

Passover Song Acknowledgement Project

Let My People Go

2022



5782

(Pass around to read aloud before singing "Go Down Moses" as part of the Maggid section of the Seder)

In the Haggadah it is written: "Whoever expands upon the story of the Exodus from Egypt is worthy of praise" (*Rambam, Hilkhhot Hametz uMatzah 7:1*).

Tonight, let us expand upon the telling of the Exodus by asking questions about the African-American Spiritual "Go Down Moses," a song that Jews have sung at Seder tables for more than half a century.

What are the origins of this song?

"Go Down Moses" (also known as "Let My People Go") was written by enslaved Africans and their descendants as they suffered under the harsh oppression of slavery right here in the United States.

Those enslaved were inspired by the biblical story of the Exodus that they heard in church. They wrote thousands of Spirituals that expressed their yearning for freedom, and singing these Spirituals became an act of self-preservation and resistance for them.

The message of "Go Down Moses," perhaps the best-known Spiritual, was so clearly aligned with the Underground Railroad that some slaveholders banned its singing on their plantations. Harriet Tubman, the "Moses" of her people, used it as a signal on the Underground Railroad. The song was used as a call to leave the fields, and delivered many from their house of bondage to a promised land of freedom.

Why should we care who composed this song?

The names of the composers of "Go Down Moses" and over 6000 other Spirituals were lost to history by the time the words and music to the songs were written down at the tail end of 400 years of slavery.

As an artform, these African-American Spirituals created the bedrock of many forms of American music that have enriched our culture, including Jazz, Gospel, and the Blues.

Those who wrote these Spirituals deserve to be acknowledged. Descendants of Africans enslaved in the United States have often been last in line to receive recognition and compensation for the extraordinary contributions they've made to American culture.

What can we do?

This Passover, let us bring more justice (*tzedek / tzedakah*) into the world. Let us make a reparative *tikkun*, a healing. Let us commit to:

- **Continue to acknowledge** the experiences of enslaved Africans, including those who wrote "Go Down Moses," and the experiences of their descendants who live in our communities today.
- **Make a yearly Passover contribution** to a local organization in our community serving Black people, acknowledging their extraordinary musical contributions to American culture.

Turn over to sing, discuss, and contribute

O, Let My People Go / Go Down Moses

These are some of the original lyrics heard and written down in 1851 by Rev. L. C. Lockwood, chaplain of the "contrabands" at Fort Monroe Virginia. "Contrabands" was the name given to those who ran north to escape slavery during the Civil War.

The Lord by Moses to Pharaoh said,
O, Let My People Go!
If not I'll smite your first born dead,
Then, **Let My People Go!**

**O, Go down, Moses,
Away down to Egypt's land;
Tell King Pharaoh to Let My People Go!**

No more shall they in bondage toil (**Let My . . .**)
Let them come out with Egypt's spoil (**Let My . . .**)

Haste, Moses 'till the sea you've crossed
Pharaoh shall in the deep be lost

The sea before you shall divide
You'll cross dry-shed to the other side

Fear not King Pharaoh or his host
They all shall in the sea be lost

They'll sink like lead to rise no more
And you'll hear a shout on the other shore



Questions to ask around the Seder table

- How are the two stories of slavery and liberation – the Passover story of the Israelites and the African-American story – alike, and how are they different?
- In what ways are the descendants of those who wrote this song still experiencing oppression?
- How might making a yearly Passover acknowledgement contribution make a difference to you and to those who receive the contribution?

Send your acknowledgement contribution this year to:

Action Centered Tutoring Services, ACTS, provides one-to-one tutoring and mentoring to elementary school students in Springfield, MA

- **Online:** www.acts86.org / **Mail:** ACTS, 35 Chestnut Street, Springfield, MA 01103

Those beyond Western Massachusetts, send your contribution to a local Black-led organization that works to support Black people in your community.

This Haggadah supplement is the work of the Western Massachusetts Passover Song Acknowledgement Project Committee (Anthony Russell, Carolyn Toll Oppenheim, Felicia Mednick, Judi Wisch, Rabbi Lev Baesh, Rabbi Riqi Kosovske, Sadie "Zeydi" Gold-Shapiro).
Artwork by Ariel Shapiro.

The Passover Song Acknowledgement Project is supported by the following Western Massachusetts organizations: Beit Ahavah Reform Synagogue of Greater Northampton / Circles for Jewish Living / Congregation B'nai Israel / Congregation Shir Heharim / Jewish Federation of Western Massachusetts / Lander Grinspoon Academy / Sinai Temple / Temple Beth El / Temple Israel of Greenfield