

# A Shakespeare Haggadah

(warning: not a real haggadah)

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Jewish tradition says that "whoever enlarges on the telling of the Exodus is praiseworthy", which has turned into centuries of being enthusiastically creative with the haggadah. And this year, the second night of Pesach is also Shakespeare's 400th deathday.

This Shakespeare Haggadah isn't a full one (ie it can't be used on its own), but it can be read along with your proper haggadah for second night seder tonight, or any night, or you can just read it for fun and argue with the choices on Twitter (fun fact: arguing about Jewish ritual is also a mitzvah! SUCH A MITZVAH).

## Welcome

Before starting, or as part of the opening readings, the leader may read:

### **Capulet:**

*This night I hold an old accustomed feast,  
Whereto I have invited many a guest,  
Such as I love; and you, among the store,  
One more, most welcome, makes my number more.*

## Kadesh

After saying the blessing for the festival, we drink the first of the four cups of wine. For this Shakespeare seder, the four cups are for comedies, tragedies, histories and romances.

The first cup represents comedy: joy, subversion, exploration and ritual.

**Sir Toby:** *Approach, Sir Andrew: not to be abed after midnight is to be up betimes; and 'diluculo surgere', thou know'st—*

**Sir Andrew:** *Nay, my troth, I know not: but I know, to be up late is to be up late.*

**Sir Toby:** *A false conclusion: I hate it as an unfilled can. To be up after midnight and to go to bed then, is early: so that to go to bed after midnight is to go to bed betimes. Does not our life consist of the four elements?*

**Sir Andrew:** *Faith, so they say; but I think it rather consists of eating and drinking.*

**Sir Toby Belch:** *Thou'rt a scholar; let us therefore eat and drink. Marian, I say! A stoup of wine!*

This reading is a complex midrash that illustrates several parts of the Pesach ritual.

Sir Toby begins by alluding to the Roman saying, 'Diluculo surgere / Est saluberrimum', meaning 'To get up at dawn is good for your health'.

But Sir Andrew counters this in English with the assertion that being up late is its own reward – a clear reference to the famous story in the haggadah of the rabbis in B'nei Brak staying up all night on Pesach retelling the story of Exodus.

This reference is made especially pointed by the fact that they may actually have been discussing the Bar Kokhba revolt, a Jewish rebellion against Roman rule – a conflict highlighted by Sir Andrew's rejoinder in the vernacular to Sir Toby's imperialist Latin. However, Sir Toby – a diasporist rather than a nationalist – calls this revolutionary topic "an unfilled can", a plan with no petrol in it, and proposes skipping over the whole messy affair entirely and drinking instead, making an oblique reference to the four cups. Sir Andrew takes the hint, and Sir Toby graciously acknowledges his scholarship.

The jarring shout to an offstage Maria is a reminder of the ongoing absence of women from ritual spaces and underlines the need for liberation of all genders.

## Urchatz

The first time we wash our hands on Pesach we do it without saying a blessing, which is unusual for ritual handwashing in Judaism.

**Cordelia:** *Nothing, my lord.*

**Lear:** *Nothing?*

**Cordelia:** *Nothing.*

**Lear:** *Nothing can come of nothing. Speak again.*

The absence of the traditional blessing, in a place where we would usually expect it, is a reminder to consider the function of a blessing – and particularly paying attention to whether words (ours and others') match actions.

## Karpas

A green herb, a symbol of freshness and spring, is dipped in salt water, which represents tears.

### **Perdita.**

*Now, my fairest friend,  
I would I had some flowers o' the spring that might  
Become your time of day; and yours, and yours,  
That wear upon your virgin branches yet  
Your maidenheads growing: O Proserpina,  
For the flowers now, that frighted thou let'st fall  
From Dis's wagon!*

### **Antipholus of Syracuse.**

*He that commends me to mine own content  
Commends me to the thing I cannot get.  
I to the world am like a drop of water  
That in the ocean seeks another drop,  
Who, falling there to find his fellow forth,*

*Unseen, inquisitive, confounds himself:  
So I, to find a mother and a brother,  
In quest of them, unhappy, lose myself.*

Perdita and Antipholus have both been forcibly separated from their families, although Perdita doesn't know it yet, and are consciously or subconsciously talking about that loss. This midrash reminds us that people who have been forcibly displaced experience it as individuals, not as a collective faceless group. We must treat every individual as a person worthy of respect, instead of writing off huge categories of people; it's especially relevant that both Perdita and Antipholus are refugees and shipwreck survivors.

