

A New Freedom Seder for the Earth

By Rabbi Arthur Waskow

[See graphic by Avi Katz below](#)

Forty years ago, the 2000-year-old forms of the Passover Seder and Haggadah were turned into a seed for change, liberating new vision and creativity. The original Freedom Seder was held in Washington DC in 1969 on the first anniversary of the death of Dr. Martin Luther King.

Every Haggadah before it had told only the story of the liberation of the ancient Israelites from slavery under Pharaoh; the Freedom Seder intertwined that Jewish story with the struggles for freedom of Black America and other cultures, races, and religions. It won national attention and emulation, and in the decades since has sparked for many people the creation of many Seders and Haggadot devoted to various aspects of liberation.

Forty years – like the forty days of rain before the Flood, the forty days and nights that Moses and then Jesus fasted before their revelations, the forty years of travail in the wilderness, the forty weeks of human pregnancy -- are the time for a pregnant pause toward a new birthing. What now most needs a birthing?

Since the most profound issue facing the world today is the danger of climate catastrophe --- "global scorching" --- and other forms of earth-wide environmental disaster, the Fortieth Anniversary Freedom Seders will especially address that challenge through the presence in the Passover story of the Ten Plagues. These Seders for the Earth will also draw on the teachings of Shabbat HaGadol and the 28-year cycle of the Blessing of the Sun, which come just before Passover on April 4 and April 8. On Shabbat haGadol we read Malachi, the last of the prophets, who 2500 years ago foresaw “a day that will burn like a furnace,” who then pointed toward its remedy as “the sun of righteousness with healing in its wings / rays,” which we can hear as the healing power of solar and wind energy; and who said that God would send Elijah the Prophet to “turn the hearts of the parents to the children and the hearts of children to the parents, lest the earth be utterly destroyed.” (Malachi 3: 19-20 and 23-24)

Each of the ancient plagues was an ecological disaster brought on by Pharaoh's hard-heartedness, stubbornness, and addiction to his own power. Swarms of frogs and locusts, unprecedented hailstorms, rivers become undrinkable, three days of sandstorm darkness so thick it could be touched -- these disasters for the earth were intertwined with economic disasters for the people: workers impoverished into slaves, foreigners turned into pariahs. What are the Ten Plagues being brought upon us by the institutional "pharaohs" of today? Who and what are those pharaohs?

The New Freedom Seder for the Earth will also address Ten Healings for the earth and human justice that we must bring about through our own action.

I wrote the original Freedom Seder, which was nationally published by *Ramparts*

magazine. The actual Seder was broadcast live on WBAI radio, and the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation carried an hour-long reprise on national television. Since I am now director of The Shalom Center, The Shalom Center has taken responsibility for creating the New Freedom Seder for the Earth.

A flagship 40th Anniversary Seder will be held in Washington, DC, at 5 pm on March 29, 2009, at Shiloh Baptist Church in Washington, D.C. Hundreds of participants representing many faiths and races are expected to attend the event, which will draw attention to global threats to the environment. The Seder will also focus on the central Passover themes of freedom and the ten Biblical plagues, most of which were ecological calamities.

Shiloh Baptist Church is one of the earliest and sturdiest of African-American churches in the nation's capital. It was founded by slaves in 1852, in Fredericksburg, Virginia. When the Union Army offered safe passage to all blacks from Fredericksburg, north to Washington, many Shiloh members, now freed slaves, came -- meeting in a small shanty where they learned to read and write. They continued to worship together, growing to 750 members by 1861. In 1863, Shiloh was recognized as a true church.

March 29 is ten days before Passover, two weeks before Easter, and less than a week before the anniversary of Dr. Martin Luther King's death. The Freedom Seder in Washington will infuse each of these events with new energy and depth. It will draw national attention to the many local Fortieth Anniversary Interfaith Freedom Seders that will be held simultaneously in communities around the U.S., uniting people of all faiths, cultures, and races in a common dedication to social and economic justice, peace, and the healing of our wounded earth.

The Fortieth Anniversary Freedom Seders will focus on how to move past the top-down pharaonic powers that today are blocking the path toward a promised land of justice and sustainable community, nourished by sustainable sources of energy. We intend for the Seders to be not a one-time-only event but part of a process of ongoing organizing to prevent climate disaster and work for a just and sustainable economy.

The current draft of the text of the New Freedom Seder for the Earth is on the home page of The Shalom Center's website at www.shalomctr.org It is still being revised.

To attend the Seder in Washington, please register at –

https://salsa.democracynaction.org/o/602/event/checkOut.jsp?event_KEY=47013

To sponsor or take part in your Freedom Seder for the Earth in your own community, please write Awaskow@shalomctr.org and register your Seder at –

[http://salsa.democracynaction.org/o/602/t/4180/event/distributedEventSignup.jsp?d](http://salsa.democracynaction.org/o/602/t/4180/event/distributedEventSignup.jsp?distributed_event_KEY=475)

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