

# ***Ha Lachma Anya***

**"This is the bread... ..next year, free"**

**A Passover Call from Matir Asurim**

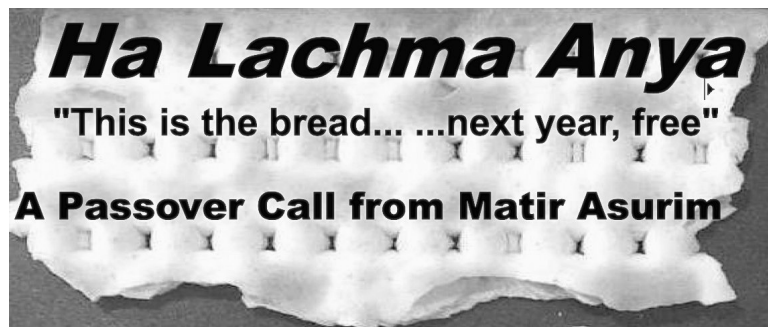
## **Learning and Action Guide for Passover Season 5784**



**Matir Asurim** ["The One Who Frees Captives"] connects Jewish spiritual, cultural, and communal resources and people experiencing incarceration or re-entry

MatirAsurim.org. PO Box 18858, Philadelphia, PA 19119





**The seder opens** with rituals setting the moment and the table: candles and wine, washing, *karpas* [spring greens], and *Yachatz*, splitting the middle matzah. Immediately following, we declare that our observance is tied up with the needs of others by holding up the matzah and reciting:

*"Ha Lachma Anya... This is the bread...Now we are slaves; next year, free."*

With this, we acknowledge that *ha lachma anya*, the bread of poverty and oppression, is part of our collective experience and a regular meal for many today. We recognize, at the start of the seder, that we understand its obligations: We are to share what we have now and envision a more equitable "next year."

The needs around us are enormous and varied, and *Ha Lachma Anya* does not limit the seder's obligations to Jews alone. Nevertheless: ***Ha Lachma Anya* calls us to consider specific needs of Jewish kindred, including those who are incarcerated.**

**Matir Asurim asks you to join us in responding  
with Passover-season learning and action.**

Matir Asurim works year-round in a mutual aid effort, encompassing Jews incarcerated in the U.S. and Canada and outside members. What follows is addressed primarily to Jews living outside carceral facilities who are interested in building a wider, deeper, stronger Jewish Care Network for Incarcerated People.

Actions and learning can be pursued by individuals and by congregations and other Jewish organizations. Some suggestions would ideally begin before Passover; others can be pursued at the seder, into the Omer, and beyond.

From "this is the bread" to "now we are slaves," *Ha Lachma Anya* addresses needs of incarcerated Jews and those around them. There is much to learn and do... for those who have long struggled with related issues and for those new to these topics. We must start now, moving toward next year, when "we will be free."

***Ha Lachma Anya***

הָא לַחֲמַא עֲנִיא דִּי אֲכָלוּ אַבְהַתְנָא בְּאַרְעָא דְּמִצְרַיִם.

כָּל דְּכָפִין יִיתִי וְיִיכַל,

כָּל דְּצָרִיךְ יִיתִי וְיִפְסַח.

הַשְּׁתָא הָכָא, לְשָׁנָה הַבָּאָה בְּאַרְעָא דְּיִשְׂרָאֵל.

הַשְּׁתָא עַבְדֵּי, לְשָׁנָה הַבָּאָה בְּנֵי חוֹרִין.

*Ha lachma\* anya di akhalu avhatana b'ar'a d'mitzrayim.*

This is the bread of *anya\*\** that our ancestors ate in *Mitzrayim*.

*Kol dikhfin yeitei v'yeikhol,*

Anyone who is famished should come and eat,

*kol ditz'rich yeitei v'yif'sach*

anyone who needs should come and partake of the Pesach meal.

*Hashata hakha, l'shana haba'a b'ar'a d'yisrael.*

Now we are here; next year, in Godwrestlers' land, still barely imagined.

*Hashata av'dei, l'shana haba'a b'nei chorin.\**

Now we are slaves, next year we will be free.

\* *Ha Lachma Anya* is composed in Aramaic, except for the final words

-- " לְשָׁנָה הַבָּאָה בְּנֵי חוֹרִין , *l'shana haba'a b'nei chorin* [next year, free people] " --

which are Hebrew. For some 3000 years, Aramaic was commonly used in the Levant and Mesopotamia. It was a predominant language for many Jews for centuries.

Translation above is slightly adapted from Rabbi Ari Hart's translation, now posted on Sefaria (see full source citations at end of document).

\*\* *anya*, an Aramaic word, is based on "עני" in the Torah (Deut 16:3). It is vocalized there as עני *oni*, "oppression, affliction [*oni*]." But the Talmud (B. Pesachim 36a) suggests reading it differently, as עני *ani*, "poverty [*ani*]."

"*Lechem oni*" is also defined, using a Hebrew pun (*onin* = "said, responded"), as "*lechem sheh'onin alav devarim harbei* [bread over which many words **are said**]" -- that is: "bread over which *Maggid* [the telling] is recited" (B. Pesachim 115b).

Scholars today believe that *Ha Lachma Anya* first appeared in print in the mid-9th Century CE, in *Seder Rav Amran Gaon*. Many date it to that time. But teachings relating to *Ha Lachma Anya* are quite old, and some scholars say that at least parts of the recitation are older, dating to shortly after the destruction of the Temple.

## "This bread...Now we are slaves" and Jewish Care for Incarcerated People --



### DECLARATION

...calls us to imagine the long chain of matzah-eating Jews before us, including incarcerated Jews, past and present.

...calls us to consider the needs of incarcerated Jews, and the complicated issues of poverty, oppression, and narration involved.

...calls us to sit with the tension between the need for immediate rescue and the need to build lasting relationships and long-term change in work around incarceration and beyond.

...calls us to recognize incarceration as one reality in the "world as it truly is," to consider what responsibilities and visions that recognition invokes.

### INVITATION

...calls Jews outside to provide for the physical and spiritual needs of those on the inside (if possible, before launching our own celebrations). But needs persist, so it's never a bad time to begin addressing them.



### EXILE and ACCESS

...calls Jews outside to consider our history with various everyday languages, like Aramaic, and Hebrew, the language of sacred text and prayer, and to reflect more widely on our language choices, surveillance, and the interaction of the two.

...calls Jews to examine what is available, from their own and other movements and educational organizations, to Jews inside and what assumptions -- about who is a Jew and what a Jew does -- are made.

...calls Jews to build connections and mutuality.



### NEXT YEAR

...reminds us that human trafficking worldwide, "incentive pay" of pennies per hour in Canada, and the "exception clause" to involuntary servitude in the U.S. mean that, in very real ways: Now we are slaves. Next year, we will be free.

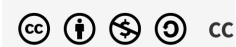
...reminds us that incarceration creates hunger, all sorts of need, and disconnection from home and calls us to respond, for those still inside and for those engaged in re-entry/reintegration.



**CLEARING CRUMBS.** In preparation for this bread-focused journey -- whenever we begin it -- Jews can consider...  
...What crumbs, from last year's old grain and moldy ideas, what cobwebs of neglect hold us back from collective liberation?  
...On our own and in groups, we can strive to better understand the demands of "*Ha Lachma Anya*" and take that understanding into our Passover observance, through the Omer period, and beyond.

These study materials are prepared and shared by  
Matir Asurim: Jewish Care Network for Incarcerated People,  
Adar-bet 5784 (March 2024), to spur greater attention within Jewish communities to needs of incarcerated Jews and of others in Canadian and US carceral systems.  
(Ad Hoc Working Group: Rachel Doyle, Dina-Hasida Mercy, Virginia Avniel Spatz)

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#### Who We Are

We are a collection of Chaplains, Rabbis, Cantors, Kohanot/Hebrew Priestesses, advocates, activists, volunteers, loved ones of incarcerated people, and people with direct experience of incarceration. We are an all volunteer group who began meeting in 2021. We live and work across Turtle Island, in territories, cities, and rural settings of the US and Canada.

#### Vision

We are striving toward a world free from oppression, where aspects of social identity like race, class, and gender no longer limit our safety, opportunities, and agency to live into the fullness of our sacred potential.

We are striving toward a world where individuals are mutually accountable to one another and where wrongdoing is addressed through reparative and transformative justice, guaranteeing the human dignity of all parties.

We are striving toward a world where all people are provided with the conditions for healing trauma and for *teshuvah* (repentance/restoration), surrounded by resources, guidance, and social support networks.

We are striving toward a world where nobody is isolated and everyone has opportunities to connect to something larger than ourselves—whether to community, culture, or spirituality. Within that world, we envision a Judaism that is radically welcoming and accessible to all seekers.

