

A HAGGADAH INSERT

ARAMI OVED AVI: A FAMILY COMING OUT JOURNEY*

BY ADINA KOCH AND JOANNA WARE

.....

Several years ago, Keshet member Adina Koch came out at her family's Passover Seder. In true Koch family fashion, she did so by offering words of Torah. She gathered her whole family together, and shared with them how the Haggadah's retelling of our ancestor's journey from bondage to redemption offered a reminder of the importance of family, liberation, speaking out for justice, and being true to oneself. This Pesach, we offer Adina's words of Torah as a teaching for all of our Seder tables.

...

AND YOU WILL ANSWER AND SAY BEFORE ADONAI YOUR GOD, "My father was a wandering Aramean. He descended to Egypt and resided there in small numbers. He became a nation—great, powerful and numerous. The Egyptians treated us badly. They persecuted us and put us under hard labor. We cried out to Adonai, the God of our ancestors. God heard our voice. God saw our persecution, our toil and our oppression. God took us out of Egypt with a strong hand and an outstretched arm, with awesome power, signs and wonders. God brought us to this place and gave us this land, a land of milk and honey. Now I have brought the first fruits of this soil, which you, God, gave me." (Deut. 26:5-10)

...

WHEN WE RETURN TO THE STORY OF PESACH YEAR AFTER YEAR, OUR *MAGGID* (story), we return to a reminder of from where we have come. Our parent wandered. Our ancestor searched for a place to call home; out of which we emerged as a nation and a community. As Jews, we are blessed with a tradition that teaches us to stretch what it means to be family and on all days of the year to welcome the orphan, the widow, and the stranger. The lesson is especially salient on Pesach, as we open our doors and invite all who are hungry to come and eat. Food, however, may not be the only nourishment our bodies and souls are craving.

When we recall our slavery in Egypt, so too are we called to notice the oppression in our midst; the Egyptians of our day treat those who are LGBTQ harshly. Those in our LGBTQ community suffer from higher than average rates of abuse, homelessness, harassment,



and violence. For some of us, just walking down the street poses a threat to safety that others never need consider. None of us are exempt from being in the role of Egyptian. We may believe we have just cause for persecuting those who are different, we may do so without intent to harm, and we may do so with our silence. Yet our story teaches that it is our responsibility to recognize oppression and cry out for justice. The Torah teaches us that as human beings we are created *b'tzelem elohim*—in the image of God. The divine spark is in each one of us, and we each have the power to hear those who cry out and witness their pain, to extend our hands and stretch out our arms to those who are still in a narrow place. Some years it might be us, or the people we love, who need those open arms and a strong hand.

Jewish people living in the United States today are in many ways living in a time of milk and honey. While we have our individual and collective struggles and hardships, as a people we are not under the threat our ancestors once lived with. We have a responsibility to use this land, this time and space that we are in, to make fruit from this soil. We honor our tradition and history by standing on the side of justice and fighting for space at the table for the LGBTQ people in our lives and in our communities. For all who are hungry will come and eat on this night with us: the stranger, the friend, and those whose hunger will be sated not by food, but by love, acceptance, justice, and equality in our homes, synagogues, and the world at large.

• • •

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Many LGBTQ people have “chosen family” in addition to their families of origin. How do you define your family, and how does that impact your relationship to this text?
2. What lessons do you take from your ancestors’ journeys?
3. What, other than food, do you have to offer to the stranger in your midst?
4. How can you nurture the souls and well being of LGBTQ people at your Seder table, in your community, and around the world?

* Hebrew translates to “My ancestor was a wandering Aramean.”