

# From Displacement to Rebuilding the World

## A Passover Supplement



**NECHAMA**  
JEWISH RESPONSE  
TO DISASTER



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## **From Displacement to Rebuilding the World A Passover Supplement**

### **A Passover Message of Hope and Renewal from NECHAMA**

*Chag Sameach!* Tonight, as you join millions of Jewish people around the world to retell the story of our liberation, NECHAMA invites you to look closely at the tools on your table. The Matzah is a reminder of haste; the Maror, a reminder of bitterness; the Saltwater, a reminder of tears. For those of us at NECHAMA—and the countless survivors we serve—these are not just ancient symbols. They are the daily realities of disaster recovery. We have designed this supplement to help you bridge the gap between the story of the past and the work of the present. May your Seder be a night of not only remembrance but of a renewed commitment to rebuilding the world.

The Hebrew word for Egypt, *Mitzrayim*, literally means "the narrow place." For our ancestors, it was a land of physical bondage. Today, for a family whose home has been gutted by a flood or leveled by a tornado, *Mitzrayim* is the claustrophobia of a FEMA trailer, the bureaucracy of insurance claims, and the crushing weight of a life turned to debris. NECHAMA exists to be the "outstretched arm" that helps our neighbors navigate the journey from these narrow places back to the expansive possibility of home.

The Exodus is not a relic of the past; it is a recurring blueprint for survival. For those whose lives have been upended by disaster, the "narrow place" of *Mitzrayim* is a current reality. At NECHAMA, we believe that liberation is a process of rebuilding, and the path to the Promised Land is cleared one piece of debris at a time. This supplement invites you to bring the spirit of the volunteer and the survivor to your table.

### **Kadesh (The First Cup): Sanctifying the First Response**

We begin by sanctifying time. In disaster recovery, the first "holy act" is showing up. Before rebuilding can begin, the chaos must be ordered. When a NECHAMA volunteer enters a home, they perform a modern Kadesh—declaring that a site of destruction is worthy of being restored. We lift the first cup to those who break the paralysis of disaster to begin the Seder (order) of recovery.

### **Urchatz (First Washing): The Sanctity of Water**

Disaster often brings "destructive water"—floods that ruin lives. This ritual washing focuses on "restorative water"—the clean water needed for health and the symbolic washing away of the grime left by the storm.



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## **Karpas (Dipping Greens): The Tension of Salt and Spring**

We dip the green vegetable into saltwater. For the survivor, saltwater is the residue of a storm surge. But the Karpas represent spring. NECHAMA's work is the bridge between these two. We acknowledge the tears, but we focus on the "green"—the debris removal that allows life to take root again.

## **Yachatz (Breaking the Matzah): The Hidden Wholeness**

We break the middle matzah. Disaster breaks a community in two—the life they had, and the fragments left behind. We hide the Afikomen because we have faith that what is "lost" can be recovered. NECHAMA stays in the field long after the news cycle ends, searching for that hidden wholeness.

## **The Four Children of the Recovery**

Jewish tradition speaks of four children. In the context of disaster and NECHAMA's mission, we see four ways of responding to the brokenness of the world:

### **The Wise Child asks: "What are the specific protocols, the logistical requirements, and the safety measures required to rebuild a community properly?"**

To this child, we provide the technical knowledge of disaster response. We teach them that *Tikkun Olam* requires both a warm heart and a skilled hand. We explain that sustainable recovery is built on the foundation of expertise and long-term commitment.

### **The Wicked (or Rebellious) Child asks: "What does this work mean to you?"**

By saying "you" and not "us," they distance themselves from the suffering of the displaced. To this child, we respond by showing that in a world of climate volatility and sudden disaster, there is no "them"—there is only "us." We remind them that our ancestors were all "strangers in a strange land," and the safety of one is inextricably linked to the safety of all.