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### 1) The Declaration

*Ha Lachma Anya* begins with a statement about the matzah:

- ➔ We name the bread "*anya*" (Aramaic word, related to Hebrew *oni* and *ani*):
  - bread of "oppression" or "affliction" (Deut 16:3 -- עֲנִי *oni*); and
  - bread of "poverty" (B. Pes 36a -- עֲנִי *ani*).
  - also bread "over which many words are repeated" (B. Pes 115b)

➔ We declare that this food has a particular context:

- it was consumed by our ancestors;
- it was consumed in *Mitzrayim*;
- Deut 16:3 adds that
  - we left in haste [*b'chipazon*], and
  - this is an eternal reminder of the day of departure from *Mitzrayim*

**Deuteronomy 16:3**

לֹא-תֹאכַל עִלְיוֹ הַמֶּזֶץ שֶׁבַעַת יָמִים  
 תֹּאכַל-עִלְיוֹ מִצּוֹת לֶחֶם עֲנִי  
 כִּי בְחִפְזוֹן יָצָאתָ מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם לְמַעַן תִּזְכֹּר  
 אֶת-יוֹם צְאתְךָ מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם כֹּל יְמֵי חַיֶּיךָ:

➔

You shall not eat anything leavened with it; for seven days you shall eat unleavened bread, bread of distress, for in haste you departed from the land of *Mitzrayim* so that you may remember the day of your departure from the land of *Mitzrayim* as long as you live.

**Ancestors Ate in *Mitzrayim*.** The Sages of the Talmud seem anxious that Passover participants reflect on meanings of the matzah, past and present. *Ha Lachma Anya* encapsulates some of those meanings, and we make this declaration at the start of the seder. When we study and recite them, we join a centuries-old chain of Jews preparing to eat matzah by reflecting on its meaning.

By the time Akiva and students were discussing Passover, early in 2nd Century CE Palestine (B. Pes. 36a above), biblical instructions and Temple service could no longer be followed exactly; in place of (expert) priests, regular Jews were preparing matzah and conducting seders. When the pun about "many words" was recorded in the name of Shmuel, 3rd Century Babylon (B. Pes. 115b above), his community was separated from Temple service by more years and geographic distance. The words of *Ha Lachma Anya* probably entered the seder several hundred years after that. For those of us considering the meaning of matzah today, another thousand years, more geographic distance, and centuries of Jewish teaching -- based on many and varied cultural experiences -- separate us from the Temple and biblical instructions for Passover.

But that same distance -- in time, geography, and Jewish thought -- also unites us with that chain of Jews, across centuries and circumstance, finding ways to prepare and share matzah in recognition of ancestors who ate in *Mitzrayim*.

That chain includes Jews who were experiencing incarceration for all sorts of reasons.

***Ha Lachma Anya* calls us to imagine the long chain of matzah-eating Jews before us, including incarcerated Jews, past and present.**

**This is the bread.** The braided meanings at the start of *Ha Lachma Anya* highlight key aspects of Matir Asurim's work:

- ~ operating a care network involves regular feeding of oppressive systems (fees for email, phone access; commissary funds when diet is inadequate);
- ~ interacting with carceral systems means constantly facing a worldview that takes scarcity and poverty, in- and outside the facilities, for granted;
- ~ building mutual care includes an on-going struggle to ensure that the "many words" around incarceration include lived experience of those most affected.



These general issues manifest in very specific ways around Passover:

- **Seeking to ensure adequate Passover diet** for those inside involves subsidizing entities that circumvent the law with inadequate supplies;
- **Providing Passover foods for those otherwise without** reinforces the idea that meeting inside folks' basic needs is optional or unattainable;
- **The struggle to observe Passover while incarcerated** is one meaning of "This is the bread...", and recognizing this is one key to ensuring that the "many words" recited this Passover season incorporate realities of incarcerated Jews and loved ones.

***Ha Lachma Anya* calls us to consider the needs of incarcerated Jews, and the complicated issues of poverty, oppression, and narration involved.**

**Haste and Redemption.** Commenting on *Ha Lachma Anya*, Rabbi David Silber discusses overlapping emphases on preparedness and just getting out:

The *lachma anya*, then, is not the bread of bondage but the bread of redemption. However, it is meant to remind us specifically of the unpreparedness that characterized our departure from [*Mitzrayim*], the swift and sudden way in which redemption occurred.

-- Silber, *Go Forth and Learn*, 2011, p.6

Silber notes that breaking bread in the Bible "symbolizes understanding, loyalty, and covenantal relationship." This stands in contrast to eating matzah, which "represents uncertainty, limited trust, and shaky relationships." On the other hand, God looks fondly on the people's hasty departure and wilderness travels -- treating them like a new partner: loving and devoted, but not entirely prepared for the journey ahead (Jeremiah 2:2). Thus, Silber explains, "redemption did not occur in an ideal manner," but it is part of our collective history, and the *lachma anya* is reminding us of that experience and of the need to be ready to "leave our present exile quickly, at a moment's notice" (p.7 -- some "quotations," some paraphrasing)

Both images that Silber raises here reflect the work of Matir Asurim:

- on the one hand, "uncertainty, limited trust, and shaky relationships" with strangers of varied backgrounds, across carceral systems fostering fear of mis-steps, moving toward shifting goals; (cont. p.8)

(cont. from p.7)

- on the other hand, love and devotion and a commitment to join together for a better future.

The need for haste and immediate results is powerful, but so is the concern for more complete redemption and longer-term change.

***Ha Lachma Anya* calls us to sit with the tension between the need for immediate rescue and the need to build lasting relationships and long-term change in work around incarceration and beyond.**

**Once, Future, and Present Bread.** Many teachers have noted how *Ha Lachma Anya* seems to collapse time: This bread right here in my hand, this bread...

...is bread our ancestors ate in *Mitzrayim*, part of the Exodus story's oppression;

...is the half-baked bread of hurried escape into the wilderness;

...is a taste of time future, complete redemption, when we all are free.

This bread is a reminder of past events and future aim, connection to others and to the divine to the obligations these entail.

Rabbi Ari Hart, co-founder of Uri L'tzedek: Orthodox Social Justice, writes about how *Ha Lachma Anya* frames the seder:

In our opening declaration, is no mention of God, no mention of the glories of the Jews, no mention of miracles, manna, or Moses! Rather, in our opening declaration, we frame the seder with the recognition of the real hunger, needs, and oppression that exist in the world and a responsibility to act upon them, and to look towards a world where they do not exist. These words, *ha lachma anya*, demand that, even as we enjoy the seder, we go beyond our comfortable pillows and engage with the world as it truly is.

-- Hart, "Pesach Dvar Torah," 2011 American Jewish World Service

***Ha Lachma Anya* calls us to recognize incarceration as one reality in the "world as it truly is," to consider what responsibilities and visions that recognition invokes.**

## 2) The Invitation

After defining the bread, *Ha Lachma Anya* issues a two-part invitation:

- We invite those who suffer from hunger, without enough to eat, and
- those with food but no provisions for Passover.



Many open the door to read, "Let all who are hungry come and eat; let anyone who needs join the Passover meal."

There is discussion, however, about whether such a last-minute invitation is genuine and should be taken at face value...  
...unless those in need are likely to be right outside our doors.

Some Jews honor *Ha Lachma Anya's* hospitality obligation with advance invitations to those who might otherwise not have a place for Passover. Some make food or financial donations prior to Passover, to support holiday observance and/or wider food distribution. Amid all the needs, those of incarcerated people can sometimes be overlooked. But *Ha lachma anya* and that open door direct our attention to these specific concerns.

In *My People's Passover Haggadah*, David Arnow writes about the phrase, "Let all who are hungry come and eat":

...The life of the body and the spirit cannot be separated. Oppressive poverty "deprives an individual of knowing his creator" ([B. Eruvin 41b]). -- Arnow, p.119



Rabbi Arnow clarified the *Eruvin* citation, noting that it can be read as: oppressive poverty causes a person to "pass beyond" their own senses and knowledge of their Creator (personal communication, March 2024).

NOTE: Images are largely decorative: 1) open door with nothing visible outside; 2) open door with stylized individual behind bars just beyond doorway.

Incarcerated Jews in many locations in the U.S. regularly face a dearth of nutritious food, year-round, as well as a lack of Passover resources, material and spiritual. The weight of both lacks -- food and Jewish resources -- weighs on body and spirit of incarcerated Jews. These are needs that are best addressed by fellow Jews, and Jews living outside can commit to honoring this obligation for Jews who

(cont. p.10)

(cont. from p.9) are strangers to us -- and/or get to know a Jew inside who has asked for support through correspondence.

Opening the door, as we do metaphorically [if not also physically] when we recite *Ha Lachma Anya* makes porous the border between inner and outer-- between our lives and the lives of others, between our selves and the greater whole of being. We open the door, and we open our hearts, fulfilling the commandment to empathize with those who are strangers to us: "You shall not oppress a stranger, for you know the feelings of a stranger, having yourself been strangers in the land of [*Mitzrayim*]" (Ex 23:9).

-- Marcia Falk, *Night of Beginnings*, p.63

### *Ha lachma anya* calls Jews outside

**to provide for the physical and spiritual needs of those on the inside...**

**...if possible, before launching our own celebrations.**

**But needs are on-going, so it's never a bad time to begin addressing them.**

Detailed suggestions in action section.

