

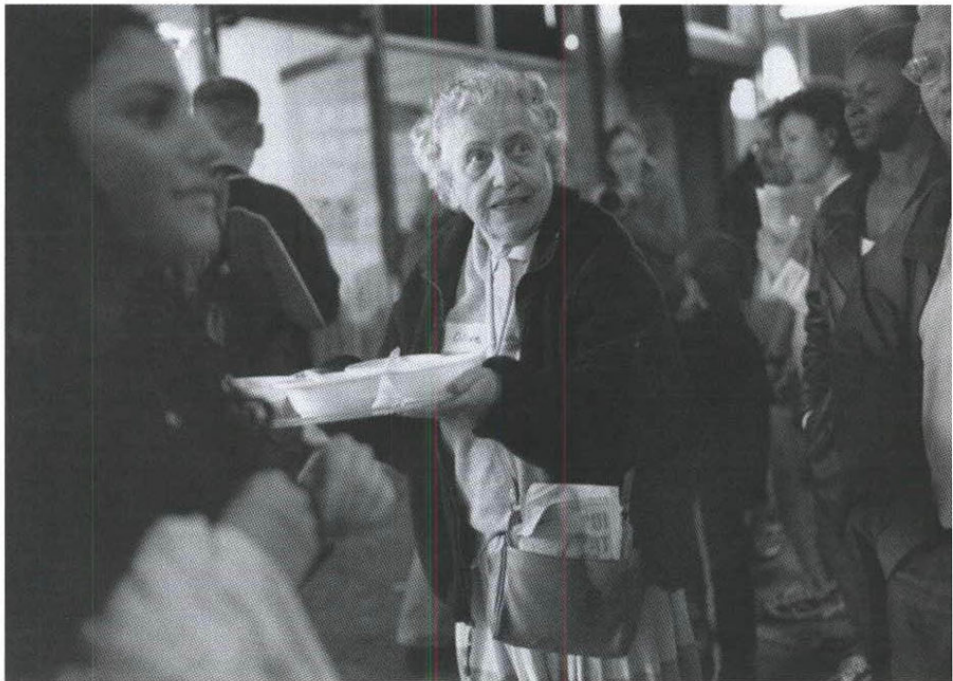
# Times Square Seder

## Happening for Homelessness

Melissa Shiff

*This is the bread of affliction which our ancestors ate in the land of Mitzrayim. All who are hungry, let them enter and eat. All who are in need, let them come celebrate Passover.*

—Passover Haggadah



The Matzah Ball Soup Kitchen.

From February until the end of Passover this year, my video sculpture “Elijah Chair” is featured in The Jewish Museum’s new Goodkind Media Gallery. This sculpture was an integral piece of a larger multi-media/social action event I created in 2002 called the *Times Square Seder, Featuring The Matzah Ball Soup Kitchen*. The aim of that event was to mobilize art in the service of activism, using the ritual of the Jewish Passover Seder. In the words of Rabbi Arthur Waskow, the goal was “to translate the Seder into forms that speak to a contemporary community that is not entirely Jewish, with both the practices and values of Pesach.” In particular, I sought a way to take the Passover Haggadah’s mandate to “feed the hungry” to a place where New York’s hungry and homeless had been most visibly banished.

In January 2002, Chashama Arts Organization opened its 42nd Street Times Square storefront gallery window spaces to artists. Upon learning this, I was struck with the idea to stage a Jewish ritual there that would act as a counterpoint to a space that is so clearly identified with the celebration of the Christian New Year and with mass consumerism. Instead of glorifying this epicenter of capitalist culture, I wanted to call attention to a site that was once specifically associated with homelessness before its sanitization by conservative governments who have merely relocated the problem elsewhere.

The Times Square Seder was held on March 30, 2002, on the fourth night of Passover. The event took place in three distinct spaces all on the same block of 42nd Street, just steps away from Times Square. The happening utilized two

storefront window spaces and one interior space that was transformed into The Matzah Ball Soup Kitchen. The performance began in front of the first Chashama window, continued inside this storefront window space, then moved onto the street, and ended up at the nearby soup kitchen. Meanwhile, an interactive video installation played throughout the evening in the second storefront window. Along with sculpture and video art, the Seder featured symbolic actions performed by political and religious leaders known for their concern with social justice. The former Manhattan Borough President and current director of The American Jewish World Service, Ruth Messinger, helped to officiate. Rabbi Arthur Waskow, leader of the famous Freedom Seder in the 1960s, current Director of the Shalom Center in Philadelphia, and regular contributor to *TIKKUN*, was also a participant in the Seder performance. In addition, Rabbi Burt Siegel of the Lower East Side Shul of New York and Cantor Mark Perman made important contributions.

