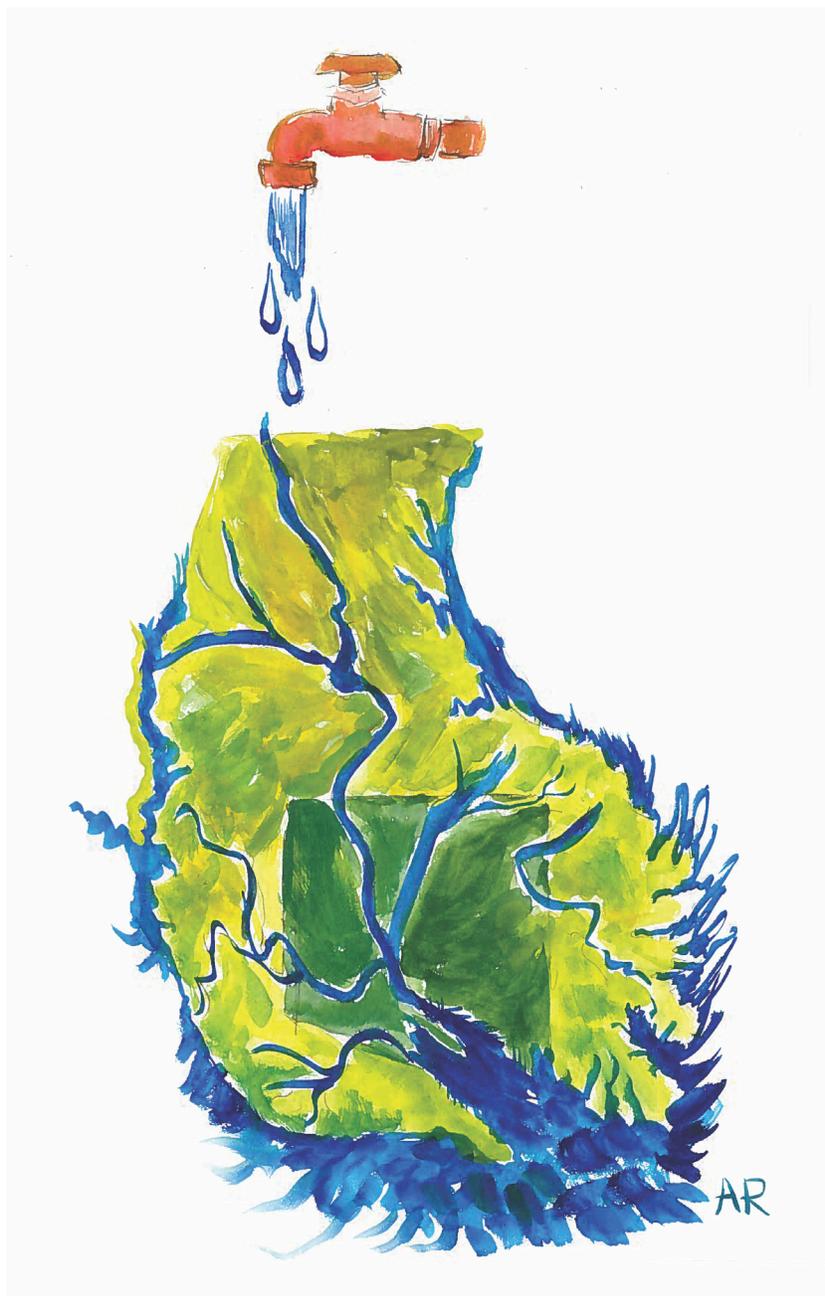


# COMMON RESOURCE, COMMON NEED

## A SEDER ON WATER JUSTICE

JEWS UNITED FOR JUSTICE ▲ SOCIAL JUSTICE SEDER



MARCH 31, 2019 ▲ 24 ADAR II 5779

CHEVREITZEDEK CONGREGATION ▲ BALTIMORE, MD

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## **WELCOME**

As an inclusive community centered around Jewish values and social justice, we welcome everyone to Jews United for Justice's 6th annual Social Justice Seder in Baltimore. As is traditionally said at the Passover seder: "Let all who are hungry come and eat!" To that we add, "Let all who are eager come and act!"

Your table captain (please raise your hands, table captains!) will help to guide you through today's seder. Whether you have been directly affected by the water affordability and billing issues we'll hear about today, or you're learning about them for the first time, whether you've been to dozens of seders, or never attended one before, you can both contribute to and learn from today's program. We hope to end the seder feeling like a *kehillah kedoshah*, a sacred community, who work together to stand up for the rights and basic needs of all our neighbors.

Before we begin our discussion of Baltimore's contemporary water justice issues and its impact on housing stability, we wish to acknowledge the physical place where we find ourselves today. In the name of justice, we name that we hold our seder on native lands of the Piscataway, Nentego, Lenape, Susquehannock, and Pamunkey peoples.

We also wish to acknowledge and thank JUFJ's co-host for this event, Congregation Chevrei Tzedek, who have so generously shared their space with us today. In 1988, a group of people gathered to create a lay-led and egalitarian congregation, committed to creating a Jewish community engaged with social justice within the larger community. They called themselves Chevrei Tzedek, community of justice.