### **The Simple Child asks: "What is this?"**

They are overwhelmed by the images of destruction and the sheer scale of the debris. To this child, we speak plainly: This is the work of showing up. This is the act of holding a shovel so a neighbor doesn't have to hold their grief alone. We explain that even the smallest act of mucking out a home is a holy act of restoration.

### **The One Who Does Not Know How to Ask:**

This child is paralyzed by the "plague" of devastation. The magnitude of the storm has silenced them. For this child, we "open the way." We do not wait for them to find their



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voice; we take the first step of the *Nachshon*, entering the water and the wreckage to show them that hope is still possible through action.

## The Four Questions: A NECHAMA Perspective

Traditionally, the youngest person at the Seder table asks four questions that inquire about the unique nature of this night. This year, as we reflect on the themes of liberation and resilience, let us consider these questions through the lens of NECHAMA's mission and the experiences of those impacted by disaster:

### 1. Why is this night different from all other nights?

- **Adapted Answer:** On all other nights, we may take for granted the stability and security of our homes and communities. But on this night, we remember those whose lives have been upended by disaster, who are now on their own journey towards rebuilding and recovery. Tonight, we acknowledge their hardship and our responsibility to support them.
- **Reflective Question:** How can we show up for those who feel displaced today?

### 2. On all other nights we eat leavened bread or unleavened bread, but on this night only unleavened bread.

- **Adapted Answer:** The matzah, the bread of affliction, reminds us of the haste with which our ancestors left Egypt, without time for their bread to rise. Tonight, we also reflect on the many individuals and families who have been displaced by disaster, forced to leave their homes quickly and often with little more than the clothes on their backs, facing their own form of "affliction."
- **Reflective Question:** How can we offer comfort and support to those who have been suddenly uprooted?

### 3. On all other nights we eat all kinds of herbs, but on this night only bitter herbs.

- **Adapted Answer:** The *maror*, the bitter herb, symbolizes the bitterness of slavery endured by our ancestors. Tonight, we also recognize the bitterness of loss, displacement, and the challenges of rebuilding that are experienced by those affected by disasters. Their journey of recovery is often marked by hardship and pain.
- **Reflective Question:** How can we acknowledge and help alleviate the bitterness in the lives of those who have suffered loss?

### 4. On all other nights we eat sitting or reclining, but on this night we all recline.

- **Adapted Answer:** Reclining is a symbol of freedom and comfort. On this night, as we celebrate our own freedom, we also remember those who have



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lost their sense of security and comfort due to disaster. We acknowledge their struggle to find stability and peace, and we commit ourselves to helping them on their path towards a place of renewed comfort and security.

**Reflective Question:** What does true comfort mean, and how can we help others find it after disaster?

## The Ten Plagues of Disaster

As we diminish our cup of joy, we acknowledge the modern "plagues" that follow the storm:

1. **Displacement:** The loss of sanctuary.
2. **Isolation:** The silence that follows when the news cameras leave.
3. **Contamination:** The toxins left in the wake of the flood.
4. **Bureaucracy:** The "Hard Service" of navigating insurance and aid.
5. **Exhaustion:** The bone-deep fatigue of long-term recovery.
6. **Maimed Memories:** The loss of the photos that tell our story.
7. **Uncertainty:** The darkness of not knowing when "home" will feel like home.
8. **Economic Ruin:** The crushing weight of debt and lost livelihoods.
9. **Vulnerability:** The exploitation of the weakest in the wake of chaos.
10. **Indifference:** The plague of turning away from a neighbor in need.

## Crossing the Waters: The Nachshon Spirit

The Red Sea did not part for a prayer; it parted for a footstep. *Nachshon ben Aminadav* walked into the water until it reached his nostrils. Only then did the miracle occur. Disaster recovery is the same. We do not wait for the waters of chaos to recede. We step in. NECHAMA is the collective "first step" for thousands of survivors.

## Rachtzah (Second Washing): Preparing for Action

We wash again before the meal. This second washing represents our transition from "telling the story" to "doing the work." We prepare our hands for the heavy lifting of reconstruction.