## **3) Language of Exile, Access**

Most of the Passover seder, including the earliest parts found in the Mishnah, are in Hebrew. In contrast, *Ha lachma anya* is in Aramaic, except for the final words.

Jewish teachers have long discussed the language choice here and its meaning for the seder: Maybe use of vernacular is meant to offer **welcome and access**:

Aramaic speakers without Hebrew education, including most women at the time it was composed, could understand easily. Maybe its language is supposed to reflect a sense of **exile and hope for the future**: Aramaic, mundane language for "here now" is followed by Hebrew, emphasizing spiritual hope for a better "next year."

Both of these views feature in discussion about whether *Ha lachma anya* is part of the *Maggid* narrative proper or a separate, introductory statement about circumstances around the telling. Both reflect issues in sharing Jewish materials inside carceral facilities: What language choices make materials most

(cont. p.11)

(cont. from p.10) accessible and welcoming? What choices signal belonging or lack thereof? What kinds of adaptations would better suit Jewish learning materials to conditions inside and/or to re-entry hopes?

Over the centuries, Jewish teachers also considered what the choice of language for *Ha lachma anya* means -- or meant, historically -- in terms of **who, outside the house, would understand**. Some said it was polite to issue an invitation in a language non-Jewish neighbors -- Babylonian Aramaic speakers, at the time --

would understand. In contrast, use of Hebrew for the closing words, "*l'shana haba'a b'nei chorin* [next year, free people]," has been explained as an attempt to keep those same non-Jewish neighbors from overhearing that Jews were eager for freedom and longed to leave. (See, e.g., Alyssa Gray's commentary in *My People's Passover Haggadah*, p.126-7; note.)\*

This, too, reflects issues in sharing Jewish materials within carceral facilities, with their bureaucracy and censorship, complex policies, layers of regulations, and

sometimes haphazard implementation of listed restrictions.

***Ha lachma anya* calls Jews on the outside to reflect on our language choices, surveillance, and the interaction of the two.**

Some suggestions for engaging on this topic in action section.

\*Gray also notes that some medieval commentators linked use of Aramaic to attempts to keep angels and/or demons from understanding and then interfering with the household or community -- the apparent assumption being that angels and demons are not fluent in Aramaic.

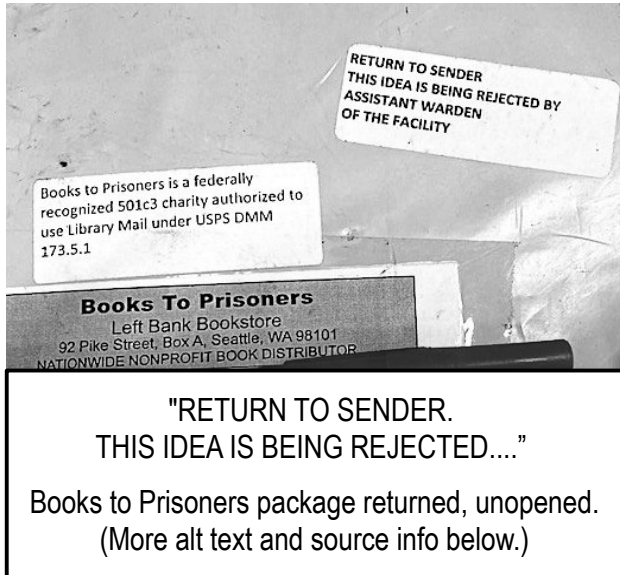
**Additional image description/alt text for returned package above:**

Package returned with label reading: "RETURN TO SENDER. This idea is being rejected by Assistant Warden of the facility."

Addressee information blocked. Return address labels read: "Books to Prisoners. Left Bank Bookstore, 92 Pike Street, Box A, Seattle WA 98101. NATIONWIDE NONPROFIT BOOK DISTRIBUTOR" and "Books to Prisoners is a federally recognized 501(c) charity authorized to use Library Mail under USPS DMM 173.5.1."

Source: Image sent on August 2, 2023 via X platform, from Books to Prisoners Seattle: "After 50 years of providing books to incarcerated people, we thought we'd seen every flavor of censorship. This FL prison decided to prove us wrong."

<https://twitter.com/B2PSeattle/status/168670565998244864?>



### 3) Now We Are Slaves

*Ha lachma anya* closes with: "Now we are slaves, next year we will be free."

A whole range of interpretations and commentaries assume slavery is past tense for Jews -- at the time *Ha lachma anya* was composed as well as present day -- and offer abstract reasons for beginning the seder with, "Now we are slaves." Meanwhile, slavery persists worldwide through human trafficking, through state-imposed forced labor, and through exploitative labor practices in carceral systems. These conditions -- and the racism, colonialism, and capitalism that foster them -- are real and present in the matzah we hold.

Human trafficking is illegal in US, Canada, and international law, although it is regularly enabled through a variety of labor and immigration laws. However, **state-sponsored forced labor is legal in 17 nations, including the U.S.** **"Incentive pay" in Canada's prisons is considered "captive labour."**

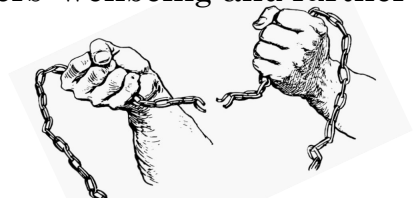
**As Cost Recuperation.** Selling prison labour to private enterprises has a history dating at least to the 1830s in Canada. Today, incarcerated people are not forced to work, and work refusal is supposed to be free of punishment. Those who refuse can be locked in their cells for the duration of the workday, however, or face other negative consequences, including inability to afford basic needs. Today, according to Canada's Office of the Correctional Investigator (OCI), a months' pay is needed for a pair of winter gloves, and two days' pay for a small box of tampons.

OCI estimates that the current system nets the average participant \$0.46/hour: "Beyond violating every principle of any labour code, such a miserly amount is an affront to human decency and dignity and may very well contravene Canada's international human rights standards, including the Nelson Mandela Prison Rules (*United Nations Standard Minimum...*)." Some work experiences in prison do yield benefits for incarcerated people. Overall, however, OCI argues that this voluntary system "keeps people behind bars destitute, demeaned and degraded."

**As Punishment for a Crime.** Ratified in 1865, the 13th Amendment to the US Constitution abolished involuntary servitude "except as punishment for a crime." This "exception" clause continues to permit forced labor in federal and state carceral institutions for anyone convicted of a crime. The ACLU (American Civil Liberties Union) estimates that 800,000 incarcerated people in the U.S. are forced to perform a variety of labor, in- and outside the institution, under threat of additional punishment; compensation, if any, is pennies per hour. Some of this labor is in dangerous jobs for which individuals receive no, or inadequate, training. Some institutions rely on incarcerated people, with training or without, to run addiction-recovery and other programs inside for little or no

(cont. p.13)

(cont. from p.12) compensation. Most forced labor in the U.S. has no rehabilitative value and does nothing to prepare or credential an individual to work outside, upon re-entry. Sick days, safety protections, and other elements of US employment law do not apply to incarcerated workers. Perhaps most importantly: the fact that sick, injured, or deceased laborers are replaced by the system, at no cost to the employer, represents a grave threat to workers' wellbeing and further contributes to devaluing of those forced into this labor.



**"Now we are slaves"** is no abstraction while these conditions exist for any of us.

Rabbi Hart (cited above) outlines four understandings of "*oni*" in *ha lachma anya*, as described by the 18th Century teacher known as Gaon of Vilna. One is:

The *oni* who is afflicted by oppressive working conditions. Today, we might call this a migrant worker, a sexually harassed employee, or any worker who is denied her rights to compensation and workplace protections. She is represented by *hashata avdei* (today we are slaves), and we work towards the next year, when we are all free (*bnei chorin*). -- Hart, "Pesach Dvar Torah"

State-imposed forced labor is an extreme example of this type of oppressive working conditions, commonly understood as slavery.

***Ha lachma anya* reminds us that, in very real ways:  
Now we are slaves. Next year, we will be free.**

**Now We Are Here.** Forced labor is only one form of oppressive conditions faced by incarcerated Jews and their fellows. Three more categories of *oni*, relating to *Ha Lachma Anya*, are outlined by Hart and the Gaon of Vilna --

- *oni* without enough to eat, represented by *kol dikhfin*, "all who are hungry";
- *oni* with food but without resources for basic societal needs, represented by *kol ditzrin*, "all who need";
- *oni* who is oppressed far from home, represented by *hashata hakha*, "now we are here" --

-- and incarceration creates all three. In addition, these conditions follow individuals into the re-entry process without substantial outside support.

***Ha lachma anya* reminds us that incarceration creates hunger,  
all sorts of need, and disconnection from home,  
and calls us to respond, for those still inside  
and for those engaged in re-entry/reintegration.**

Some suggestions for engaging on this topic in action section.