## **WHY A SOCIAL JUSTICE SEDER?**

The Passover seder serves many purposes. First and foremost, it is a ritualized celebration of the biblical Israelites' dramatic journey from slavery to freedom. But even from its earliest days, the seder was never just about history. As the format of the seder was finalized in Mishnaic and Talmudic times (50 BCE - 500 CE), rituals were included to make each participant feel as if they personally are experiencing the journey from slavery to freedom. The Passover seder is also a lens through which to see the modern world around us.

We know too well that the fight for justice and freedom is a fight that is continuous throughout history and across the globe. The Passover seder teaches us that just as we alone could not free ourselves from *Mitzrayim* (the narrow place, or ancient Egypt), we have an obligation to fight for the freedom of all peoples in every generation. The injustices of the world are many, but the Passover story reminds us, in the words of the ancient Jewish book of ethics *Pirkei Avot*: "It is not your duty to complete the work, but neither are you free to desist from it."

Together, this Passover, let us use our collective power to further the cause of justice and freedom.

## WHY A PASSOVER SEDER ABOUT WATER JUSTICE IN BALTIMORE?

Judaism, like many religious and spiritual traditions around the world, teaches us that water is sacred. In the Book of Jeremiah, God is called a “fountain of living waters.” Water is a gateway to numerous Jewish rituals, rituals that define our days, usher us into communal meals, and purify us. Prayers for water are found throughout our *siddurim* (prayer books), and in the Passover story, Moses’ parting of the water in our journey out of *Mitzrayim* led us towards a future as free people.

Despite the sanctity of water in so many faiths, in our modern world water is too often treated as a commodity to be purchased and to be profited off of. Injustices that the Israelites faced as slaves to Pharaoh are mirrored in our society when water is seen not as a right but as a luxury available only to those who can pay.

During tonight’s seder (“order”), we will remember the role of water in our ancient search for justice and for a home. We will read and sing together from this new *haggadah*, the book that guides us through our Passover ritual. We will recite Passover’s traditional four questions, remember four types of children, and as we drink four ritual cups of wine, we will learn together about four pillars of water justice we work toward for Baltimoreans:

**Affordability** - Midrash teaches us that, in desperation, the enslaved Israelites took essential supplies from their masters before fleeing from *Mitzrayim*. Water is unaffordable for too many Baltimoreans. Water rates have doubled in recent years. The United Nations Development Program (UNDP) states that people should not pay more than 3% of their income for water. But a comprehensive report by Roger Colton, the country’s leading utility affordability expert, concludes that by this standard, water bills are currently unaffordable for approximately one-third of Baltimore households. This proportion will rise to one-half by the end of 2019. In addition, the amount of assistance offered to low income households is insufficient; there is no assistance to renters and more than 22,000 families making around \$10,000 a year are still paying 7 to 8% of their income on water bills. And, over the next 3 years, the cost of water will increase 30% for Baltimore residents. In Baltimore County rates have been rising for years, and are expected to increase another 40% in 5 years.

**The Right to Due Process** - When Moses and the Israelites cried out against injustices, Pharaoh’s heart hardened. There was no way for them to seek justice under his rules. When Baltimoreans receive outrageous water bills, we have no process by which to dispute them, and no guarantee of responsiveness or accountability from Baltimore City’s Department of Public Works. The system is hardened against the pleas and the needs of our people.

**Sanctity of Housing** - We once left our homes in *Mitzrayim*, fleeing so quickly that we had to bake bread without letting it rise, and were cast into the desert to wander. Today, if Baltimoreans can’t pay their water bills, our homes can be put up for tax sale. That means we only have a few months to try to get our homes back before losing them for good. Homeowners who have spent decades painstakingly paying their mortgages, and renters who pay their rent on time each month, are at risk. In 2017, over 8,000 Baltimore homes were placed on the tax sale list due to water bills.<sup>1</sup> To force people from their homes is to cast them into a desert.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.wmar2news.com/news/region/baltimore-city/bill-fights-tax-sale-of-baltimore-homes-with-unpaid-water-bills>

**Human Health** - As slaves under Pharaoh's regime, Israelite families suffered physical and mental health impacts too numerous to list. Families here in Baltimore are suffering the cruel physical and mental toll of insurmountable bills, water shut-offs, and fear of losing their homes. Parents can lose custody of their children because a property without water can be deemed unsafe. Healthcare providers are mandated to report any family with children who do not have running water in their home, which complicates relationships between healthcare providers and their vulnerable patients.<sup>2</sup> Even with the current moratorium on water shut-offs, many Baltimoreans are afraid to use water for fear of driving up their already high water bills.<sup>3</sup>

Tonight we hope to inspire you to take action—no matter where you live—so that over the next year, and in years to come, nobody will lose their home, place of worship, or financial security because of water. Like our ancestors of old, it is time for us to cry out against injustice.

## CANDLE LIGHTING

As we come together for Baltimore's 6th annual Social Justice Seder, we take time to light candles, which serve not only to sanctify our gathering, but as a reminder throughout the night of those in search of light in this world.

We also say the *shehecheyanu*, a blessing of thanks for bringing us together again this season.

