LET MY PEOPLE VOTE
WHY A LABOR SEDER?

We have come together at this time for many reasons. A traditional Passover seder is a festive meal in which we remember and reenact the ancient Jewish story of liberation from slavery in Egypt. Over the centuries, thousands of different versions of the Passover haggadah, or “narrative,” have been written. This haggadah has been prepared to bring the Jewish, labor, and activist communities together to retell the story of the Exodus in a time many of us feel we are actually living that story. Like the story of our time, the Passover story is one of a tyrannical leader, persecution, oppressive policies, impossible work demands, misery, destruction, and finally, we pray ... a successful struggle for freedom.

Adapted from the Jewish Labor Committee Passover Haggadah, Third Edition, Spring 2002

SHEHECHEYANU

The Shehecheyanu blessing gives thanks for the arrival of any long-awaited occasion such as a holiday or a new beginning. Saying the Shehecheyanu to mark this day and this political moment may seem completely counterintuitive - no one is grateful for this moment. But given that we are living this moment nonetheless, how blessed we are to be experiencing it together, as a community that is committed to the ongoing fight for justice, compassion, and love.

The power and potential in this room are enormous. Let us say together:

בָּרוּךְ אַתָּה אֱ-יְיָ אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעָלָם שֶׁהָיָתָה וַיִּקְיָמֵנוּ וַיִּגֶּיאָנֵנוּ לֶחֶם הָיֶם הַזֶּה.

Baruch atah adonai, eloheinu melech ha-olam, shehecheyanu vekiyemanu vehigianu lazeman hazeh.

Blessed are You, Source of All Life, Spirit of the Universe, who has given us life, and kept us strong, and brought us to this time.
**Hadlakat Nerot/Candle Lighting**

In the light of the Passover candles,
We celebrate the spirit of freedom,
Our candles a beacon of liberation
For our people, for all people.
It is our task to make from fire
Not an all-consuming blaze
But the light in which we see each other.
Each of us distinct, yet
Each of us bound up in one another.

*Adapted from the Workmen’s Circle Haggadah*

As the candles are lit, we say together:
*We light these candles to illuminate our work for justice and liberation.*

**Havruta/Meeting our Neighbors**

Before we continue, let’s get to know each other a little better. Please turn to your neighbor — preferably someone you don’t know — introduce yourself, and then share one thing that has inspired you this year, or one action you have taken to resist, or one treasured memory of voting or elections.

**Mah Nishtanah/The Four Questions**

The four questions we ask at the beginning of the seder set in motion the telling of the Passover story. We ask and then debate why tonight is different from all other nights. Today we are asking important questions about a bedrock of our democracy: voting.

The right to vote has been hard-fought and won in the US: easily more than half of us in this room would have been legally denied the right to cast a vote just 100 years ago. Women gained the right to vote in most of the US only in 1921. Some of us and our families, African-Americans in particular, were the victims of white terrorism and systematic legal oppression that kept us from voting until just over 50 years ago. Even today, we see conservative lawmakers arguing hard for voter ID laws that claim to solve made-up issues of voter fraud in places where strong turnout from Black, brown, and other communities might tip the results a different way. These same politicians and policy makers actively work to close polling locations, limit early voting, scare voters away from the polls, engage in questionably-legal gerrymandering, and more - all to prevent those with opposing views from exerting political power.

Voting is powerful. So powerful that those invested in white supremacy and stolen wealth have
tried with all their might to keep people they think will oppose them from exercising that right. Too many people in our country’s history paid with their lives for attempting to vote and for registering others. Their blood made it possible for others to vote. Today we gather as a community to reaffirm this precious piece of our democracy.

Let us ask four questions about voting together:

All recite:

1. Why do local elections matter?
2. How are local elections connected to racial justice?
3. What is our power in local elections?
4. What does it take to win a local election and how can we help?

ARBA BANIM/ THE FOUR CHILDREN

The haggadah also speaks of four kinds of children, or four kinds of people, and how they relate to the Passover liberation story. Tonight we will talk about four ways that people relate to elections and voting.

The wise person says, “What are the issues facing my city and neighborhood, and which of these candidates will really make change?” She learns in depth, reads voter guides, and goes to candidate events. She thinks about the effects of systemic racism and how they might be changed locally. She shares information, seeks new perspectives, and debates with friends. She picks a candidate and does what she can to volunteer and donate and promote her choice. She registers voters and gets out the vote on election day! She stays connected once her candidate is elected and holds them accountable to their promises.