# Suggestions for Action

## The Invitation: Action Suggestions

### 1) Support Jewish education for those inside

Jewish education for those inside, across the U.S. and Canada, is dominated by a single organization: Aleph, which is an arm of the Chabad/Luvavitch movement. (For clarity: Aleph.org is **NOT** the same as ALEPH: Alliance for Jewish Renewal.)

This situation has evolved partly through neglect on the part of many Jewish groups, partly through Aleph's active outreach efforts (to those they consider Jews), and partly through happenstance. Informal survey results from Matir Asurim indicate that carceral facilities in the U.S. more readily approve Chabad-related apps for tablets used by incarcerated people and that podcasts and other resources are almost exclusively Chabad or Orthodox. If any materials for learning Hebrew and other basics are available inside, they are likely to be from Chabad. There are some rare exceptions, in New York City, for example.

In general, Aleph is accepted by carceral authorities as a -- if not "the" -- default, authoritative Jewish source. Even Jewish movements with huge philosophical and practice differences with the Chabad movement, in the outside world, seem to defer to Chabad for addressing folks inside. This means, in our limited experience, that materials from Conservative, Humanist, Modern Orthodox, Reconstructionist, Reform, Renewal, and other sources are much harder to come by for those inside.

**1.1) Existing materials.** Are there educational materials that your congregation, or another Jewish organization in which you're involved, could send to chaplains or individual incarcerated Jews in local, state/province, or federal facilities nearby? Regulations for delivery of print to carceral facilities vary -- check policies before trying to deliver or mail anything. Email is sometimes an option.

**1.2) Research Support.** Any contacts with expertise related to getting apps and e-materials approved for inside tablets? Please ask them to contact Matir Asurim.

**1.3) Affiliated Efforts.** If you, or your congregation, are affiliated with a movement or larger Jewish organization, ask what they are doing to support Jewish education inside. If the answer is that they defer to Aleph or Jewish Prisoner Services International, ask if they are comfortable with the philosophies, and definition of who is Jewish, of these organizations.



## The Invitation Action Items (cont):

**1.4) Relationship through correspondence.** Consider becoming an individual penpal with an incarcerated Jewish person, sharing Jewish education in the course of your relationship.

Some groups, also write cards or letters for holidays and other occasions.

**2) Learn about "religious" diet** in carceral institutions near you. Policies and menus are public documents, and religious diet, by law in US and Canada, must be equivalent to diet offered to others inside. Learn who is in charge of food delivery to people inside -- a private corporation, in many cases -- and how changes are made.

In the U.S., "religious diet" — which includes meals for Jews, Muslims, Hindus, and others whose religious practice affects diet — is protected under the federal "Religious Land Use and Institutionalized Persons Act of 2000." Implementing this Act has not been straightforward. In Florida, for example, FDOC refused to supply religious diet and was sued at least three times by the federal government. At present, the religious diet is the same every day of the week, with no hot meal provided at all and insufficient calories. In addition, there are delivery issues with food arriving wet or in other inedible condition. There are limited kosher food options available through the commissary to supplement this meager fare, for those who can afford the price.

**See Inside Members' Words beginning on page 25.**

The law is similar in Canada. Guidelines provided to Canadian chaplains are shared on Matir Asurim's website, along with related details and documents. See "Kosher and Nutritious Food."

**3) Explore options for Passover foods.** Can Jewish communities supplement Passover food for Jews inside? Perhaps by contributing to commissary accounts, or other arrangements.

**4) Consider advocacy options.** Does your own or your congregation's network include people skilled in legislation, policy development, or legal challenges? Can they point you to help, in ensuring that basic rights for incarcerated Jews are upheld? Take action locally. And, if possible, share your actions and learning with Matir Asurim.

## Language of Exile, Access: Action Suggestions

**1) Check into basics** regarding what materials are accepted or rejected at local, state/province, or federal facilities. Who is allowed to send materials to the facility? by what shipping methods? Find out if particular books or categories of books have been banned recently in your area.

Some existing operations have been sending books to carceral facilities for over 50 years. They have experience and resources to share on censorship, surveillance, and related topics. Check out Books to Prisoners, based in Seattle, and Prison Book Program, which now links to groups across the U.S. and Canada. In Canada chaplains are permitted to provide donated used books for chapel libraries.

**2) Hebrew as Religious Freedom.** Use of any language other than English can be tricky in US carceral facilities. Facilities have banned non-English dictionaries, and special permission must be obtained to correspond by paper or email in a language other than English. These policies are challenged by and on behalf of non-English-speaking incarcerated people, with varying results. In the case of Hebrew, the use of a "foreign" language becomes a First Amendment issue for Jews. Hebrew and bilingual Hebrew-English materials labeled for religious study should be allowed in the U.S.

In Canada, access to some Hebrew materials is also a matter of Religious Freedom, but there is no budget in Federal prisons for religious material; donations of Hebrew material, while welcome, must be verified as religious by a Jewish chaplain, if the institution has one. Most Jewish chaplains visit just once each month.

**3) Explore Jewish materials** available at carceral institutions near you. Do incarcerated people get access to actual Jewish text? Some institutions offer only Christian bibles. Is what's available accessible and welcoming to all Jews? Most materials make assumptions about gender and sexuality, for example, and much of it promotes Chabad-specific theology, including their foundational concept that Jewish and non-Jewish souls fundamentally differ. (See bibliography, p.32.)

**4) Consider adaptations.** Given the absolute dearth of Jewish educational materials, sharing what's available makes sense in most cases and will contribute to needed variety of resources. Where there is opportunity to edit materials before they're sent out or to amend them with context-specific notes, however, here are some considerations:

(cont. p.17)

## Language of Exile, Access: Action Items (cont from p.16)

**4.1) Literacy and background.** English and Hebrew literacy levels are, on average, lower for inside readers. In addition, access to dictionaries and other supporting materials is uneven. Some incarcerated Jews prefer audio materials, but attention to assumptions about prior Jewish education is in order in preparation of such materials as well.

**4.2) Assumptions.** Some Jewish content written with an outside audience in mind translates well for readers inside. Much does not work well, however, because communal and ritual aspects of Jewish practice are not available, or available in usual forms, to those inside: community gatherings for Shabbat and holidays; group prayer and study; control over one's time for prayer and ritual matters. In addition, so many regular, basic assumptions do not apply to life inside: access to nature as an avenue to get closer to the divine, for example, or the ability to choose one's companions and set a routine.

**4.3) Fostering connections.** Does sharing resources suggest further opportunities to build relationships between individual Jews on the inside and those on the outside? Can local, national, and international Jewish organizations build more bridges with Jews on the inside or experiencing re-entry?

**4.4) Mutuality.** What opportunities are available for sharing the views of Jews inside? Torah of inside Jews covers general topics, as well as some mentioned in this Language section: exile, access, welcome, and hope.

## Now We Are Slaves: Action Suggestions

### 1) Learn Our Intertwined Histories

Descendants of the Atlantic Slave Trade are disproportionately affected by forced prison labor in the U.S. and disproportionately affected by lower wages in the Canadian incentive pay system. Other groups in the U.S. and Canada, including those classified as "indigenous" or First Nations, face related realities. In addition, many more are affected by forms of oppressive working conditions, as described by Rabbi Hart above. Puzzling out who is pharaoh and who is oppressed, when reciting *Ha Lachma Anya* and telling the Passover story, is a complicated task for our overlapping Jewish, Black, and Indigenous communities.

(cont. p.18)

**Now We Are Slaves: Action Items** (cont. from p.17)

The complex, interrelated stories of racism, enslavement, and incarceration; of colonialism, displacement and destruction; of Canadian and US history are way beyond the scope of "*Ha Lachma Anya: A Passover Call from Matir Asurim.*" Some of us have long included parts of these histories in our Passover tellings. For some of us, this exploration may be newer -- or kept largely separate from our holiday approaches. In addition, those of us in the U.S. may be less familiar with Canadian history and vice versa. So, finding a good starting point will be an individual or group-specific decision.

Here are just a few resources for considering on this journey.

Canadian history link, maybe especially for US readers, from the Canadian Museum for Human Rights -- <https://humanrights.ca/story/story-black-slavery-canadian-history>

US history link, maybe especially for Canadian readers, from the Equal Justice Initiative -- <https://eji.org/reports/slavery-in-america/>

Indigenous people are severely overrepresented in the carceral systems of the U.S. and Canada. See, e.g., <https://www.prisonpolicy.org/profiles/native.html> on US, and on Canada: <https://theconversation.com/ca/topics/indigenous-incarceration-26620>

Of related interest: "Invisible Minority" -- <https://tribeherald.com/an-invisible-minority-the-need-for-more-native-jewish-voices/> and "Native and Jewish" <https://jwa.org/blog/native-and-jewish>

See also, Passover resources, from a decade or more back, circulating from a group called "Jews in Solidarity with Native People (JSNAP)." More at Haggadot.com: <https://shalomrav.files.wordpress.com/2011/04/jsnap-passover-insert-final.pdf>

Further studies can explore Jewish teaching on land, displacement, and reparations, as well as more on incarceration from Indigenous perspectives.