### Recite together:

בָּרוּךְ אַתָּה יְיָ אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם אֲשֶׁר קִדְּשָׁנוּ בְּמִצְוֹתָיו וְצִוָּנוּ לְהַדְלִיק נֵר שֶׁל יוֹם טוֹב

*Baruch atah adonai, eloheinu melech ha-olam,  
asher kid'shanu b'mitzvotav v'tzivanu l'hadlik ner shel Yom Tov.*

**“Blessed are You, Adonai our God, Sovereign of the universe, who makes us holy with *mitzvot* and commands us to kindle the light of the festival day.”**

בָּרוּךְ אַתָּה יְיָ אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם שֶׁהַחַיִּינוּ וְקִיַּמְנוּ וְהַגִּיעֵנוּ לְזֶמַן הַזֶּה

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

**“Blessed are You, Adonai our God, Sovereign of the universe, who has granted us life, sustained us, and enabled us to reach this occasion.”**

## TABLE DISCUSSION

*Havruta* is a Jewish practice of deeply studying a text together with another person to learn what that text can teach us. Please introduce yourself to your neighbors at your table. Then, in groups of 2 or 3, please read the text study below, and discuss the questions that follow.

2 Experiences shared by Dr. Natalie Spicyn, member of Beth Am and clinician at Park West Clinic

3 <https://www.abell.org/sites/default/files/publications/Keeping%20the%20Water%20On.pdf>

## TEXT STUDY

In the first three verses of the book of Genesis, we read: “When God began to create heaven and earth — the earth being unformed and void, with darkness over the surface of the deep, and a wind from God sweeping over the water — God said, ‘Let there be light,’ and there was light.”

This is a famous and widely cited text. We take for granted that, in the beginning, “God created light.” Yet, upon closer reading, we see that the Torah implies that water existed **before** the creation of Divine light. Just a few lines later in verse six we read: “God said, ‘Let there be an expanse in the midst of the of water, that it may separate water from water.’” God does not create water, but rather, separates it. God again separates waters during the Passover story when the Israelites pass through the Sea of Reeds. In both these cases water facilitates a new beginning. But God also uses water to destroy human life — during the floods of Noah’s time, and when the sea closes on the Egyptians in the Passover story, after the Israelites have passed through. Water is powerful: it can both nourish and destroy life. Water is ancient: it existed in the darkness before creation. **What, then, is God’s relationship to water?**

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. If, as the Torah teaches, God and water existed together before the creation of “heaven and earth,” what might the Torah teach us about the fundamental nature of water?
2. How might this interpretation help us think about how we, as a society, own, commodify, and distribute water?
3. What does it mean to you to “own” or “have access to” water?

## B’CHOL DOR VA’DOR (IN EVERY GENERATION)

בְּכֹל דּוֹר וָדוֹר

In every generation, each person is obligated to see ourselves as if we had personally left *Mitzrayim*. This obligation ensures that we remain empathetic to anyone experiencing oppression and slavery, and that we work in solidarity with those seeking liberation. Each time we reconnect to our history, we find new meaning and hope in our story of liberation. In addition to remembering the Passover story, today we also remember the history of our struggle for water justice in Baltimore.

Since 2014, our first year in Baltimore, Jews United for Justice has worked with partners in several coalitions including One Baltimore, 7,000 Families, and the Right to Water Coalition, to achieve water justice for all. In 2014 and 2015, we and the One Baltimore Coalition, prevented Veolia from being awarded a contract that could have led to the privatization of the City’s water system. In 2015, when more than 5,000 Baltimore families’ water had been shut off, we and our allies pressured the city to stop the practice of turning off water for unpaid bills and were successful. We are also organizing with Renters United of Maryland to prevent water bills from being a cause for eviction in Rent Court. In 2018, we and our partners passed legislation

requiring that tenants of all 1- and 2-unit buildings receive a copy of their water bill. And in the election that year, we helped win a ballot measure that made Baltimore the largest city in the US to ban water privatization. Cities that privatize their water pay 50% more on average, and have poorer water quality and customer service.

We have worked for years on statewide legislation that would permanently ban tax sales of homes and houses of worship based on water bills. Last year, we and our allies won a moratorium on the practice of selling homes at tax sale for unpaid water bills. As this Haggadah goes to print, this bill, The Water Taxpayer Protection Act (HB161/SB096), has unanimously passed the House and Senate, and we are optimistic that it will become law. We are also supporting city legislation, The Water Accountability and Equity Act, that would increase water affordability and provide a means and a timeline for Baltimore City and County residents to challenge their water bills, for which there is currently no mechanism.

As we explore the ongoing struggle for water justice, we keep these victories in mind, and acknowledge that without the work of our coalitions over the last four and a half years, the water access and justice situation would be even more dire. We appreciate the contributions of JUFJ members, our organizational partners, and legislative champions like Senator Mary Washington, Delegate Nick Mosby, and Council President Jack Young.

**Sing together:**

עֲבָדִים הָיִינוּ לְפָרֹעַה בְּמִצְרַיִם

*Avadim hayinu l'pharoh b'Mitzrayim*

**We were slaves to Pharaoh in Mitzrayim**

## **FIRST CUP OF WINE: AFFORDABILITY**

All Jewish holidays begin with *kiddush*, the blessing of wine or grape juice, and our social justice seder is no different. This blessing sanctifies the holiday. Today we will be using grape juice.

On Passover, the first cup marks the beginning of the Exodus story, when Jews began their journey towards freedom and self-determination. Our first cup today also marks the origin of Baltimore's water justice crisis.

The water affordability crisis in Baltimore can be traced back to the City's 2002 agreement with the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), which mandated that the City update its water infrastructure. To fund these improvements, DPW began increasing rates for residential water customers by 9% every year, starting in 2010. Before these increases began, water was affordable even for a family near the federal poverty level. This is no longer the case.