The wicked person says, “What does this election matter to me?” He has the ability to vote, but doesn’t. He thinks local elections are irrelevant or small potatoes. He thinks that the struggles of his neighbors have nothing to do with him. He thinks racism is over or that it’s “too divisive” to talk about. He separates himself from the community. He squanders a right that many of our ancestors and our movements fought and died for.

The simple person says “What is all the fuss?” She simply votes - which, to be honest, isn’t actually such a simple thing. She doesn’t always have a lot of information, but she votes in most elections. This is important: she is ready to be drawn into deeper engagement, to learn more and get excited about the issues and candidates. She cares about elections and social change, merely by her commitment to voting. We have all been, and may be now, this person.

The person who cannot vote has been silenced and must struggle to find his voice in democracy. He is likely to be Black, brown, and/or poor. Whether he was disenfranchised because of a past conviction (even though he has served his time), or because he has to work two or three jobs to put food on the table and cannot take time to vote, or because his neighborhood
polling place is physically inaccessible or was closed due to racist voter suppression, or because he was targeted by voter ID laws, too many millions of people in our society are denied basic democratic rights.

No matter what kind of voter you are or have been, this is the year to get active: your voice, and your vote, and the time you take to mobilize voters in our region will make real change. **Are you ready to volunteer for the JUFJ Campaign Fund?**

**Eser Makot / Ten Plagues**

God brought ten plagues on the people of Egypt to convince Pharaoh to let our people go. We too are suffering from the plagues of tyrannical leadership - and they are trying to stop us from participating in democracy. To make change we must name those plagues and refuse to let ourselves become numb or silent.

*We read the name of each plague aloud together:*

- **CORPORATE AND BILLIONAIRE MONEY IN POLITICS**
- **TAXATION WITHOUT REPRESENTATION IN DC**
- **LITTLE MEDIA COVERAGE OF LOCAL ELECTIONS IN OUR REGION**
- **LOW VOTER TURNOUT**
- **HAVING TO WORK ON ELECTION DAY**
- **RETURNING CITIZEN DISENFRANCHISEMENT**
- **FAKE NEWS**
- **POLITICALLY-MOTIVATED CLOSURES OF POLLING PLACES AND REDUCED EARLY VOTING TIMES**
- **RUSSIAN INTERFERENCE IN OUR ELECTIONS**
- **RACIALLY-MOTIVATED VOTER ID LAWS, VOTER SUPPRESSION, AND GERRYMANDERING**
Reader:
The haggadah tells us that in every generation we must each see ourselves *k’eelu hu yatzah mee-Mitzrayim* – as though we ourselves were freed from Egypt. In our political era, the story speaks for itself:

All recite:
Long ago, a new king rose over Egypt. “Behold!” he said. “The people are too many and too mighty. Let us deal shrewdly with them.” He set over them taskmasters to afflict them and to make their lives bitter and harsh. We became slaves to Pharaoh in Mitzrayim.

Had God not brought us out of Egypt with a strong hand and an outstretched arm, we and our children and our children’s children would still be servants to Pharaoh.

Reader:
There arose in America a President who did not know the real promise of this country, who did not recognize the beauty of our American ideals. He made our lives harsh with schemes of registries, walls, deportations, and humiliation. He embittered our lives: trampled the poor, cut our safety nets, and flouted the law. He afflicted us and enabled the forces of hate. He feared that we, the people, were too numerous - and he tried to divide us from each other.

All:
But the more he afflicted us, the more we multiplied.

Reader:
When millions of people marched around the globe and filled the streets again and again - we multiplied. When we stood with the Dreamers in the halls of power until they had to arrest us - we multiplied. When we threw his cronies out of office in Alabama, in New Jersey, and in elections all over this country - we multiplied. When we said, #MeToo and #TimesUp, and the harassers and rapists and abusers were outed week by week - we multiplied. When we found out that his lackeys and toadies were Russian stooges - we multiplied (our investigations!). When our brothers’ and sisters’ and children’s blood cried out from another school shooting, and we saw the Pharaoh’s hands filled with blood money - we multiplied.

All:
We will not stand idly by the blood of our sisters and brothers. We know the heart of the outsider because we were outsiders in Mitzrayim.

