

NEWS DESK

# THE CASE FOR A FOURTH OF JULY SEDER

By Alan Burdick and Eliza Byard

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*The Passover narrative has been entwined in American history since our Republic was founded. Why not celebrate accordingly on Independence Day?* Photograph by Martin Parr / Magnum

**W**e hold these truths to be self-evident, that fireworks are awesome, that a four-day weekend is long overdue, that a hot dog or two once a year probably won't kill you, and that the Declaration of Independence is a superb

foundational document, even if many of us haven't read it since grade school and couldn't quote exactly what's in there. For many Americans, the Fourth of July marks the true start of summer; easy and undemanding, it's just the sort of national holiday that, in theory, we should all be able to get behind.

But the time has come for it to be something more. The Fourth of July celebrates our national identity, a subject that, ever since the country was founded, has been neither easy nor undemanding. "This is the birthday of . . . your political freedom," Frederick Douglass, the great orator and former slave, told the women of the Rochester Ladies' Anti-Slavery Sewing Society, on July 5, 1852. "This, to you, is what the Passover was to the emancipated people of God. It carries your minds back to . . . the act of your great deliverance; and to the signs, and to the wonders, associated with that act that day." Independence Day should be restful, yes, but it could also be more purposeful. What the Fourth of July needs, we think, is a Seder.

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For those unacquainted with it, the Seder is the meal served at the beginning of Passover, the Jewish holiday that recalls and celebrates the flight of the Israelites from bondage in ancient Egypt. It is a ceremony replete with symbolic foods (bitter herbs, invoking the bitterness of slavery; matzo, the bread of affliction) and ritual acts (hand-washing, blessings over wine). These, and a recounting of the story of the Exodus, are laid forth in a printed pamphlet, the Haggadah, from

which participants read aloud, and whose name, from the Hebrew word for “telling,” recognizes a solemn command in the Torah: “And you shall tell your children on that day...” It’s a religious kind of Thanksgiving, with a how-to guide, the gravity of centuries behind it, and a moral imperative to pass on the tradition to the next generation.

It’s also an adaptable holiday, responsive to its audiences through the ages and to changing historical tides. There are Haggadahs for Reform, Conservative, Reconstructionist, and Humanist denominations of Judaism; feminist and L.G.B.T. Haggadahs; a “freedom Haggadah,” written in 1969 in support of the civil-rights movement; even a Communist Haggadah, dating to 1917. In the nineteen-thirties, Maxwell House developed and began distributing a Haggadah for free with every can of coffee sold, in part to persuade Jews that the coffee bean is kosher for Passover. A genius stroke of branded content, it is the most popular Haggadah in the world—the U.S. military still uses it—and the longest-running sales promotion in advertising history.

The Exodus story has been entwined in American history since the very beginning of the Republic. On July 4, 1776, the Continental Congress tasked Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Jefferson, and John Adams with designing the first great seal of the United States. Franklin wanted an image of Moses parting the Red Sea, a doomed pharaoh in hot pursuit; Jefferson wanted an image of the Israelites wandering in the wilderness. (Adams hoped that Hercules would appear on the seal, but Congress ultimately went with a coat of arms on one side and a pyramid on the other.) For many early Americans, including Douglass, the Exodus was a common reference point in discussions of slavery, and it remained a pillar narrative for African-Americans through the civil-rights movement and into the present. Martin Luther King, Jr., in his final sermon, said that he, like Moses, had “been to the mountaintop”; like Moses, he never reached the Promised Land.

What would a good Fourth of July Seder look like? We'll let gastronomes work out the menu. But one core ritual, easily carried out in ten minutes, should be to read the Declaration of Independence out loud. Sure, you could read it online or in print—many newspapers devote a full-page ad to it each year. Or you could have it read to you, a service NPR provides annually, or watch [the YouTube video](#) in which Kevin Spacey, Whoopi Goldberg, Benicio Del Toro and other celebrities take turns reading lines from it. But, if any document was meant to be enacted at a back-yard barbecue, the Declaration of Independence is it. It's a declaration; let's declare it.

In so doing, we experience the beauty and the power of the document—created by the nation's best writer, Jefferson, and shaped by its best editor, Franklin. But we are also forced to confront its flaws, which are our own. The passage on “merciless Indian Savages,” for instance, is particularly painful to say aloud. “Some people want their flawless TV version of history,” the writer Jack Hitt said, earlier this week; since the nineteen-eighties, he has celebrated the Fourth by having his guests take turns reading from the Declaration. “That's why reading it out loud is crucial. You can't miss the warts. They're right there. And then you have to talk about them.”

This spirit of inquiry, of course, also animates the Passover Seder. At the heart of the ritual are the four questions, which traditionally are asked by the youngest participants and are really variations on a single question: Why is this night different from all other nights? The questions serve a rhetorical function, creating a symposium out of what might otherwise feel like a lecture. Passover remains vibrant and engaging for so many in part because it is annually poked and tested.

The Declaration of Independence requires no less from us. Imperfect even in its time, it prompted a conversation that continues in our homes and streets: Is happiness, or only the pursuit of it, guaranteed? What is equality, exactly, and who shares in it? (The [New York Public Library](#) currently has on display a copy of the Declaration, one of Jefferson's, containing all the text that Congress removed from

his first draft, including a condemnation of the slave trade as “an assemblage of horrors.”) The questions one could ask of the Declaration are as vital and urgent today as they have ever been, which is all the more reason to ask aloud.

Douglass’s 1852 speech, which is often republished under the title “What to the Slave is the Fourth of July?,” is itself a bracing interrogation. He begins by lauding the principles of the Declaration, then delivers a stinging rebuke of the document’s, and the audience’s, obvious exclusivity and hypocrisy. “The rich inheritance of justice, liberty, prosperity, and independence, bequeathed by your fathers, is shared by you, not by me,” he says. He continues:

This Fourth July is *yours*, not *mine*. *You* may rejoice, I must mourn. To drag a man in fetters into the grand illuminated temple of liberty, and call upon him to join you in joyous anthems, were inhuman mockery and sacrilegious irony. Do you mean, citizens, to mock me, by asking me to speak today?

Read that aloud on the Fourth. Or this, from Langston Hughes: “I say it plain, / America never was America to me, / And yet I swear this oath— / America will be!” Or Elizabeth Cady Stanton’s “Declaration of Sentiments,” from 1848: “The history of mankind is a history of repeated injuries and usurpation on the part of man toward woman, having in direct object the establishment of an absolute tyranny over her.” Or Emma Goldman’s New Declaration of Independence, from 1909: “When, in the course of human development, existing institutions prove inadequate to the needs of man...” So many texts speak to the Declaration and its contradictions. Pick your Presidents, your rabble-rousers, your poets; claim them, declaim them, and reclaim the day.

If this exercise makes you uncomfortable, it has succeeded. The Fourth of July celebrates our founding ideals, as yet unrealized; we owe it to ourselves and to future Americans to reflect honestly on that. There is something here worth building on.

And one more thing: a proper Seder requires that you invite a stranger to your celebration, someone who is wandering alone in the desert, beyond the borders of your community. That shouldn't be hard to find. We began as strangers in a strange land; we still are. That is the novelty of our nation and the struggle that continues to breathe life into it. As Jefferson, Franklin, and Douglass saw it, we haven't yet reached the Promised Land. We may not reach it this year or next, but if we eat and talk together along the way, we'll have gotten a step closer to somewhere we all want to be.

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