something **sacred**. The Passover story **endures** because it **insists** that **no** human being is born to be owned, chained, silenced, or erased.

There **are** four core lessons of the Passover story:

We all share our identity with the stranger, the immigrant

The Torah commands: "You shall not oppress a stranger, for you **know** the **soul** of the stranger, having yourselves been strangers in the land of Egypt". This is a spiritual memory.

Migration is a just act.

Exodus is the story of persecuted people fleeing to safety and dignity - seeking life in a new land. In this story, migration is not a **crime**; it is a **sacred journey**. The Israelites walk into uncertainty guided only by a pillar of cloud, a pillar of fire - and a **stubborn hope that freedom is possible**.

One law for all.

Passover regulations insist there be “**one law**” for both the native-born and the immigrant. That is justice. That is equity. **Equity** is **not** a modern **invention**; it is ancient. It is **covenantal**.

FINALLY perhaps the **most** important: Passover commands us to **remember**.

To remember what it was like to labor without wages

what it was like when Pharaoh killed our baby boys.

what it was like to depend on a master to feed our families.

To remember wandering without guarantees - approaching a new land.

Remember fear. Hunger. **Hope**

In Unitarian Universalism, we speak of a free and responsible search for truth and meaning. **That search requires memory**. And it takes moral courage. It asks us not to look away.

Last summer, John and I visited a replica of the Anne Frank House. There, we walked through rooms of exhibits documenting how Adolf Hitler dismantled a democracy. In an **astonishingly** short time, he transformed one of the **most** tolerant, diverse societies in Western Europe into **Nazi** Germany.

The steps were eerily familiar:

- Demonize an “alien” group

- Control or discredit the press
- Undermine the judiciary
- And most of all, **Redraw the circle of belonging.**

Once a group is cast as dangerous or less than human, the **soul** of a society can begin to crumble.

That is why **remembrance is a spiritual practice.**

Look back to ancient Egypt, when Pharaoh consolidated power in a turbulent time by turning fear toward a **vulnerable** minority. The oppression of the **Israelites** did not emerge from nowhere. It was strategic.

According to the Exodus story, Pharaoh made it impossible for Israelites to own property, move freely, control their own labor, or ensure their children's safety. They were confined, exploited, **dehumanized.**

It is no wonder the Exodus story resonated so deeply with enslaved Africans in America. For them it was not mythology; it was a mirror.

They knew what it meant to have movement restricted, families separated, labor stolen, bodies controlled, humanity denied.

And so, as they prepared for **their** Exodus, they sang of crossing over because they **needed** to **believe** that the waters **would part.**

Across centuries and continents, the structures of oppression do not change. **Yet neither does the structure of the human spirit.**

Passover is about **recognizing** the architecture of oppression - and **refusing** to accept it as inevitable.

As Unitarian Universalists, we covenant to dismantle systemic oppression. **Covenant is a commitment to stay in relationship long enough to build something better.** Covenant is how democracy survives.

For most of my working life, I helped women and children - **and** the occasional man - fleeing intimate partner violence. I worked for the organization that opened the very first battered women's shelter in New York State. The idea of shelter itself - that a person had the **right** - and the **means** - to leave a partner who hurt her - was **radical**.

I remember a woman we called "the Wolof-speaking woman." Her family in rural Senegal sold her into marriage to a man who wanted a "country wife" not "one of those back-talking American women."

She could **not** speak English. She did not know how to use money **or** cross a street. And he taught her **nothing**. When she became pregnant, he took her to Harlem Hospital, where Wolof-speaking staff provided prenatal care. She missed two appointments - a nurse grew concerned - and called the police.

The police found the Wolof-speaking woman chained to a radiator.

Her husband had been arrested and never mentioned her. For ten days, pregnant and restrained, she had no food, no water, no way to stand.

His arrest became **her** Exodus.

Sometimes liberation arrives by miracle. Sometimes by design.

Sometimes because a nurse notices a missed appointment and makes a call.

But liberation **always** begins when someone decides another human being **matters**.

Passover demands that we **remember** - to recognize bondage when we see it. To ask: who is enslaved now? Who is wandering? Who is knocking at a border? **Who is chained to a radiator?**

Our faith speaks of the interdependent web of all existence. When one person is chained, the whole web trembles. When one person is freed, the web strengthens. Unitarian Universalism says: **your suffering is not separate from mine**. Your freedom is bound up with my own.

Passover is not only about what God may have done a long time ago. It is about what **we** are called to do **now**.

To Remember - so that when someone is wandering, **we** walk beside them.

- when someone is chained, **we** look for the key.
- when someone needs an escape hatch, **we** build one.

To Remember - so that **when** the democratic process is threatened,
we protect it - **not** as politics, but as **spiritual discipline**.

May we be a people who remember.

May we be a people who widen freedom.

**May we be a people who help part the waters - again and again -
until all can cross.**

May it be so.