Reader:
Together, we will lift up our own strong hands and outstretched arms - at the ballot box. We come from a proud history: our Jewish forebears were workers, strikers, unionists, and activists. Our immigrant families fled terror and sought freedom. Our enslaved and indigenous ancestors fought for their place in an America that tried to deny their humanity. We share a
common ancestry of resistance. We have fought and died for the right to vote, and we will exercise it.

All:
Not just one enemy alone has risen against us, but in every generation they have risen against us to destroy us. Yet we have been saved from their hands.¹⁶

Reader:
Today we face a new Pharaoh and we live in fear for our neighbors, our communities, our country, and ourselves. But let us remember that today’s Pharaohs were elected (barely) and we will un-elect them!

🎵 DAYEINU 🎵

Though “Dayeinu” means “it would have been enough,” we know that each step toward our liberation was necessary but not sufficient. Today we celebrate some voting victories of the last year in our region and our country, and sing in anticipation of steps yet to come. Dayeinu!

This winter, the DC Council unanimously passed the Fair Elections Act. Once it is funded, this law will set up a public elections financing program in DC, opening local politics to new candidates, increasing the power of small donors and donors of color, and reducing the influence of corporations, developers, and the wealthy on our elections.¹⁷ This spring we must work hard to get our elected officials to fund and implement this new law, but for the moment we say:
All respond: Dayeinu!

In nearby Virginia, the cynical, racist portrayals of local immigrants as violent criminals by conservative forces did not change the positive outcome of the governor’s race this fall.
All respond: Dayeinu!

Candidates with more progressive views flipped seats in elections all over the country this year. Kein yehi ratzon — may this be a sign of things to come!
All respond: Dayeinu!

This was also a year of firsts. In Virginia, Danica Roem became the first openly trans woman, and Hala Ayala and Elizabeth Guzmán became the first two Latina women, to serve in the House of Delegates. Justin Fairfax became only the second African-American to serve as Virginia’s Lieutenant Governor. Montgomery County is in the very first election cycle to use its new public financing system. Record numbers of candidates are running for office, helping to pave the way to a more representative county government.
All respond: Dayeinu!

Here in DC and Maryland we will join together in this election season to vote our values and advance our vision of justice and compassion.
All respond: Dayeinu!
Let us sing:

דַּיֵּנוּ... מִמִּצְרַֽיִם
דַּיֵּנוּ... אָלֶֽלוּ
דַּיֵּנוּ... אֶת־הַשַּׁבָּת
דַּיֵּנוּ... אֶת־הַתּוֹרָה

Eelu hotzee’anu mee-Meetzrayeem … Dayeinu
Eelu natan lanu et Shabbat … Dayeinu
Eelu natan lanu et ha’Torah … Dayeinu

If God had taken us out of Egypt … Dayeinu
If God had given us Shabbat … Dayeinu
If God had given us the Torah … Dayeinu

WITH A MIGHTY HAND(shake)
WITH AN OUTSTRETCHED ARM (TO KNOCK DOORS AND DIAL PHONES)
WITH (LAWN) SIGNS
AND WITH WONDERS(FUL COMMUNITY ALONG THE WAY)!

Making change through elections and voting doesn't take a miracle. It does take all kinds of action and education. You came here tonight to pick up new ideas and practice new skills that will help move our communities toward liberation and democracy. Here are your choices:

Finding Your Inner Eliyahu: Canvassing for the DC Elections
Everyone opens the door for Elijah! Channel your inner prophet as you learn the ins and outs of door-knocking and how to talk to your neighbors about issues, voting, and political change. (Like phonebanking - see below - talking to our neighbors is one of the most important tools we have in elections, and a vital part of how we win. We know this can feel scary if you haven’t done it before. We promise to support you through it… and that you’ll probably have fun doing it.) At the Broadmoor.

Calling On Community: Phonebanking for the MoCo Elections
Practice reaching out to friends, family, and total strangers about issues that matter, all from the comfort of your own phone. (One of the single most powerful ways to learn about a candidate or issue is to hear from a fellow community member. Like canvassing, above, we know this can feel scary if you haven’t done it before. We promise to support you through it. Thank you for being brave!) At the Broadmoor.
**Moses Wouldn’t Take Corporate Money: DC Fair Elections**
The Fair Elections Act is a dramatic change to how DC elects its leaders that could make our government listen more to its people. But it won’t happen unless we work to implement it. Learn all about the urgency of Fair Elections and what you can do to make it happen. In Kay Hall.