Annual bills are projected to triple between 2010 and 2022, with some low-income families paying more than 10% of their income for water. While the City needs to fund necessary improvements to its ailing water infrastructure, we must consider the dire consequences of these rate increases.

A leading expert on utility affordability describes our water billing crisis this way: when people can afford to pay their water bills, they do pay their water bills. They pay a larger portion of their bill, and pay more reliably and consistently into the future.

**We must prioritize water affordability. It is a moral — and practical — imperative.**

Before drinking our first cup, let us reflect on the unaffordability of water for too many of Baltimore’s families. More than 20% of Baltimore City residents live in poverty. The median household income in the City is \$46,641.<sup>4</sup> Over 30% of Baltimoreans are being charged more than 3% of their income. This has led to water shut-offs in the past, and to homelessness for homeowners whose properties have been sold at tax sale or renters who have been evicted for unaffordable or incorrect water bills.

**[Fill cup of juice]**

*A representative from each table raise the first cup of juice high in the air, to be out of reach from others, just as the current price of water in Baltimore is out of reach of so many.*

בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה יְיָ אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם, בּוֹרֵא פְּרֵי הַגָּפֶן

*Baruch atah adonai, eloheinu melech ha'olam, borei p'ri hagafen.*

**Blessed are You, Adonai our God, Sovereign of the universe,  
Creator of the fruit of the vine.**

## **MIRYAM'S CUP**

Miryam’s cup was added to many Passover seders in the twentieth century, to recognize the often silent and unnoticed role of women in the Passover story. We fill Miryam’s cup with water, not wine, in remembrance of the life-giving well that followed the Israelites through the desert as a reward for Miryam’s courage and dedication to her people. As the Talmud states, “If it wasn’t for the righteousness of the women of that generation, we would not have been redeemed from Egypt” (Babylonian Talmud, Sotah 9b).

Miryam has a unique relationship to water and the sea. After the baby Moses is placed into the water on a *teiva* (“a little ark”), she stands at the edge of the river to look after her brother, “to know what would be done to him” (Exodus 2:4). After the dramatic exodus from Egypt, when the sea has closed over the heads of the Egyptians who pursued the Israelites, she stands again at the edge of the water and sings: “Sing to the Lord, for He has triumphed gloriously; Horse and driver He has hurled into the sea” (Exodus 15:21). Because Miryam stood at the edge of water at both the beginning and the end of Moses’s journey in Egypt, she, for many

Jewish commentators, marks the redemptive aspect of Moses's journey from Israelite slave, to Egyptian Prince, to liberator of the Israelite people. As she sang her song at end of Moses's Egyptian journey, she finally knew what would be done to him. In fact, she may have known all along.

We also notice the word *yam*, sea, is in Miryam's name. While commentators have long debated the meaning of her name, when we read further in the narrative, we find some answers. The Israelites traveled for three days in the wilderness and found no water. Upon arriving at the place of Marah, they discovered they could not drink the water because it was bitter. The name Marah literally means "bitter," like the *maror* (bitter herbs) we eat on Passover. *Mar* (bitter) plus *Yam* (sea) equals *Miryam* ("the bitterness of the sea").

Where does this bitterness come from? It comes from the death of the Egyptians. Miryam is bitter because, despite God being the "fountain of the living waters" (*mekor mayim chayim*), justice for the Israelites must come at the expense of the lives of the Egyptians.

Today we fill Miryam's cup to honor the life-affirming power of water, and of the strong women in our midst. But we also remember the bitter relationship people may have with water, both here in Baltimore and around the world.<sup>5</sup>

## **SONG (SEE HANDOUT)**

### **YACHATZ - THE BREAKING OF THE MIDDLE MATZAH**

There are three symbolic pieces of matzah in the center of a seder table. The breaking of the middle matzah is one of many rituals that transform the food of the seder into symbols of meaning. We are told that the matzah is the bread of affliction, of poverty and persecution, of stretching one meal into two.

In tearing the matzah in half, we shake ourselves out of complacency. We express the anger and fear that occurs when our basic human needs are not met, when our basic human needs are not respected as human needs. With the physicality of tearing, we move through anger so we can shift into action. The breaking of the matzah is a small act of empowerment. As we invite a representative from each table to break the middle matzah, let us imagine tearing an unaffordable water bill down the middle. We do this to honor those who are directly impacted by the unjust system of water unaffordability both in Baltimore City and throughout our region, and to recognize that this unfair system can be broken when all of our human needs are respected and met.

Not only were we deprived of basic human needs as we wandered in the desert, but that literal thirst remains present in our world.

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<sup>5</sup> Women are uniquely impacted by the bitterness of water injustice in our contemporary world. In many countries, the lack of a safe and sufficient water supply, coupled with inadequate sanitation facilities, has a disproportionate effect on the lives of women and girls, who usually bear the responsibility for collecting water, are more vulnerable to abuse and attack while walking to and using an open toilet, and who have enhanced hygiene needs during menstruation, pregnancy and child bearing. (<https://www.theguardian.com/global-development-professionals-network/2017/mar/17/access-to-drinking-water-world-six-infographics>)

## HA LACHMA ANYA

Someone at each table hold up or point to the matzah on the table as **we say together:**

This is the bread of affliction that our ancestors ate in *Mitzrayim*. All who are hungry, let them come and eat. All who are in need, let them come and celebrate Passover with us. Now we are here; next year may we be in the land of Freedom. Now we are enslaved; next year may we be free people.