Beyond the topic of the 13th Amendment (see below), there is a great deal to explore at the intersection of Black history and incarceration, plus many, varied discussions of overlapping Black and Jewish responsibilities for addressing policing, incarceration, and related issues. Here are just two suggestions with some connection to Passover:

JFREJ, Jews for Racial and Economic Justice based in New York City, offers some important related resources for Passover -- <https://www.jfrej.org/news/2019/04/the-jfrej-haggadah-library> -- as well as powerful material on understanding antisemitism and related forces within our complex communities: <https://www.jfrej.org/events/2019/09/understanding-antisemitism>

Also note: NEW version of Marc Dollinger's *Black Power, Jewish Politics: Reinventing the Alliance in the 1960s*, revised to reflect the overlapping nature of Jewish and Black stories, is due out just before Passover this year. A great time to learn more!

## Now We Are Slaves: Action (cont.)

### 2) Take Informed Action on Captive Labor

**2.1) Learn the "exception clause."** Learn about the 13th Amendment to the US Constitution and the clause allowing slavery "as punishment for a crime." This can be pursued through individual study, but it is also a great opportunity for congregational or other group learning.

The text of the amendment itself is available through this government website -- <https://tinyurl.com/13thDetailsCongress/>. The 2016 documentary, "13th," directed by Ava DuVernay is one good source for a wider view. It is one hour 40 minutes and now available free (YouTube), as well as through Netflix (producers). There are many discussion guides -- including some from Jewish perspectives (see bibliography). In addition, the documentary references many other works of importance.

Abolish Slavery National Network also offers helpful learning and action opportunities. ASN is an organizing collective centering perspectives and leadership of people with lived experience of forced labor. Their efforts now include more than 20 campaigns to abolish slavery from US state constitutions. Join state-level organizing, if appropriate, or join the national, whether you live in the U.S. or not. Their website is full of helpful background and links to more resources and action -- <https://abolishslavery.us/>.

**2.2) Learn the "incentive" system.** In 1980, Correctional Service Canada launched CORCAN to link the private sector with incarcerated labor for government purposes. CORCAN and other work programs were meant to support rehabilitation and reintegration. Some jobs reportedly do foster relationships and experience useful when seeking parole or jobs upon reintegration; some jobs simply serve to fill long hours; and a few, like chapel clerk, support inside-outside relationships of use to many -- but almost all are either unpaid or low-wage.

Where an incentive system once allowed incarcerated people to save and send money home, however, Office of the Correctional Investigator (OCI) says: "We are now tracking a net flow of monetary contributions into federal facilities, effectively nullifying any of the reintegrative, behavioural or vocational objectives of having a payment and allowance system in the first place." (OCI annual report, <https://oci-bec.gc.ca/en/content/office-correctional-investigator-annual-report-2022-2023>)

OCI adds: "Many sentenced individuals live near or in a constant state of impoverishment and destitution, inside and outside prison. Moreover, the (cont.p.20)

## Now We Are Slaves: Action (cont.)

(cont. from p.19) deprivations of an inadequate pay system feed a prison underground economy of violence, extortion and abuse that jeopardizes the safety and security of everyone." Related reports in bibliography.

**2.3) Addressing Captive Labor.** While Canada's OCI has been calling for reform of the incentive pay system for years, an organized response is not immediately apparent. A call for unionizing incarcerated workers centers around the book, *Solidarity Beyond Bars: Unionizing Prison Labour* by Jordan House (Brock University) and Asaf Rashid (attorney). See also the work of journalist Haseena Manek who covers this topic.

The ACLU in the U.S. works on "captive labor" more broadly, beyond 13th-Amendment issues. See their report, *Captive Labor: Exploitation of Incarcerated Workers* -- <https://www.aclu.org/publications/captive-labor-exploitation-incarcerated-workers>

Toronto Metropolitan Museum shares: "Fabric of Crime. Exploring Labour within Canadian Penitentiaries: Trades Workshops – Education or Exploitation?" Although the exhibit is closed now, lectures and other resources are still available, including on-line materials and a bibliography on captive labour resources -- <https://fabricofcrime.ca/captive-labour/>

See also "Forced labor's impact: U.S. and Canada" just below.

**3) Forced Labor's Impact: U.S. and Canada.** Earlier this year, the Associated Press reported on state-imposed forced labor in the U.S. and the many common food brands that rely on this labor. (See "Prisoners in the US are part of a hidden workforce linked to hundreds of popular food brands," at APNews.com. See also: "Fast Food Prison Labor" at TheTakeOut.com; "The Food on Your Table" at TheMarshallProject.org).

How do we respond to knowledge of specific food brands' use of forced US prison labor or exploitative labor in other locations? It is tempting to try to excise particular brands from our shopping lists to avoid benefitting from exploitative labor. Is that where the call of *ha lachma anya* leads, though? Perhaps boycotting individual brands involved in captive labor will eventually lead to stopping the practice -- but, echoing the *Dayeinu* ["enough for us"] section of the haggadah, we might ask: Is that enough?

### **Now We Are Slaves: Action (cont.)**

Matir Asurim has no specific data on Jews in state-imposed forced labor. Surely, a world in which "we are all free" implies an end to forced labor in US carceral institutions -- for everyone, including Jews. A world where all are free would also require ending exploitative practices that fail to protect incarcerated workers in Canada as well as migrant workers anywhere who help bring food to our tables.

In July 2023, Canada passed mandated reporting on forced labour within supply chains. This includes trafficked migrant labour within Canada and as well as goods brought into the country from places relying on forced labour. The first reporting deadline is May 31, 2024. (See *Policy Magazine*, "Modern Slavery...Trafficking in Canada" and CBC, "What is Canada doing to crack down on goods produced using forced labour?")

Does such legislation alter the demands of *ha lachma anya*? How?

These organizations offer assistance in deliberating on Jewish responsibility to address these topics -- on your own or as a congregation/group:

Truah: The Rabbinic Call for Human rights --  
e.g., *The Other Side of the River* haggadah

Uri L'tzedek: Orthodox Social Justice,  
e.g., "Workers Rights and Ethical Consumption" sources.

AJWS (American Jewish World Services) resources, now at Sefaria.org  
e.g., "A Jewish Approach to Food Justice"

**4) Re-Entry.** People returning from incarceration -- often called "re-entry" in the U.S. and "reintegration" in Canada -- face many challenges: housing and employment, rebuilding personal relationships, and avoiding violations of probation or parole.

**4.1) Parole.** In the U.S., 45% of annual prison admissions, nationwide, are due to probation violations, which include missing an appointment, failing to announce an address change, and other technical matters, as well as minor and more serious legal offenses (Council of State Governments, 2020). In Canada, 40% of parolees are re-incarcerated within two years for parole violations (Ling, 2021).

Disproportionate incarceration for some demographics -- including Black and Indigenous people -- means that some communities are over-burdened with parole-related surveillance, contributing to a vicious incarceration-release-incarceration circle. Both housing and employment are also affected by, and affect, parole: Criminal records are barriers to public housing in some (cont. p.22)

## Now We Are Slaves: Action (cont.)

(cont. from p.21) places, for example, and to employment in many areas. And yet stable housing and steady employment are conditions of parole. Another set of vicious circles. (More on employment below). Many organizations are attempting to address parole reform. (See, e.g., the National Parole Transformation Project in the U.S. and OCI reports page for Canada).

**4.2) Families, Women and Girls.** Much has been written about family dynamics during and after incarceration, with many organizations dedicated to assistance. Here are two:

- National Re-entry Network -- <https://thenationalreentrynetwork.org/>
- Canadian Families and Corrections Network -- <https://www.cfcn-rcafd.org/>

"Oh, Mother of Mine" (Rawls, 2021) is a short documentary on the long road to healing following mothers' incarceration. Group showings and discussions can be arranged, and the website provides additional resources focusing on challenges of mothering across bars and upon re-entry.

See also the National Council of Incarcerated and Formerly Incarcerated Women and Girls, which offers many resources and is planning "FreeHer Campaign" events in 2024 -- see notice on page 36 here. In Canada, Enough for All focuses on the precipitous increase in women, particularly indigenous women, in prison and associated difficulties of returning to communities (Enough for All, 2023).

**4.3) Employment.** A recent US study found 60% joblessness among formerly incarcerated people. A third found no employment at all over the course of four years; more worked for periods but failed to find stable employment (Prison Policy Initiative, 2022). A Canadian study found similarly low levels of employment with a substantial percentage earning poverty wages (CTV News, 2021).

The Second Chance Business Coalition -- <https://secondchancebusinesscoalition.org/> -- offers information about the impact of a criminal record on hiring and some steps employers can take to promote hiring and career support for formerly incarcerated people. In addition, the "Ban the Box" Campaign (mostly U.S.-based, but also in Canada, <http://bantheboxcampaign.org/>) encourages pledges of employment support:

- ~ To hire and support the formerly incarcerated.
- ~ [Eliminate restrictions] that may exclude the formerly incarcerated.
- ~ To encourage others to also institute fair hiring practices.