**Seeming Presidential? Implicit Bias in Elections**
How does racial prejudice affect voters’ choices? What can we do to combat our own biases and those of our neighbors when they affect our voting? Start answering these questions together. In the Gewirz Beit Am.

**All The Torah On One Foot: Montgomery County Elections 2018**
This is going to be a wild and wacky year of voting in Montgomery County. Learn about the many, many ideas that will be on the ballot and what you need to understand about them to make informed decisions. In Smith Sanctuary.

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**The Sweetness of Struggle: Haroset**

In a classical seder we eat haroset, a spiced fruit and nut paste, to symbolize the mortar that our ancestors used in their forced labor under Pharaoh. The sweetness represents our redemption from that labor. But is it right to use a delicious treat to recall our oppression and degradation? Does this imply that our pain, or the pain of other oppressed people, is redemptive? No. The sweetness of our struggle for liberation does not excuse or explain the atrocities done to us and to others peoples, even until today. Yet we have learned, especially in this last year of struggle against Pharaoh and his enablers, that hard work in community can be truly joyful, even when there is also pain.

Today we end the first part of our seder by savoring the sweetness of this haroset. May the continued joy of our work together in community lift us up, sustain us when we experience defeat, and allow us to celebrate together when we win. And may we win big this year!

*We say together:*

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ברוך אתה אלוהינו לאלהי העולם, בורח פטר היען.

Baruch atah adonai, eloheinu melech ha’olam, borei p’ri ha’eitz.

Blessed are You, Source of All Life, Spirit of the Universe,
Creator of the fruit of the tree.
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Notes

1 Whether it’s local or national, money talks louder in politics than ordinary citizens’ voices. The ultra-wealthy have seen their wealth skyrocket through pro-rich policies of the last several decades - from lax corporate taxation to lowered estate taxes to a tax code riddled with loopholes and exemptions. To reward politicians who’ve enabled the enrichment of corporate and development titans, the gutting of the public sector, and the impoverishment of the working classes, these donors give lavishly both as individuals and increasingly through a complex system of PACs, corporate giving, and political funds. These mechanisms are now perfectly legal, while regular people often cannot get a hearing on the policies that matter to us. Join the DC Fair Elections Coalition! (dcfairelections.org)

2 Not only are DC residents deprived of full voting representation in Congress, we are also subject to the politically-motivated whims of members of Congress from other parts of the country. Any law or budget that we as citizens support must be approved by Congress. DC residents should control our own budgets and be in charge of local affairs, just like any other community in the country. (dcvote.org)

3 Local elections are woefully under-reported in our region, making it even harder for voters to get good, current information.

4 In our region, important elections are often won and lost by razor-thin margins. In DC, turn-out for the last two primary elections was under 27% of registered voters. Turnout was about 65% in the 2016 general election, and 38% in 2014 (DC Board of Elections). Nationally, voter turnout in presidential elections - which is almost always the highest of any US elections - has barely risen above 55% of eligible voting age adults since 1968. Many other countries have voter turnout in the 80-90% range. (en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Voter_turnout_in_the_United_States_presidential_elections)

5 Many countries around the world smooth the way to voting by making election day a federal holiday or holding elections on the weekend. In the US, research shows that 28-35% of registered voters who do not vote cite work and school conflicts as the reason they did not vote. There are many ideas for how to make voting more accessible, including requiring that employers provide time off, making election day a holiday, or moving election day to a weekend: nytimes.com/roomfordebate/2016/11/07/overturning-election-day-tradition

6 Nearly every state bars incarcerated people - who are disproportionately Black and brown as a result of the racist “New Jim Crow” policies of the last several decades - from voting. In our region, Virginia permanently bars returning citizens from voting, unless their rights are individually restored by the governor. In 2016, the Virginia Supreme Court overturned then-Governor Terry McAuliffe’s executive order to restore voting rights to nearly 200,000 citizens who had completed their sentences, forcing him to make over 12,000 pardons individually. In 2016 the Sentencing Project estimated that 6.1 million Americans cannot vote due to felony convictions, including 1 in every 13 Black adults, and up to 1 in 5 in some states (sentencingproject.org/publications/felony-disenfranchisement-a-primer)
7 Misinformation on issues as well as politicians’ actions and positions leads to misinformed voters who are both cynically turned off from politics and elections and filled with manufactured hate and rage.