## SPEAKER - A STORY OF WATER INJUSTICE

### SECOND CUP OF WINE: THE RIGHT TO DUE PROCESS

For millennia, societies around the world have developed ways for parties in dispute to come together and be heard. From tribal councils and community-based conflict mediation, to formal arbitration and court proceedings, the ability to present one's case and receive the judgement of a fair and objective arbiter is a hallmark of just societies. We know that *Mitzrayim* was an unjust society because we were enslaved, and could not appeal to the law for a fair judgment.

Currently the Baltimore DPW does not offer any formal dispute resolution process. Those with privilege and power are more likely to have access to due process, to have the time and resources to fight erroneous water bills, or to reclaim the lien on their home if it has gone to tax sale. Those with connections to City government may find a helping hand. Those who can afford to can seek legal advice, or who can spend a day waiting at DPW to speak to an agent — who may not even be able to help — have an advantage. Renters have it even worse, with no access to water bills, accounts, or financial assistance.

Access to due process, to plead one's case to public officials who seek to serve, should not depend on socioeconomic status. If you couldn't afford to take time off from work, if you had nowhere to turn, didn't know who to call — what would you do?

The City Council is considering the Water Accountability and Equity Act, which will create an independent Office of the Water Customer Advocate to handle billing disputes. This important provision is a step towards holding City institutions accountable to the people, and giving the people a voice and a partner in the fight for justice, accurate billing, and the roof over their heads.

#### [Fill cup with juice]

*A representative from each table rise in body or in spirit with your glass just as we must rise to respond to the call to advocate for what is just, tell our stories, and face those who block our way.*

בָּרוּךְ אַתָּה יְיָ אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם, בּוֹרֵא פְּרֵי הַגָּפֶן

*Baruch atah adonai, eloheinu melech ha'olam, borei p'ri hagafen.*

**Blessed are You, Adonai our God, Sovereign of the universe,  
Creator of the fruit of the vine.**

## THE FOUR QUESTIONS

### Reader:

The four questions are not truly four questions at all. This section of the Passover seder poses one central question—*how is this night different than all other nights?*—and offers four answers to explain the meaning of our seder rituals.

Tonight, instead of the traditional question, we compel our community and our elected leaders to ask, and to answer:

### Everyone:

How do we attain a future in which no one is adversely affected by unaffordable or inaccurate water bills?

### Sing Together:

מה נִשְׁתַּנָּה הַלַּיְלָה הַזֶּה מִכָּל הַלַּיְלוֹת?

*Mah nishtanah halailah hazeh mi'kol ha'leilot?*

### Recite Together:

1. The City Council's Water Accountability and Equity Act will help protect low-income residents from unaffordable water bills, and provide a pathway out of water debt.
2. The Water Accountability and Equity Act will create an independent office to address resident complaints and billing disputes.
3. The Maryland General Assembly's Water Taxpayer Protection Act will prohibit Baltimore City from selling people's homes and places of worship just because of unpaid water bills.
4. The Water Taxpayer Protection Act will help prevent renters from being evicted for unpaid water bills.

## THE SEDER PLATE

The Seder Plate contains foods that are traditional symbols of Passover, each helping us to remember and recreate different aspects of the Passover story. This year, the symbols take on new meanings as we also use them to reflect on the role water justice plays in our daily lives.

*(Designate a volunteer to hold up each symbol as it is explained)*

**Karpas (green vegetable)** - Spring's new buds remind us to look forward to the future. Traditionally, we dip the green vegetable in salt water to remind us of the tears the Israelites shed as they labored for Pharaoh. Today, we know that change in our water system is possible. We will continue to chip away at injustice in water billing and collection. Yet, we still dip our greens in salt water to remember the pain and suffering that DPW policy and practice is causing to people in our community.

**Maror (bitter herb)** - Taste is the sense tied most strongly to memory, and the bitter taste of maror is meant to put us in the place of the Israelites suffering under Pharaoh. Do you carry bitter memories of injustices that you or others have experienced in Baltimore?

**Egg** - An egg is fragile, but its thin shell is enough to protect tender new life from a rough world. What little things can we each do to protect all homes from being sold because of unpaid water bills?

**Beet (or shank bone)** - The Israelites used lambs' blood to mark their doors as a signal to the Angel of Death to pass over their homes and spare the lives of those under that roof. The vegetarian version of the shank bone is the beet root, whose red juice resembles blood. What is the root of the water injustice in Baltimore?

**Charoset** - The chunky paste of *charoset* is meant to recall the mortar the enslaved Israelites were forced to use to build Pharaoh's palaces. When we force our people to bear the cost of rebuilding Baltimore's water infrastructure, even though so many live in poverty, what is the true cost to all of us?

**Matzah** - The Israelites did not have time to bake bread before they left the house of bondage, so they carried unleavened bread—matzah. What would you bring with you if you were forced out of your home or religious sanctuary because of a water shut-off or because of unpaid water bills?

**Orange** - The orange on the seder plate symbolizes our commitment to lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer folks, and to a more fruitful community where all are welcome at our table. How will we work in solidarity with marginalized groups in our community who struggle disproportionately with water injustice?