## Yachatz

The bit where we break a piece of matzah in half and hide some of it for the kids (or particularly enthusiastic drunk adults) to find.

**Dumaine.** *How follows that?*

**Berowne.** *Fit in his place and time.*

**Dumaine.** *In reason nothing.*

**Berowne.** *Something then in rhyme.*

IDK, some things we do on Pesach are just weird.

## Maggid

The longest part of the seder is the retelling of the Exodus story, which includes the hit song 'Ma nishtana'. I have no desire to add to the endurance test before everyone gets to eat, but it also includes the second cup of wine: the cup of tragedies, representing irreparable loss.

**Shylock.** *Out upon her! Thou torturest me, Tubal: it was my turquoise; I had it of Leah when I was a bachelor: I would not have given it for a wilderness of monkeys.*

Shylock is a character a lot of Jews are rightly uncomfortable with; it would be nice if Shakespeare had written a major Jewish character that wasn't a bloodthirsty moneylender but oh well. 'Wilderness' here to me is an echo of the wilderness after Egypt, with Shylock reaching back to the language of collective Jewish trauma to talk about his loss (which, since Jessica has also converted to Christianity, is a loss to the Jewish community as well).

## Rachtzah

A second ritual handwashing, this time with the blessing.

**Lady Macbeth.** *What, will these hands ne'er be clean? All the perfumes of Arabia will not sweeten this little hand: o, o, o!*

(Sorry.)

## Motzi and matzah

The matzah, the "bread of affliction", is eaten.

**First Citizen.** *Before we proceed any further, hear me speak.*

**All.** *Speak, speak.*

**First Citizen.** *You are all resolved rather to die than to famish?*

**All.** *Resolved. resolved.*

**First Citizen.** *First, you know Caius Martius is chief enemy to the people.*

**All.** *We know it, we know it.*

**First Citizen.** *Let us kill him, and we'll have corn at our own price. Is it a verdict?*

**All.** *No more talking on it; let it be done: away, away!*

**Second Citizen.** *One word, good citizens.*

**First Citizen.** *We are accounted poor citizens, the patricians good. What authority surfeits on would relieve us: if they would yield us but the superfluity, while it were wholesome, we might guess they relieved us humanely; but they think we are too dear: the leanness that afflicts us, the object of our misery, is as an inventory to particularise their abundance; our sufferance is a gain to them. Let us revenge this with our pikes, ere we become rakes: for the gods know I speak this in hunger for bread, not in thirst for revenge.*

Pesach is one of the most political Jewish holidays, with its explicit calls for liberation, and to treat 'strangers' (meaning immigrants and/or refugees) well. This midrash from *Coriolanus* is a short but complicated discussion about how to relieve hunger and achieve social emancipation.

"We are accounted poor citizens, the patricians good" is a rebuke to people who see justice as a form of charity; as the First Citizen sarcastically points out, "goodness" is a quality that only people with agency and power are allowed to have. "Our sufferance is a gain to them" is clearly still true today, with wealth becoming more and more concentrated in fewer hands, leading to suffering and starvation; and even the opening request to "hear me speak" underlines whose voices are usually heard in debates over poverty and justice.

## Maror

Horseradish, a reminder of the bitterness of slavery. Some people dip it in the charoset, or eat it between pieces of matzah after Rabbi Hillel.

