



With Outstretched Arms

A Passover Seder Reading and
Discussion Guide

By Rabbi Tamara Cohen

Part 1: Responsive Reading to be read after the recitation of Avadim Hayinu.

Together:

*Avadim Hayinu L'Pharaoh
B'Mitzrayim.*

We were slaves to
Pharaoh in Egypt.

עֲבָדִים הָיִינוּ
לְפָרֹעַה בְּמִצְרַיִם

*V'yozienu Adonai
misham b'yad chazaka
u'vizroa netuya.*

And God took us out with
a strong hand and an
outstretched arm.

וַיּוֹצִיאֵנוּ יְיָ
אֱלֹהֵינוּ מִמִּצְרַיִם
בְּיָד חֲזָקָה
וּבְרִזְוֹעַ נְטוּיָה

Reader 1: This is how the haggadah begins the story of the Exodus. We were slaves. Then God took us out. As if it were that simple.

Reader 2: There is a tradition that the white spaces between the letters of the Torah are as important as the black letters. In our haggadah the white space between these two phrases – between slavery and redemption – holds many stories, stories of God's partners in the liberation from slavery.

Together: Tonight we tell the stories of some of those partners, courageous women with strong hands and outstretched arms.

Reader 3: When Pharaoh ordered that all baby boys should be killed, he assumed his decree would be carried out by the Hebrew midwives, Shifra and Puah. These women who felt God working through their strong hands and outstretched arms with each baby delivered, what did they do? They said no. They resisted Pharaoh and kept alive each newborn Hebrew child, regardless of gender.

Reader 4: On this night of many questions we ask: Did Shifra and Puah hesitate? Did they wonder whether they could make a difference? Did they question whether, as women, they would be taken seriously? Would they have acted had they not had each other's support?

Reader 5: Yocheved gave birth to a boy. She hid him as long as she could, then placed him in a basket in the Nile. Miriam, his sister, watched over him. When she saw Pharaoh's daughter, Batya, take him from the water, Miriam approached and suggested her mother as a wet nurse and Batya agreed. Reaching out their arms and stretching their hearts, these women broke through fear and crossed boundaries of

age, ethnicity and status to protect Moses and provide the foundation for his life and leadership.

Reader 6: On this night of many questions we ask: Did Miriam consider staying hidden in bulrushes, afraid her plan might fail? What pushed her from passive witness to risk-taking builder of alliances?

Reader 7: The Torah tells us that Shifra and Puah acted because they feared God. Greater than the fear of standing up, of speaking out, of making trouble or getting into trouble, was the call to honor their deepest sense of what was right, of what justice and compassion demanded. And they weren't alone. "Rabbi Avira taught: Israel was redeemed from Egypt on account of the righteous women of that generation" (Babylonian Talmud Sotah 11b).

Together: Tonight we tell stories of strong hands and outstretched arms in our own generation. May our stories inspire us to take the next step toward redeeming ourselves and our world. As if it were that simple. Because sometimes it is.

Part 2: The Conversation

Pose any or all of the following questions to those assembled at your seder table: (consider alternating speakers by gender).

1. What helps you speak up for what you believe in? What keeps you from speaking up?
2. How has your upbringing – particularly early messages and expectations about gender-appropriate behavior – influenced you in your decisions to speak up and act, or to hold back?
3. When you have spoken up, have you experienced resistance to your ideas and actions based on your gender or other aspects of your identity? Share a story of what that was like.
4. How have friends, allies, mentors or community made it easier for you to take action?
5. In what ways do your spiritual life and your Jewish values serve as sources of strength for you in going up against external barriers?