## **THE FOUR CHILDREN**

The haggadah presents four questioning children who approach the seder in four different ways. At traditional seders, we begin with the wise child and end with the child who doesn't know how to ask questions. But tonight, we have flipped the order. Why is this night different from all other nights? Because on this night, we may have entered this room not knowing what questions to ask or even what the issues are, but like the wise child who asks the most probing questions, we will leave wiser, knowing what needs to be done to attain water justice for all.

### **The Child Who Doesn't Know How to Ask**

This child is unaware of the vulnerabilities and suffering of others in their community. They have water coming out of their faucet, can readily afford their reasonable monthly bill, and wonder only why "irresponsible people" don't pay their bills. This child must be exposed to a wider perspective, to life experiences beyond their own. As a community, we must work to develop this child's sense of curiosity about and empathy for those they see as apart from themselves.

### **The Simple Child**

Though the simple child understands that we must fight for water justice, they are overwhelmed by all the nuances and policy details. They need to know more specifics so they can wrap their head around the issues and learn to talk to others about them. The simple child asks: Where do these water bills even come from?

Why is the cost of water so high in Baltimore? What is a tax sale? Is there a process for disputing bills? Why is the cost of water going up by 30% over the next 3 years? What is the Water Accountability and Equity Act? What is the Water Taxpayer Protection Act? How are they different?

We respond to the simple child with definitions to help them build a foundation of knowledge.

Sometimes when people cannot pay their water bills, the city puts a lien on the property, then sells the lien to predatory investors who charge 18% interest on the initial debt. If not paid or "redeemed" in 9 months, the investor can foreclose on the property.

There is currently no basic process for addressing exorbitant water bills. The Water Accountability and Equity Act in Baltimore would create an income-based water affordability system, keeping prices below 3% of household income, providing assistance to renters, and formalizing a customer dispute and resolution process.

The Water Taxpayer Protection Act would ensure that no one loses their home due to unaffordable or erroneous water bills. It would ban DPW or the city from selling properties at tax sale for water bills.

## The Wicked Child

This child is sometimes misunderstood as mean-spirited, as a trickster or an adversary who uproots themselves from their history. The wicked child separates themselves from the community by asking, “what does this mean to YOU?” In truth, the “wicked” child is often simply inquisitive and skeptical. They are the one who asks hard, intimidating questions, questions that go beyond what is right or wrong.

Keeping this in mind, our wicked child is tired and fatalistic. They ask: Why do we even keep trying? What is the point? Why do we do this over and over again, year after year?

We respond to the wicked child by first acknowledging their fatigue, frustration, and pessimism. It can be difficult to work for years without seeing victories. It is important to stay engaged, whether water injustice directly affects us as individuals or our greater communities, because change can happen slowly and in cycles.

We can tell the skeptical child: each iteration of the work brings us closer and closer to justice. Jewish tradition teaches us that we are obligated to **continue** the work, not to start or to finish. That is why we keep trying, despite the challenges and the fatigue. None of us are free until all of us are free.

## The Wise Child

The wise child seeks to delve deeper to the source of water injustice, and asks hard questions aimed at finding real solutions. The wise child asks: What are the statutes and laws in our state and city that protect people from water injustice? What legislation can help all of Baltimore’s residents? How do unpaid water bills lead to tenants being evicted? Why is there no due process for Baltimoreans with inaccurate water bills? How do we ensure people have the tools to advocate for themselves?

**As it is written in the Torah, the wise child proposes:**

כִּי־יִמּוּךְ אָחִיךָ וּמָטָה יָדוֹ עִמָּךְ וְהִחָזְקֶתָ בוֹ גַּר וְתוֹשֵׁב וְחֵי עִמָּךְ

**Strengthen the person so that he does not fall and become dependent on others. (Leviticus 25:35)**

The wise child climbs Maimonides’ “Ladder of *Tzedakah*” (charity)<sup>6</sup> to see a solution: Like Queen Esther, she throws a banquet, invites people in need and people who can elicit change. She makes a *shidduch* — builds relationships like a holy marriage — between those who face water problems and the advocates and lawmakers who can write policy to provide transparent, accountable, affordable water service and billing to all. And we, the community, are the sacred witness.

## 10 PLAGUES OF A BROKEN WATER SYSTEM

During the Israelites' journey to freedom, God brought ten plagues upon the Egyptian people, which we recite together at our seders and pour out our wine in remembrance of the suffering they caused. Today, we read instead ten modern plagues of our current water system, which are afflicting us and our neighbors.

*As each plague is named, pour a small amount of juice from your cup onto your plate. You may also dip your pinky and shake off a drop for each plague.*

### Recite Together:

1. **Emotional Distress:** anxiety and fear from mounting unpaid bills; confusion about your rights; shame from the possibility of losing your house.
2. **Lost Time & Wages:** spending a day or more at the DPW office, in rent court, or seeking help.
3. **Lack of Transparency:** homeowners unclear about the risk of tax sale; tenants without account information unaware that bills are unpaid.
4. **Water Shut Offs:** over 16,000 Baltimoreans lost water in 2015 and 2016.
5. **Incorrect Bills:** over 500 properties received inaccurate water bills in February 2018.
6. **Defeat:** paying a wrong or unaffordable bill to save your home; borrowing money from friends or family; turning to predatory loans; going into debt.
7. **Eviction:** renters being evicted for unpaid water bills, with no consideration of their ability to pay and no due process.
8. **Tax Sale:** loss of generational wealth, home equity, and stability for families building equity; hundreds of thousands of dollars lost for as little as \$750 in unpaid bills.
9. **Homelessness & Houselessness:** subjecting our neighbors to inhumane and dangerous conditions; needless aggravation of Baltimore's already serious houselessness problem, further burdening City services.
10. **Predatory Interest:** investors who buy liens on homes charging immoral rates to homeowners trying to recoup their houses; investors able to foreclose on houses after 9 months.

