

Seder Activity: Should We Put Reparations Back in ‘Dayenu’?

by Rabbi Micah Weiss

This role-playing activity is designed to generate a lively discussion of the many considerations involved in making intentional changes to Jewish tradition — a foundational component of a Reconstructionist approach to Judaism. The topic of reparations is the catalyst for the conversation, not an end goal that everyone has to agree on. Debating liturgical changes to the Haggadah can be a spiritually restorative practice for Jews living in two civilizations and constantly navigating places of ethical dissonance in the larger societies we live in to try and reach greater alignment with our ideals.

There are two versions of the activity: One requires no background knowledge, and the other asks either that participants pre-read the essay, “If God Had Only Given Us Reparations,” or that someone be prepared to summarize key parts of the article.

Reader:

“Welcome to the first (pretend) meeting of the Reconstructionist Haggadah Commission. You have been charged to recommend liturgical changes for a brand-new Reconstructionist Haggadah. The Tikkun Olam Commission (TOC) asks that the very first liturgical recommendation you should consider is whether or not we should add the line, ‘אלו נתן לנו אֶת־מָמוֹנָם *Illo natan lanu et mamonom*, Had God [only] given us their wealth,’ back into the words of Dayenu. This line was one of four that Rabbi Mordecai Kaplan, the intellectual parent of the Reconstructionist movement, removed from Dayenu when he published the radically innovative Haggadah *The New Haggadah* in 1941. He argued that they referenced events in the Exodus story that ‘might conflict with our highest ethical standards.’

“The four lines removed from the Reconstructionist Dayenu are, ‘Had God not ...

1. brought judgment upon their gods - עָשָׂה בְּאֱלֹהֵיהֶם
 2. Killed their firstborn sons - הָרַג אֶת־בְּכוֹרֵיהֶם
 3. Given us their wealth - נָתַן לָנוּ אֶת־מָמוֹנָם
 4. Drowned our enemies in [the Reed Sea] - שָׁקַע צָרֵנוּ בְּתוֹכוֹ
- ...Dayenu! It would have been enough.’

These changes were very popular in their day and have been emulated by most liberal Haggadot ever since. However, a new generation of Reconstructionist leaders have developed a surprising interest in restoring lines of traditional liturgy that were removed or revised in the past, claiming

that some of the texts that once were experienced as ethically dissonant are now the places where their deepest political and spiritual convictions are reflected. The TOC claims that by removing the “textual hook” of “אֶת־מַמּוֹנָם לָנוּ נָתַן *natan lanu et mamonam*, God gave us their wealth,” from the Haggadah, we inadvertently disinherited ourselves from one of our most politically important Jewish theological traditions: that of reparations. Apparently, many of us have not been telling an essential part of the story of our liberation from Egypt to our children — mainly, that we received reparations as we left Egypt, and so, too, should all formerly enslaved and colonized peoples when they are set free. This is a serious allegation, and we hope you will consider the TOC’s recommendation carefully.”

Discussion Version 1: [No Background Knowledge Required]

1. Before we weigh the demands of the Jews of the “present, let’s give more consideration to the wisdom of our Jewish leaders of the past. Why might Kaplan have removed this line from Dayenu in the first place, and why has it been such a widely popular liturgical revision for so long?
2. What other changes are we opening ourselves up to if we agree to put this line back in Dayenu? Should we also consider returning the lines, “brought judgement upon their gods,” “killed their first born sons” and “drowned our enemies in the Reed Sea” to the Reconstructionist Haggadah text? Can we bring back one without bringing back the others?
3. How do we know that reparations isn’t just a short-lived political fad of the moment? Is there value to bringing back this line of liturgy beyond using the Haggadah as an organizing tool to mobilize support for a contemporary social justice campaign? How much or how little does that matter?
4. Why is it so important to name reparations specifically in Dayenu? There are other places that reference this part of the exodus story in the traditional Haggadah text. What’s so important about Dayenu?
5. *[at the conclusion of your discussion]* What’s your final position? Try to sway the rest of the commission to approve your recommendation for the new Reconstructionist Haggadah.

Discussion Version 2: [With “If God Had Only Given Us Reparations” as Background]

In addition to questions 1-5 in Discussion, Version 1:

6. If you were to add additional, interlinear texts or sources to the Dayenu text in the style of many Sephardi Haggadot, what would you add to help focus the Reconstructionist Dayenu text on reparations?
 - a. How would you make sure these additional texts would stand the test of time?
7. How does this particular political moment feel similar and different to 1941, when *The New Haggadah* was published? Does the current landscape of antisemitism make you think differently about this question than you would have in the summer of 2020? What can we learn about how to navigate antisemitism today from how the founders of the Reconstructionist movement navigated their oppression, as Jews, in their day?