### **Now We Are Slaves: Action (cont.)**

Helping someone find employment or establishing a business partnership with them are among the best ways to fulfill the Torah of giving to the poor, according to 12th Century teacher Maimonides (*Mishneh Torah*, Gifts to the Poor, 10:7-14). Providing loans or gifts -- such as work clothes or tools -- so that a person need not rely on hand-outs is also important, according to Maimonides' ladder of giving.

Jewish groups might want to consider together how best to combine Maimonides' ladder with the spirit of "ban the box."

**4.4) Communal support.** The "Ban the Box" campaign also asks individuals to pledge to "always welcome formerly incarcerated people into my community," and to support "changes in policies that discriminate against the formerly incarcerated." Jewish groups, especially congregations, might reflect together on what this would mean in practice and take supportive steps together toward a world in which all are free.

Also of interest: "Feeding Time: A Whole-Community Approach to Safer, Smarter Reintegration of Federal Prisoners in Post-Pandemic Canada," a new report written by I. M. Grenada, who is serving a life sentence.

**General Support.** The many and varied needs of formerly incarcerated people mean that individuals and congregations/groups can get involved in a whole range of ways:

- donating professional clothes;
- donating supplies for living quarters;
- supplying professional tools, e.g., for construction work;
- protecting legal rights for returning citizens and those on parole;
- promoting employment opportunities, providing job leads and mentoring;
- fostering connections with Jewish or other worship/support communities.

## Finally: Today, Next Year

As we prepare to declare "*Ha Lachma Anya*" -- with all that entails -- we begin the work of learning and organizing for "next year," when we will all be free. One way we prepare is by removing *chametz*, leavened products, from personal and public spaces. Rabbi Ariana Katz and Rabbi Jessica Rosenberg write about the relationship of this clearing out in Nisan to the renewal work of Tishrei:

Jewish tradition instructs us that in this season of new growth, it is time to clean out the cobwebs and crumbs from the corners of our home and hearts. We go to the corners of our hearts and clean out that which keeps us stuck in narrow places....While the work of Tishrei is often focused on personal and interpersonal renewal, Nisan invites a focus on collective revolution and renewal, and an orientation of life and work toward greater visions for collective liberation. The harvests of Tishrei feed what we build in Nisan, the visions dreamed in Nisan guide our personal work in Tishrei. In this way, living in the spiral of Jewish time creates mutually reinforcing processes: our individual bodies' healing and freedom are possible only in the context of collective and communal healing and freedom; our collectives and communities are made up of diverse, holy bodies that deserve liberatory love and care. In Nisan, we celebrate the ways in which all of our freedom is possible and close at hand. -- Katz and Rosenberg, p.198

In the period before Passover, congregations and other Jewish groups can consider together what crumbs and cobwebs hold us back from collective liberation. Learning and organizing together in advance, we can better understand the demands of "*Ha Lachma Anya*." And we can take that understanding into our Passover observance, through the Omer period, and beyond.

## Inside Member Perspectives

### From the Narrow Places

At the seders we should remind ourselves that "In every generation we should feel as if we are leaving Egypt." The word "*Mitzrayim*" (Egypt) resembles the word "*mitzarim*" (from the narrow places). So when we talk about leaving Egypt, we are also talking about leaving any "narrow places" that restrict us. ("Slavery, incarceration, captivity"), etc. The underlying message of "*Pesach*" is that liberation is always possible. This is the message that I send to all Jewish people.

-- Billy T.

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### Food, Kashrut, and "the Very Fiber of My Being"

Correspondence from 2023-24, shared with permission (few spelling edits, otherwise no changes)

It's a human struggle to fight wickedness and stay on the path of righteousness. And it's my struggle too. And Jewish brothers who are incarcerated.... well they're denied of all pleasures and simple and basic human needs such as, a woman's compassion and company, and something as simple as embracing her, good food which is a must! A way to earn a living to to purchase good food. Decent living conditions, and basic treatment that's showing us that we are human. It's a rough environment! And hard not to stray off the righteous path of G-d....This place frustrates me to the very fiber of my being!!!

...And the prison industry, G-d have mercy! Our government sells us on the US stock exchange to the highest bidder that then price gouges our families! Under feeds us providing us with low quality food and uses prison slave labor to cook and serve the meals. Inmates in the kitchen working for Aramark don't get paid! 21st century slavery! Some stockholder is benefiting from this government slave market called The Dept of Corrections. And tax payers turn a blind eye and deaf ear to all this corruption!

\* \* \*

I don't think this is kosher -- Well our food is not in a sealed package. The beans, vegetables bread and paper plates are being handled by multiple people. And that kitchen from what I hear is nasty. And this is something that the Aleph Institute could help out with. Also need to get some kashrut item's on the canteen. I have my work cutout for me...

They lowered the price of unhealthy stuff like potato chips, and lowered the price of all things, tobacco!!! These are products they should have raised the price on. Because tobacco causes cancer, which is going to cost the department more money in healthcare, as is junk food that causes obesity! So this makes no sense whatsoever to the overall Florida Dept of Corrections healthcare system. This is all anyone back here has been talking about. And I'm sure its being talked about all over the Florida prison system. I don't know what I'm going to do. But most of this food that I need to supplement my meals, well I can't afford these prices anymore.

\* \* \*

I have been thinking about this kosher diet, and possibly filing a law suit to get some changes. For instance this morning its raining outside, the paper bag that our food is sent in is soak and (cont. p.26)

**Inside Members' Perspectives: Food, Kashrut (cont.)**

(cont. from p.25) wet, so the items inside are wet. Its only peanut butter, jelly, bread in a sandwich bag and a powdered milk, with a one ounce cereal bowl. So nothing is harmed in that. Now lunch and dinner is a different story, vegetables are often spilled in the bag as well as the cup of beans, I've had bread come back here wet. These are issues the court should look at. Plus they try to loop everyone into rabbinical kosher. Some guys just don't want to eat on trays that's had pork served on them. Others keep "biblical kosher." The FDOC limits what we can get in the bags as well as what we can purchase on the canteen. I think that's wrong. I'm just trying to think of how I should go about attacking it in a grievance and pursuing it legally. And I'm going to have to get some guys together to see if they want to share the expenses. The filing fee alone is I believe \$350.00.

\* \* \*

For Passover we can order \$125.00 worth of food, which doesn't amount to a lot. I signed up for the Passover meals. All that is, is a banana, a little individual cup of jam, that's probably .02 ounce. with a matzos crackers for breakfast. Then for lunch and dinner, we get a pack of chicken bologna, with raw broccoli or carrots. It's not a lot to live off of for eight days. I think we get a box of matzos every other day for breakfast.

-- Ronnie C.

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**“In Every Generation”**

In each and every generation, a person must see themselves as personally coming forth from Mitzrayim. As it is said:

“And you shall tell your child on that day, saying:

It is because of what YHVH did for me when I came forth out of Mitzrayim.”  
(Ex 13:8)

-- Mishnah Pesachim 10:5-6 [early rabbinic writings on Passover]; see also B. Pes 116b  
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**Closed Them In!**

The temptation is strong to believe that we've somehow come far enough already. Equally powerful, as exhibited in the Bible story itself and in our world today, is the urge to give up and return to the Narrow Place we sought to escape. It is clear, however, that we have much to learn from careful consideration of Exodus, in its long, messy, boundary-crossing complexity. And we have long known that "none of us is free if one of us is chained." -- Spatz, *Rereading Exodus* (2022)

In Exodus 14:3, just before the people cross the Sea of Reeds, YHVH tells Moses:

Now Pharaoh will say of the Children of Israel: They are confused [נְבוּכִים, *nevukhim*] in the land!

The wilderness has closed [סָגַר, *sagar*] them in! -- Fox translation (Schocken, 1995)

Is it only Pharaoh who believes, or says, this?

Are we stuck due to our own inability to see what confuses us or encloses us?

Looking more closely at what has us confused/ enclosed is a first step toward finding a way out.

Each new reading of Exodus, each Passover season and beyond, is an opportunity to become mired again in old arguments and hopelessness -- repeating in our own lives the same grumbling and stumbling that we watch the *Yisrael-ites* experience time after time.

We can let that *Mitzrayim*-to-wilderness passage trap us again ...or we can use it to illuminate places we've been stuck... and explore the Exodus narrative for some new clues to getting out from under. -- from Spatz, *Isn't It Time?* (2023)

## "Assigned" Neighbors and "Exacting" Poverty

Reflections from V. Spatz, Matir Asurim editor

Two distinct invitations are at the heart of *Ha Lachma Anya*: one to anyone in need of a meal and one to those with Passover-specific needs (see also p.9 above).... a recent misreading also suggested that the recitation is "an invitation to **be hungry**" -- an idea which might, however accidentally, serve to link the two invitations and those observing Passover from in- and outside prison walls.