## THIRD CUP OF WINE: THE SANCTITY OF HOME

As a Jewish people we know all too well what it means to be forced from our homes. Adam and Eve were expelled from the Garden of Eden, Abraham and Sarah fled from Babylon, and even our journey to freedom from Pharaoh lost us the only home our people had known for generations. In more modern times, Jews have fled pogroms, been stripped of and denied property rights, and been forcibly removed from communities. To lose one's home is to lose the security of where you rest your head, where your children find safety and comfort, and where you have invested in a future for your family.

In Baltimore, as in most cities in America, residents are billed for using a part of nature, a public good we can't live without. We cook food, wash clothes, take showers, and quench our thirst all while an opaque system produces seemingly arbitrary bills that arrive on our doorsteps (if we are lucky — renters are rarely even provided bills). Now imagine this bill is well beyond your means to pay. Imagine seeking assistance from an unresponsive customer service line or landlord, then eventually receiving a notice that your house is up for sale or your are facing eviction in rent court. Your family's safety and security would be at risk over an accumulation of unaffordable or inaccurate water bills. Where would you turn?

Water justice isn't just about water. It's about home. Homeowners, landlords, and tenants alike are susceptible to the City's strongarm tactics that disproportionately target low-income residents in communities of color. The City's financial assistance is grossly inadequate, and there is no billing dispute process.

As we drink our third cup, we envision a world in which our society reflects the teachings of the Talmud and Mishnah, which tell us that one is not obligated to sell one's home before receiving financial relief, and that adequate housing is that which allows us to live a full and dignified life.

### [Fill cup with juice]

*A representative from each table hold the glass over your head with both hands, to symbolize the roof we all need over our heads.*

בָּרוּךְ אַתָּה יְיָ, אֱ-לֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם, בּוֹרֵא פְּרֵי הַגָּפֶן

*Baruch atah adonai, eloheinu melech ha'olam, borei p'ri hagafen.*

**Blessed are You, Adonai our God, Sovereign of the universe,  
Creator of the fruit of the vine.**

## FOURTH CUP OF WINE: HUMAN HEALTH

Water is fundamental to human life. We honor water as we sip our fourth cup, which could not have been fermented without clean water. Though the sustaining properties of water might seem obvious, let us reflect upon the ways we use water every day.

We drink water, We use water to brew our coffee and tea, to boil our rice, to soak our beans. Our dishes, our homes, and our bodies are washed with water. The house disposes of waste with water by flushing the toilet and running the garbage disposal. We need water to sustain our plants and our pets.

Water is integral to our health. Even beyond its impact on our physical bodies and homes, we suffer emotional stresses and burdens when we lose access to water. Paying for a water bill should not come at the expense of food and other necessities.

The Egyptians could not drink from the Nile when a plague turned the water into blood. Baltimore City residents sometimes cannot use the water in their homes in fear that their bills will be unaffordable. Unaffordability and inaccessibility can lead to much more than not having water. It can lead to losing a house, or losing custody of children. Being unable to pay the water bill can pull the foundation from under people's feet. Lack of access to water is an example of environmental racism, and tends to affect disinvested communities the most.

In our fourth cup, let us commit to support and protect all Baltimoreans' access to safe and affordable water.

### [Fill cup with juice]

*Each person hold your glass out with your right hand. Join your left hand with your neighbor's glass. We connect to each other as we do when we ask for healing and health.*

בָּרוּךְ אַתָּה יְיָ, אֱ-לֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם, בּוֹרֵא פְרֵי הַגָּפֶן

*Baruch atah adonai, eloheinu melech ha'olam, borei p'ri hagafen.*

**Blessed are You, Adonai our God, Sovereign of the universe,  
Creator of the fruit of the vine.**

## BRICH RACHAMANA - GIVING THANKS FOR OUR FOOD

בְּרִיךְ רַחֲמָנָא, מְלִכָא דְעֵלְמָא מְרִיבָא דְהַאי פִּתָּא

*Brich rachamana malka d'alma ma'arey d'hai pita*

**Blessed is the merciful One, Ruler of the world,  
Creator of this bread.**

## SANCTUARY

HaShem prepare me to be a Sanctuary  
Pure and Holy, Tried and True

### BRINGING IT HOME - RESOURCES FOR YOUR PERSONAL SEDER

Thank you for joining us for today's seder on water justice. While our seder has come to an end, the fight for water affordability has not. As we conclude our seder, we individually and collectively ask, how can we bring home the knowledge gained here? How can we incorporate this learning into our own seders, and how can we animate our personal seders to also be inspiring vehicles for change?

Here are some key places where you might be inspired to bring tonight's knowledge and message to your own seder. Of course, we encourage you to find opportunities to share the message of water justice, be it at your seder, in your workplace, among your friends, etc.

