

# PASSOVER 5785: COMMON GROUND AT DIVIDED SEDER TABLES

Today the Jewish world can feel like irreconcilable camps. With such different relationships to Israel and Zionism, is it possible to find common ground? The Haggadah may offer us a way to find common ground.

## Four Children

*This text can be used as an alternative to the story of the “four sons” which appears after the “four questions” in the Magid section of the Haggadah.*

We begin the re-telling of the passover story with the parable of the four sons. Each son has such a different perspective, but the haggadah seeks to find common ground.

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### The One Who Feels Betrayed

*“The Jewish people were united against Egypt. How can we accept those who side with our enemies today?”*

To them, we say: It was not only the Israelites who crossed the Red Sea but a mixed multitude—Egyptians and Hebrews together. Our liberation has never been about our safety alone but about a collective movement toward justice.

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### The One Who’s Not Sure What to Believe

*“Our shared story of Exodus made us a people. Do our contradicting sources of news today divide us into separate peoples?”*

To them, we say: Jewish tradition thrives on debate. The Haggadah itself preserves arguments about how to count the plagues—because each view teaches something different about freedom.

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### The One Who Waits for a Leader

*“God sent Moses to free our ancestors—when will a leader come to save us now?”*

To them, we say: If our ancestors had waited for perfect conditions, they would still have been in Egypt when Pharaoh changed his mind. They left before their bread had time to rise because freedom could not wait. We must take action even when the options aren’t perfect.

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### The One Who Walks Away

*“Moses could have stayed in Pharaoh’s palace, but he chose solidarity over comfort. How can I stay within a community that defends the oppression of others today?”*

To them, we say: Moses could have remained in Midian, safe and distant, but he returned to stand with his people. Liberation required more than personal conviction—it requires community action. The work of justice calls us back, even when we’d rather stay distant.

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## The Hardened Heart

*This text can replace the rabbinical discussion of numerology after the spilling of wine in the Magid section of the Haggadah.*

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### The Puzzle of the Hardened Heart

The story of the plagues raises a moral dilemma. Egypt suffers greatly because Pharaoh repeatedly refuses to free the Israelites. Yet why does the Torah say Pharaoh's stubbornness was divinely influenced?

*"I will harden Pharaoh's heart."* – *Va'ani akhaze et-lev Par'oh* ואני אקשה את-לב פרעה

How could Pharaoh be punished if his defiance came from Hashem? Rabbis like Maimonides explained Pharaoh's stubbornness as the consequence of his earlier choices. Pharaoh's wrongdoing became so entrenched that by the time Moses confronted him, he had lost his capacity to change.

Today, psychology calls this pattern **cognitive dissonance**—our tendency to rationalize and persist on our chosen path, even when faced with contradicting evidence. Like Pharaoh, all of us can become trapped by the choices we make.

What does this phenomenon of hardened hearts mean for us as Jews today?

First, we must honestly examine our own hearts. When confronted with reports of Palestinian suffering, do we allow ourselves to feel compassion, or do we close ourselves off with phrases like *"human shields"* and *"fake news"*?

At the same time, cognitive dissonance shapes how our own community is seen. Too often, our neighbors dismiss Israeli suffering or misrepresent Jewish history. When reaching out to these neighbors, do we truly understand the barriers created by a hardened heart?

Overcoming cognitive dissonance is central to our challenge today as Jews. Many of us have given up trying to break through hardened hearts—whether our own or another's. But cognitive dissonance is not unbreakable. We always have the choice to soften our hearts, open our minds, and avoid the next plague.