**One Company.** For centuries, teachers have been noting that the second part of the *Ha Lachma Anya* invitation is at odds with biblical instructions regarding the Passover meal. The *Pesach* [sacrificial lamb] is to be eaten in "one house" (Exodus 12:46). If a household is too small for a lamb, the sacrifice is organized with neighbors in advance, "according to the number of the souls [*b'mikhsat n'vashot*, בְּמִכְסַת נַפְשֹׁת]" (Exod 12:4). When the Temple stood, one household would agree beforehand who would participate in the sacrifice, creating in advance what Ibn Ezra calls "one company."

בְּמִכְסַת : מְלַמֵּד שֶׁאֵין הַפֶּסַח נֶשְׁחָט אֶלָּא לְמִנְיָו

"According to the number of" teaches that the Paschal lamb is slaughtered only for those who have registered [*limnuyav*] for it. -- B. Pes. 61a, trans: Steinsaltz @ Sefaria

*mikhsah. manah*

מִכְסָה n.f. **computation** (f. of מִכָּסָה); hence—

a. number, [Ex 12:4](#) (P).

b. valuation, worth, [Lv 27:23](#) (P).

מָנָה vb. count, number, reckon, assign

-- Brown-Driver-Briggs dictionary

מָנָה I f. (b. h.; preced.) share, portion.

מָנָה II to count, v. מָנָה

מָנָה, מָנָה (b. h.) to divide, distribute; to count... —2) to be counted for a share in the Passover lamb, to be registered (Ex. XII, 4). -- Jastrow dictionary

There is discussion, in Talmud and later, of how more than one company could eat in the same house -- if it started raining, for example, and multiple groups sought shelter together. The key point remains that only those "assigned" people would eat of a single sacrifice on Passover.

So, standing at the door to call for folks to come on in would not have worked while the Temple still stood. But what about now? Who is part, even potentially, of our company?

In my years reporting on prison issues, I've encountered many individuals with stories [of rejection by Jewish organizations, like Aleph]: incarcerated Jews, many of them queer and trans people or people of color, who struggled to find any resources to support their religious life. -- Aviva Stahl, *Jewish Currents*, 2023

Pre-registration for a Pesach sacrifice is a thing of the past. But the practice of pre-assigning "one company" can still teach about our responsibility to other Jews. Passover, with its opening doors, is a great time to consider how we count and whom we value.

**Matir Asurim.** Opening a door to invite people in, metaphorically or not, implies hosts who have and guests who have not. And much of Jewish teaching around welcoming and feeding guests assumes haves and have-nots.... although biblical and rabbinical literature (general reading; no source to cite) tends to envision ups and downs for almost everyone, rather than a permanent underclass born of structural inequality...

The mitzvah of welcoming guests, *hachnasat orchim*, is not exclusive to Passover. In fact, the first part of the invitation -- "let all who are hungry come and eat" -- sounds very much like what Rav Huna (3rd Century CE, Babylon) recited at his door before every meal (see below and p.29). In addition, the commandment to rejoice in a festival, which involves including those "poor and bitter in soul," applies to other festivals as well (*Mishneh Torah: Hilkhoh Yom Tov* 6:18). But *Ha Lachma Anya* begins by declaring that we're about to eat bread of oppression/affliction -- an unusual invitation, bringing with it an opportunity to re-consider any us/them or have/have-not dynamic at play.

Starting out with the declaration, "This is the bread of affliction/oppression that **our** ancestors ate," reminds us of shared background and a common need to observe this ritual -- in a sense we're all simultaneously haves and have-nots. Pausing in this realization can help us along in a truly new journey.

One Matir Asurim organizer put it this way:

"It's not that other people want to be included in 'my' Jewishness, but that *their* Jewishness is also legitimate....

"The wider we build Jewish community, the more we can expand ourselves."  
-- Shir Lovett-Graf, in Stahl 2023

In a way, *Ha Lachma Anya* is inviting us to be hungry together: a vast and varied people -- inside prison walls and outside, in our own homes or visiting, with loved ones or strangers or united only in imagination -- now slaves, here this year...

**Exactng Poverty.** The quotation from Rabbi David Arnow shared earlier (p.9) is excerpted from *My People's Passover Haggadah*. The full comment follows:

*Let all who are hungry come and eat.* This invitation's style is reminiscent of that proffered by Rav Huna, a third-century sage from Babylonia. Impoverished in his early life, Rav Huna never forgot the poor when he became wealthy: "When he had a meal he would open the door wide and declare, 'Let all who are in need come and eat'" (Ta'an 20b). Leviticus Rabbah (34:9) put it this way: "The poor man stands at your door, and the Holy One stands at his right hand." ...The life of the body and the spirit cannot be separated. Oppressive poverty "deprives an individual of knowing his creator" ([B. Eruvin 41b]). -- Arnow, p.119. See next page here for sources quoted.

[Clarification: The citation, as the comment appears in the Jewish Lights volume, reads "Eruv 41a." Rabbi Arnow kindly pointed out the typo, helped me find the correct passage, and noted differences in popular translations of the quoted words.]

(cont. p.30, past the source page)

## SOURCES CITED: "Let all who are hungry"

### B. Taanit 20b

כִּי הָיָה בְּרַךְ רִיפְתָא, הָיָה פֶתַח לְבַבִּיהָ, וְאָמַר: כָּל מֵאן דְּצָרִיךָ לִיתִי וְלִיכּוּל

**When Rav Huna would eat bread, he would open the doors to his house, saying: Whoever needs, let him come in and eat.**

[OR:] When he had a meal [10] he would open the door wide and declare, Whosoever is in need let him come and eat.

(10) Lit., ‘wrapped bread’. It was the custom to begin a meal with herbs and salt placed between two pieces of bread, hence the phrase

-- Translations: Steinsaltz (via Sefaria); Soncino (via Halakhah.com)

### Leviticus Rabbah 34:9

אָמַר רַבִּי אֲבִין הָעֲנִי הַזֶּה עוֹמֵד עַל פֶּתַח וְהַקְדוּשׁ בְּרוּךְ הוּא עוֹמֵד עַל יְמִינוֹ, דְּכַתִּיב (תהלים קט, לא): כִּי יַעֲמֵד לִימִין אֲבִיוֹן, אִם נָתַתָּ לוֹ דָּע מִי שְׁעוֹמֵד עַל יְמִינוֹ וְנוֹתֵן לָהּ שְׂכָרָהּ, וְאִם לֹא נָתַתָּ לוֹ דָּע מִי שְׁעוֹמֵד עַל יְמִינוֹ פּוֹרֵעַ מִמָּהּ, דְּכַתִּיב (תהלים קט, לא):

Rabbi Avin said: This poor person is standing at your doorway, and the Holy One blessed be [God] is standing to his right, as it is written: “For [God] stands at the right of the indigent” (Psalms 109:31). If you give to him, know Who is standing to his right, and [God] will reward you. And if you do not give to him, know Who is standing to his right, and [God] will repay you, as it is written: “To deliver him from those who judge him” (Psalms 109:31). -- Translation: Sefaria Midrash

### Eruvin 41b

גַּמְ' תָּגוּ רַבְּנֵינוּ: שְׁלֹשָׁה דְּבָרִים מַעֲבִירִין אֶת הָאָדָם עַל דַּעְתּוֹ וְעַל דַּעַת קוּנוֹ, אֵלּוּ הֵן: גֵּוֹיִם, וְרוּחַ רָעָה, וְדִקְדוּקֵי עֲנִיּוּת.\*

[Gemara] Three matters cause a person to act against his own will and the will of his Maker, and they are: Gentiles, and an evil spirit, and the depths of extreme poverty.\*

GEMARA. Our Rabbis learned: Three things deprive [28] a man of his senses and of a knowledge of his creator [29], viz., [30] idolaters, an evil spirit and oppressive poverty\*

(28) Lit., ‘cause to pass’. (29) Lit., ‘his possessor’. (30) Lit., ‘these are they’

-- Translations: Steinsaltz (via Sefaria); Soncino (via Halakhah.com)

\* *dikdukei aniyut*, דִּקְדוּקֵי עֲנִיּוּת

דִּקְדוּקִים. Pl. crushing, humiliation, suffering. (דִּקְדוּקָה) m. דִּקְדוּקָה, דִּיקָה.

—2) nicety, fine point, subtlety, detail, minuteness; [in later Hebr.: grammar] – Jastrow dictionary

(cont. from p.28)

The expression, "deprives an individual of knowing his creator," reminds me of remarks from one of my study partners, an inside member of Matir Asurim:

It's a human struggle to fight wickedness and stay on the path of righteousness. And it's my struggle too....And hard not to stray off the righteous path of G-d....This place frustrates me to the very fiber of my being!!! (see p.25)

Following up on the citation, I found the original source in a passage about how an individual might be led outside the Shabbat boundary, the distance permitted for travel on the sabbath, and what should happen once the Jew was dislocated in this way. The suggestion is that three things could cause this infraction: *nokhrim* [gentiles or idolaters], *ruach rah* [an evil spirit], or *dikdukei aniyut*.