#### Ideas on how to incorporate these topics into your seder:

- **Miryam's cup** of water, if it is part of your seder, provides a moment to incorporate any of the water justice topics we discussed here that resonate with you, especially since her well of water sustained the lives of the Israelites in the desert.
- After singing **Avadim Hayinu** (we were slaves in Egypt) share some of the facts you learned here about our neighbors' struggle with water affordability. These realities remind us of our past oppression as Jews—use it to remind participants at your seder about the oppression so present in our own community past and present.
- Before tasting the **maror**, invite participants to reflect on the bitterness present in their own lives, particularly as it might relate to water access. Reflect on the bitterness experienced because of unjust policies. What unjust policies have impacted you and your family?
- Before tasting the **charoset**, consider the challenges of building up policies and laws that will ensure each Baltimorean can access affordable water, due process surrounding their water bills, and housing that cannot be taken due to tax liens, or eviction for water debts.
- Although not mentioned during some Passover seders, Moshe (Moses) is a central character in the Exodus narrative. Moshe gave up his privilege in Pharaoh's palace to defend the Israelites against the brutality of slavery (Exodus 2:11-15). Discuss how you can follow his example and give up your privilege to help others.

## GLOSSARY

**DPW:** The Department of Public Works, which is responsible for upkeep and management of water and sewage in Baltimore City.

**Due Process:** Fair treatment through the normal judicial process; an entitlement for all governed by our laws.

**Haggadah:** The Hebrew word for “telling” or “narrative,” it is the name of the text that sets out the order of the Passover seder. Reading the Haggadah fulfills the Torah commandment that we must tell our children about our liberation from slavery in *Mitzrayim*.

**HaShem:** Literally translate to “the name.” The word “HaShem” refers to God.

**Lien:** A right to keep possession of property belonging to another person until a debt owed by that person is paid or otherwise discharged.

**Mishna:** An authoritative collection of Jewish law compiled around 200 CE. The Mishna is based off earlier oral collections of Jewish law (also known as the oral Torah).

**Mitzrayim:** The Hebrew word for historical Egypt, ruled by Pharaoh in the Book of Exodus. The word *Mitzrayim* can be traced to its Hebrew root, *tzar*, meaning a narrow place of hardship and oppression.

**Moratorium:** A temporary prohibition of an activity.

**Passover:** The name of this holiday comes from the Hebrew word, *pesach*, whose root is to pass through, to pass over, to exempt, or to spare (referring to the story that God passed over the homes of the Israelites when slaying the firstborn in *Mitzrayim* during the tenth plague). *Pesach* is also the term for the sacrificial offering of a lamb that was made in the Temple on this holiday.

**Pharaoh:** The dictatorial leader of *Mitzrayim* who entrenched the enslavement of the Israelites.

**Pirkei Avot:** A tractate of the Mishnah that deals with ethical teachings.

**Seder:** A Hebrew word meaning “order,” this is what we call the ritual festive meal celebrated on the first one or two nights of Passover. The meal is called a seder because there is specific information and rituals that must be included, and tradition has come to specify a particular order for the rituals.

**Talmud:** Discussions and elaborations on the Mishna’s collection of Jewish law, compiled around the year 600.

**Tax Sale:** When a government seizes and sells a property for unpaid property taxes or other debt to a public entity. Sometimes known as a foreclosure auction.

**Torah:** The Hebrew name for the part of the Bible that consists of the Five Books of Moses.

## **WE WOULD LIKE TO THANK:**

Chevrei Tzedek Congregation, for providing the venue for our annual Baltimore Social Justice Seder. Special shout out to Pam Mandell and the Mazkirut (leadership committee) for their assistance!

Our 5779 Social Justice Seder Team: Adina Potter Yoe, Aimée Pohl, Ben Sax, Lisa Firnberg, Pam Mandell, Sara Eisenberg, and Vanessa Lubiner.

Avi Roberts for the beautiful artwork on the postcard and haggadah cover.

Our speakers for generously sharing their stories with us today.

Our partners at The Right to Water Coalition for inspiring and leading us to act on this issue and for the important work that they do to make Baltimore a more just place for all.

Tracie Guy-Decker for her assistance with fundraising.

Pearlstone Center for donating our compostable plates and utensils.

Our co-sponsors who so generously supported this program.

Everyone who attended this program and believes in our power to create a better, more just Baltimore. We are honored to be working alongside you!

## **WE NEED YOU!**

If you are interested in joining next year's Baltimore Social Justice Seder committee, please contact Rianna at [rianna@jufj.org](mailto:rianna@jufj.org). We welcome your ideas,

## ABOUT JEWS UNITED FOR JUSTICE

Since our founding in 1998, JUFJ has led Jews across Greater Washington and Baltimore to act on our shared Jewish values by pursuing justice and equality in our local community.

One day, everyone in the Washington-Baltimore region will have what they need to live and thrive, and a real voice in democracy, no matter the color of their skin, where they are from, or how much money they have. Our government will focus on equity and justice, and will respond to the needs of poor and working people, whether Black, brown, or white, who had once been systematically barred from resources and power. We work so that our Jewish community is a proud and valued partner in bringing about that day through multiracial, multifaith, cross-class movements working for social, racial, and economic justice.

Through organizing campaigns, education and training forums, and largescale events, JUFJ builds relationships and mobilizes the Jewish community to demand and win meaningful change for all area residents. Our work is grounded in Jewish text and tradition, and the historical Jewish experience of both persecution and privilege. JUFJ helps Jews live out our sacred, shared tradition of tikkun olam by working in solidarity with local partners for a more just and equal region and world.

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