### **Othello.**

*Her father loved me, oft invited me,*

*Still questioned me the story of my life*

*From year to year, the battles, sieges, fortunes,*

*That I have passed.*

*I ran it through, even from my boyish days,*

*To the very moment that he bade me tell it:*

*Wherein I spake of most disastrous chances,*

*Of moving accidents by flood and field*

*Of hair-breadth scapes i' the imminent deadly breach,*

*Of being taken by the insolent foe*

*And sold to slavery, of my redemption thence*

*And portance in my travels' history:  
 Wherein of antres vast and deserts idle,  
 Rough quarries, rocks and hills whose heads touch heaven  
 It was my hint to speak — such was the process;  
 And of the cannibals that each other eat,  
 The Anthropophagi, and men whose heads  
 Do grow beneath their shoulders. This to hear  
 Would Desdemona seriously incline:  
 But still the house-affairs would draw her thence:  
 Which ever as she could with haste dispatch,  
 She'd come again, and with a greedy ear  
 Devour up my discourse: which I observing,  
 Took once a pliant hour, and found good means  
 To draw from her a prayer of earnest heart  
 That I would all my pilgrimage dilate,  
 Whereof by parcels she had something heard,  
 But not intentively: I did consent,  
 And often did beguile her of her tears,  
 When I did speak of some distressful stroke  
 That my youth suffered. My story being done,  
 She gave me for my pains a world of sighs:  
 She swore, in faith, 'twas strange, 'twas passing strange;  
 'Twas pitiful, 'twas wondrous pitiful:  
 She wished she had not heard it, yet she wished  
 That heaven had made her such a man: she thanked me,  
 And bade me, if I had a friend that loved her,  
 I should but teach him how to tell my story.  
 And that would woo her. Upon this hint I spake:  
 She loved me for the dangers I had passed,  
 And I loved her that she did pity them.*

## Shulchan Orech

YAY, DINNER AT LAST.

**Orlando:** *I almost die for food, and let me have it!*

## Barech

After singing the grace after meals we drink the third cup, of histories: remembrance, retelling and recreating new meanings in old narratives.

**Falstaff:** *I did not think Master Silence had been a man of this mettle.*

**Silence:** *Who, I? I have been merry twice and once ere now.*

**Davy:** *There's a dish of leather-coats for you.*

**Shallow:** *Davy!*

**Davy:** *Your worship! I'll be with you straight. A cup of wine, sir?*

**Silence:** *[Singing.]*

*A cup of wine that's brisk and fine,  
And drink unto the leman mine;  
And a merry heart lives long-a.*

**Falstaff:** *Well said, Master Silence.*

**Silence:** *An we shall be merry, now comes in the sweet o' the night.*

**Falstaff:** *Health and long life to you, Master Silence!*

**Silence:** *[Singing.]*

*Fill the cup, and let it come,  
I'll pledge you a mile to the bottom.*

**Falstaff:** *We have heard the chimes at midnight, Master Shallow.*

## Hallel

After Hallel (which takes *forever*) we drink the fourth cup, of romances: finding, renewal, and the chance to make things right after a terrible loss.

**Miranda.** *O, wonder!*

*How many goodly creatures are there here!  
How beauteous mankind is! O brave new world,  
That has such people in it!*

The test of the Hallel psalms are all about God, but Miranda's delighted humanism is a reminder that we can try to do things worth celebrating too.

## Nirtzah

After the fourth cup the seder is officially over, and some people finish by saying, "Next year in Jerusalem", a tradition that started when Judaism was more diasporist than it is now (before the state of Israel was established).

**Henry IV.** *Doth any name particular belong  
Unto the lodging where I first did swoon?*

**Warwick.** *'Tis called Jerusalem, my noble lord.*

**Henry IV.** *Laud be to God! Even there my life must end.  
It hath been prophesied to me many years,  
I should not die but in Jerusalem;  
Which vainly I supposed the Holy Land.*

Henry may be disappointed but I think it's quite nice to make our own Jerusalems where we are. (In my north London tradition we finish by saying "Next year in Golders Green".)

Then we sing! I love Aemilia's line at the end of the Comedy of Errors because of her reference to 'gossips' – derived from "god-siblings" and gendered female, a gossip is your sister you want to drink with. Aemilia's invitation is basically to go get socially pissed with her and a bunch of nun friends.

**Aemilia:** *Go to a gossips' feast and go with me:  
After so long grief, such festivity!*