## Motzi Matzah (The Unleavened Bread): The Haste of Disaster

Matzah is the bread of haste. Survivors of disasters often have mere minutes to flee. This bread reminds us of the urgency required in disaster response. We do not wait for the "dough to rise"; we move when the need is greatest.



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## **Maror (Bitter Herbs): Acknowledging the Pain**

We eat the bitter herbs to remind us that recovery is painful. We do not sugarcoat the reality of loss. To provide true *Nechama* (comfort), we must first acknowledge the bitterness of the survivor's experience.

## **Koreich (The Hillel Sandwich): The Complexity of Recovery**

Hillel combined the bitter and the sweet. This is the reality of a NECHAMA work site: the bitterness of a ruined home layered with the sweetness of volunteers working side-by-side. We hold both truths at once.

## **Shulchan Oreich (The Meal): Sustaining the Community**

In the desert, the Israelites were sustained by Manna. In recovery, communities are sustained by the generosity of strangers. We eat tonight to gain the strength to continue the work of *Tikkun Olam*.

## **Tzafun (Finding the Afikomen): Restoring What was Lost**

The children find the *Afikomen*, proving that the next generation has the eyes to see what is hidden. We celebrate the restoration of what was once broken.

## **Barech (Blessing after the Meal): Gratitude for the Tools**

We give thanks for our sustenance and for the tools in our hands—the hammers, the shovels, and the masks that allow us to serve.

## **Hallel (Songs of Praise): The Resilience of the Spirit**

We sing because, despite the storm, the human spirit remains unbroken. We praise the resilience we see in every homeowner who chooses to rebuild.

If we had only cleared the fallen trees—*Dayenu*.

If we had only mucked out the mud and the mold—*Dayenu*.

If we had only provided the masks and the hammers—*Dayenu*.

If we had only listened to a homeowner's story until they felt heard—*Dayenu*.

If we had only brought Jews and non-Jews together to rebuild a single block—*Dayenu*.

*We are grateful for every small victory, for every home made dry, and for every heart made hopeful.*



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## **Nirtzah (Conclusion): Next Year in a Resilient World**

The traditional Seder conclusion, "Next Year in Jerusalem," expresses a profound longing for a world redeemed and a people returned to their spiritual home. For those whom NECHAMA serves, this year's "narrow place" is a home filled with water, wind, or ash. We recontextualize this hope not as a geographic destination, but as a commitment to restoration.

As we say these words, we offer a specific prayer: May it be Your will that by this time next year, those whose lives were shattered by disaster find themselves in a place of wholeness. May their houses be rebuilt, their spirits mended, and their sense of security restored. We work so that "Next Year" signifies a return to a "Jerusalem" of safety, dignity, and peace for every survivor.

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### **About NECHAMA – Jewish Response to Disaster**

NECHAMA is a national nonprofit organization rooted in Jewish values that provides comfort and hope to communities affected by natural disasters. By mobilizing volunteers to provide debris removal, "mucking out" flooded homes, and interior repair, we help survivors navigate the long road to recovery. Our mission is built on the principle of *Tikkun Olam* (Repairing the World)—ensuring that no one faces the aftermath of a disaster alone.

**This Passover, join NECHAMA in our sacred work of bringing hope and healing to those affected by disaster.**

- **Reflect and Discuss:** Share the insights from this supplement with your Seder participants.
- **Support Our Mission:** Visit [www.nechama.org](http://www.nechama.org) to learn how you can volunteer or donate. Your contribution makes a tangible difference in the lives of those we serve.
- **Spread Awareness:** Share NECHAMA's mission with your family and friends.

**May the spirit of liberation and renewal that we celebrate this Passover inspire us all to act with compassion and work towards a more resilient world.**

This supplement was prepared by Rabbi Scott Klein, NECHAMA's Jewish Education and Engagement consultant. To get in touch with Rabbi Klein and to learn more about NECHAMA's Jewish Education and Engagement project, you may email him at [scott@nechama.org](mailto:scott@nechama.org).