These sets of conditions are identified as depriving a person of their senses and knowledge of the divine or causing them to act against their own or God's will. To avoid ableist confusions around "knowing one's mind" and other unhelpful assumptions, it is useful to keep the focus on the ritual concern of the Shabbat boundary.

It's the third expression that Rabbi Arnow quotes. But let's look at all three:

- 1) A non-Jew has no obligations related to the Shabbat boundary, might have no knowledge of its location, and so could easily lead a Jew beyond it. (There are plenty of derogatory remarks about *nokhrim* in the Talmud, not sure this is one, fundamentally.)
- 2) The Talmud's concerns about evil spirits and demons do not translate well for most 21st Century readers; let's set those aside for now. Later readings suggest that this references some kind of on-going mental health or cognitive condition rendering an individual insensible of the boundary; it could also mean a temporary condition.
- 3) *Aniyut* is "poverty" or "oppression" -- the "*anya*" of *Ha Lahma Anya*. And *dikdukei*, translated as "oppressive" or "extreme," comes from a root meaning "crush or humiliate," *Dikduk* later came to mean "fine points, minutia," as in grammar (see Jastrow entry, p.30) -- leading at least one teacher to translate *dikdukei aniyut* as "exacting poverty."

Rabbi Jay Kelman argues that "dislocation" is a serious issue related to all three conditions: poverty, mental anguish, and work demands of a non-Jewish calendar.

In addition, Kelman writes:

*Dikduk* means exacting, where every little error is significant; hence, its use in modern Hebrew to mean grammar. Grammar may be a nuisance, but when poverty is exacting--not missing a beat, all-encompassing, and pervasive--it is that much more difficult. -- Kelman, "Torah in Motion," 2013

"What happens when someone is crushed in this way?" asks Rabbi David Rosenn in another commentary focusing on this wording from Eurvin 41b:

First, they often are literally subject to others, serving human masters in ways that make it difficult to remember the master of us all. But an ever deeper problem is that

(cont. p.31)



## Exacting Poverty, cont

(quotation cont. from p.30) the humiliations of poverty can cause people to lose sight of their own self-worth.

This does not happen necessarily – there are plenty of poor people who retain a sense of dignity and self-worth despite the challenge of their circumstances. But it is virtually superhuman to expect that someone whose life is full of crushing humiliations will retain a healthy sense of the fact that she or he too was created in the image of God. And although we are often exhorted to recognize and respect the image of God in others, the fundamental experience of humanity as being created in God's image begins with oneself. When that image becomes obscured, God's presence is profoundly diminished.

-- Rosenn, "Fighting Poverty as a Theological Necessity," Truah, 2013

Maintaining any kind of mental equilibrium while incarcerated is a challenge. As my chevruta notes, daily conditions can shake a person "to the very fiber of their being." Sticking with a chosen path is a basic human struggle for anyone; for incarcerated people, poverty of so many basic human needs adds to the struggle.

Holding the matzah to declare, "*Ha lachma anya...*," contains an obligation to help those who are hungry... for food and other basic human needs, for any elements of oppressive, "exacting" poverty that might influence someone to "act against their own will and the will of their Maker."

As we are poised to begin the heart of the Passover seder, we are called to pause and consider:

How do conditions of incarceration create "exacting poverty"?

How does that influence the ability of incarcerated Jews to observe Passover, and to otherwise engage in Jewish life?

When we consider "our company" for Passover, does the reckoning stop at prison walls?

Can Jews, inside and outside, be hungry together, this Passover?

How is "*ha lachma anya*" calling us to respond?

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JFREJ (Jews for Racial and Economic Justice) -- essential resources on social justice, race, Passover

e.g., #BLM Haggadah and Mixed Multitudes Haggadah [in the Haggadah Library](https://www.jfrej.org/news/2019/04/the-jfrej-haggadah-library)

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## Matir Asurim Contacts

Matir Asurim offers two sets of Passover resources. Download 5782 and 5783 mailings at [Resource page](#) -- <https://matirasurim.org/resources/>

Matir Asurim matches incarcerated people with outside pen pals with similar Jewish interests. Contact [matirasurimpal@gmail.com](mailto:matirasurimpal@gmail.com) to inquire about being matched.

If interested in coordinated exploration of Jewish materials available to incarcerated people or sharing your own materials, contact Matir Asurim editor, Virginia Avniel Spatz, at [ethreporter@gmail.com](mailto:ethreporter@gmail.com)



Matir Asurim joins T'ruah-Massachusetts and other Boston-based Jewish groups in supporting the work of the #FreeHer Campaign, led by [Families for Justice as Healing](#) and [The National Council for Incarcerated and Formerly Incarcerated Women and Girls](#).

Learn more, and if your Passover practice allows, join the  
**10th Anniversary Event, April 24, in Washington DC**

<https://tinyurl.com/FreeHer24Info>

## Suggested Plans for Learning/Action

from < 4 minutes to on-going commitments for groups and individuals

continued from back cover

### Contained Action Steps (one or two queries, an errand or two)

- Explore existing offerings for incarcerated Jews, #1.1 - 1.3 p.14
- Learn about religious diet in prisons near you, #2 p.15
- Offer material support for re-entry/reintegration #4 p.21

### Coordinated Group Actions (several contacts and/or several trips)

- Coordinate group donations, re-entry/reintegration support #4 p. 23
- Arrange a card- or letter-writing event for a group #1.4 p.15
- Arrange Passover donations to commissary accounts #3 p.15
- Organize group learning (a few ideas below)

### Learning, Solo or Group (45 minutes to 1.5 hours)

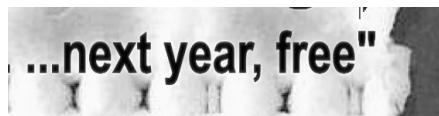
- Explore pages 5-13, as preparation for seder pp. 5-13
- Explore reports on prison food, see "Nutrition and Religious Diet" p.34
- Download a JFREF haggadah, read/discuss p.18
- Explore R. Hammer/Rabbinical Assembly paper on Non-Jews p.31
- View "Oh, Mother of Mine" p.22

### Learning, Solo or Group (1.5 - 3 hours)

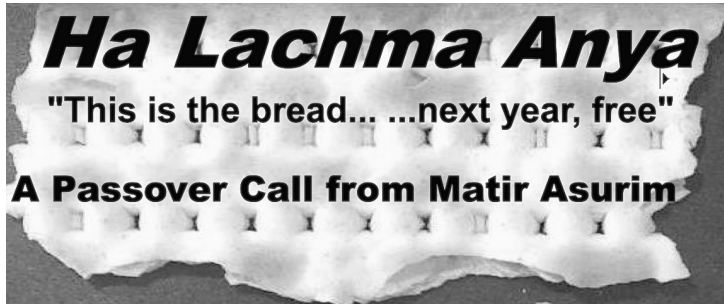
- (Re-)watch *13th* and consider/discussion #2.1 p.19
- Explore resources on Incentive Pay/Captive Labor #2.3 and/or #2.4 pp. 19-20
- Consider educational issues: p.14, #1 and p.16, #3
  - Compare Aleph resources with your Jewish philosophy/movement p.14, 16
  - See also Stahl, *Jewish Currents*, 2023 citation, p.31

### Through the Omer (seven weeks, 4/23-24 thru Shavuot, June 12)

- Follow up, through sources and suggestions inside, to learn one new thing or make one new connection per week for seven weeks on, for example:
  - incarceration conditions U.S. and/or Canada; Jewish sources on food justice;
  - Jewish sources on labor rights; language issues in carceral situations



**May the One Who Liberates Captives inspire a liberating season.**



## Suggested Learning/Action

from < 4 minutes  
to on-going commitments,  
for groups and individuals

More ideas inside, p.37

### Ten-minute Digest Version of Matir Asurim's Call

pp. 1-4

### Pre-Passover Pondering (mileage, timing may vary)

Take a few moments to read about crumbs and cobwebs

p.4, 24

Consider what needs clearing out to move toward next year

booklet, beyond

### Seder Readings or Haggadah Inserts

"Ha Lachma Anya calls us...re-entry/reintegration"

p. 3

"Ancestors ate...past and present"

top of p.6

"Once, Future, Present...invokes

bottom of p.8

"Now We Are Slaves...re-entry/reintegration"

p.13

Selections from Inside Members' Words

pp. 25-26

### Text-centered Reflections (possible sermon prompts)

pp. 27-31

### Four Steps < 4 Minutes

Follow (email and/or social media) Matir Asurim

see p.4

Follow (email and/or social media) Abolish Slavery.US

see p.19

Bookmark some history lessons

see p.18

Bookmark "Nutrition and Religious Diet" at MatirAsurim.org

see p.34

### On-Going Activities

Contact Matir Asurim to set up a pen pal match

p.36

Join a campaign through Abolish Slavery

p.19

Explore Jewish educational resources inside

pp.16-17

Explore challenges, existing efforts re: prison food near you

p. 15

Look into volunteer and/or advocacy opportunities near you

**continues, inside back cover, p.37**