8 For many working class communities, and Black communities, early voting is a key tool: it allows those who cannot get off work, or work multiple jobs, to vote at a time they choose. And many Black churches and communities use early voting as a way to organize and mobilize voters by bus and on weekends.

9 Investigations show that the Russian government worked in multiple ways to undermine the 2016 election and that plans are already underway to disrupt upcoming elections. Though 13 Russian individuals have been indicted or pled guilty to these conspiracies, the State Department has yet to spend even a dollar of the $120 million allocated to counter foreign electoral meddling. (nytimes.com/2018/02/16/us/politics/russians-indicted-mueller-election-interference.html and nytimes.com/2018/03/04/world/europe/state-department-russia-global-engagement-center.html)

10 From the ACLU: “Since 2008, states across the country have passed measures to make it harder for Americans—particularly black people, the elderly, students, and people with disabilities—to exercise their fundamental right to cast a ballot. These measures include cuts to early voting, voter ID laws, and purges of voter rolls.” This is often done in the preventing voter fraud, a problem researchers agree basically doesn’t exist. aclu.org/issues/voting-rights/fighting-voter-suppression

11 Racial gerrymandering can work by “packing” a district so that all its voters are of a similar racial demographic, concentrating their votes, or by “cracking” apart a Black or brown community into different districts so that their political voices are engulfed by a larger, usually white and Republican, majority. Both these outcomes are problematic because they can reduce political power of a minoritized community. (washingtonpost.com/news/wonk/wp/2016/06/09/how-a-widespread-practice-to-politically-empower-african-americans-might-actually-harm-them)

12 Exodus 1:9-11, 14

13 Exodus 1:12

14 Leviticus 19:16

15 Exodus 23:9

16 V’hee sh’amdah, Passover haggadah

Thank you from the bottom of our hearts to the inspiring people and organizations who have donated their time and expertise to serve as our teachers and trainers tonight. We encourage you to explore all the ways they are changing this region for the better.

**OUR GRATITUDE**

**Thank you to SEIU for supporting the printing of this haggadah.** The Service Employees International Union (SEIU) unites 2 million diverse members in the United States, Canada, and Puerto Rico. SEIU members working in the healthcare industry, in the public sector and in property services believe in the power of joining together on the job to win higher wages and benefits and to create better communities while fighting for a more just society and an economy that works for all of us, not just corporations and the wealthy. [seiu.org](http://seiu.org)

Gail Mattison, Marc Holderman, Charles Mallory, the staff, Cantor Arianne Brown, and Rabbis Aaron Alexander, Lauren Holtzblatt, and Kerrith Rosenbaum at Adas Israel Congregation for hosting us.

**Mark Wolff** captured this evening in photos.

**Hillel Smith**, an artist and typographer living in Los Angeles, created the beautiful poster and cover art. [hillelsmith.info](http://hillelsmith.info)

We give special thanks to **Let My People Vote** ([letmypeoplevote.com](http://letmypeoplevote.com)) for generously allowing us to use their name as the theme of our seder this year. Founded and led by Black women, Let My People Vote is a non-partisan, non-profit organization working to cultivate a culture of permanent Black political involvement by increasing the power of the Black voice, vote, and dollar.

**Thank you to our volunteers:**

Elliott Becker
Nathaniel Berman
Dale Brown
Stephanie Cohen
Stephen D’Alessio
Sue Dorfman
Damella Dotan
Eli Elias
Spencer Gopaul
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Ari Strauss
Soraya Vaezi
Ann Webb
Maari Weiss
Jews United for Justice leads Washington- and Baltimore-area Jews to act on our shared values by pursuing justice and equality in our local community. We work on issues like affordable housing, paid family leave, fair taxation and budgets, police reform, worker and immigrant rights, and safety net funding. Through campaigns, programs, and public education, JUFJ builds relationships and mobilizes the Jewish community to demand and win meaningful change. Our work is grounded in Jewish text as well as the Jewish experience of both prejudice and privilege. We envision a healthy, fair, and safe D.C.-Baltimore region, where the rights and dignity of all residents are respected and their voices are heard, where working hard guarantees a decent living and everyone has access to quality health care and education. We believe that the only way to build such a community is for Jews to join with our neighbors to demand social change.

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The Jews United for Justice Campaign Fund mobilizes the Jewish communities of the Greater Washington – Baltimore region to advance issues of social, racial, and economic justice, and support progressive candidates for local office. Check out our newest project, a DC Council scorecard, at dccouncil.net