The first segment of the Times Square Seder performance at 135 West 42nd Street created the link between Jewish ritual, art, and homelessness. Cantor Mark Perman began the happening by singing a Nigun (a traditional Jewish melody), after which I asked four “refashioned” questions including “Why is there a need to feed hungry people in the windows of Chashama this evening?” The Cantor then proceeded to ask the traditional four questions in Hebrew. Then Rabbi Burt Siegel chanted out the ten plagues and proceeded to ask those on the street to shout out a plague that they would like to see abolished. Louis Kaplan shouted out “Plague of the repression of artistic freedom.” We then proceeded to voice these ten contemporary plagues:

Plague of one dimensional rhetoric  
Plague of homophobia and hatred of the Other  
Plague of unbridled profit motive

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Plague of religious fundamentalism  
 Plague of the rape of nature  
 Plague of AIDS  
 Plague of exploitation of workers  
 Plague of conformity  
 Plague of indifference and apathy  
 Plague of homelessness.

The dignitaries then proceeded to take their places inside the storefront window. The space was empty with one exception—matzah covered the entire wall behind them. Rabbi Waskow removed three pieces of matzah from the back wall and, in elegant midrashic style, proceeded to explain why we break the matzah. More pointedly he linked the Afikomen ceremony to the problem of homelessness:

If anybody tries to hold onto all the abundance in the world, the matzah remains the bread of affliction, the bread of oppression, the bread of poverty and despair. The only way in which the matzah can become the bread of freedom is if we share it and in order to share it we have to break it. So that applies to wealth that we have to share. That applies to land that we have to share. It applies to food that we have to share and so, we set aside one of the pieces of the broken matzah as a symbol that we will be sharing it.

After his interpretation, the dignitaries all proceeded to tear down the matzah wall that Ruth Messinger spontaneously termed “The Matzah Wall of Oppression.” We performed this symbolic gesture to the upbeat fusion music of the British group Zohar; people on the street buzzed in anticipation to see what was being revealed beneath the wall.

Gradually, what came to light was a quote by the Israeli philosopher Gideon Ofrat from his book *The Jewish Derrida*. Ofrat wrote, “Elijah represents unconditional ‘total hospitality,’ the expectation and willingness to extend hospitality at all times, awaiting the arrival of the unknown Other without any prior assignation of the time of meeting; keeping the Elijah chair forever vacant as an ever-open ‘here-and-now,’ in the expectation of the event of the Messiah.”

After the matzah wall was taken down, the participants brought in the Elijah Chair. Taking my cue from Ofrat’s quote, I constructed my own chair for Elijah containing a video component laden with Passover symbolism. I chose a rocking chair for the project because of the possibility of movement it conferred, as if the prophetic figure Elijah were haunting it. In the traditional Seder, there comes a point when one is supposed to open the door for the Prophet Elijah. Incorporating that symbolism, I inset into the back of the chair a flat screen monitor that plays a video loop of endless doors opening. The doors open onto various sites of New York, from lower-class neighborhoods to more wealthy parts of Manhattan. I took this footage as I walked the streets where Jewish settlers have lived—from the Lower East Side, to Manhattan’s Upper West Side, and various neighborhoods in between. I videotaped various

synagogues in the Lower East Side as a reminder of a more humble time when Jews didn’t have the material luxuries of today. This video documents the staggering divide of wealth in this city of extremes. It is an effort to show that Elijah signifies hospitality and openness to the Other, which must occur in all homes at all times.

If Elijah represents hospitality, I wanted to push his role even further and employ this prophetic figure in the service of social action. In Rabbi Arthur Waskow’s Rainbow Seder, there is a passage that expresses this point succinctly. “We ourselves shall be Elijah, we ourselves shall act to bring the Messiah.” This segment of Rabbi Waskow’s Haggadah was read by Ruth Messinger as the Elijah Chair was placed in the middle of the storefront window. On the wall to the right of the chair was the quotation by Gideon Ofrat, and to the left of the Chair, two house builders began to apply the broken matzah that had been removed from the wall back onto the wall to form the shape of a house in order to symbolize the desire for home that the Passover story evokes. This window installation stood on 42nd Street for the duration of Passover and was witnessed by countless passersby.

After the storefront performance, the Seder moved down the block to the soup kitchen. After soup was served to the hungry, a second ritual object was ushered into the kitchen. This was Miriam’s Well, a sculpture based on recent feminist revisions that have introduced Miriam into the Seder in an attempt to call attention to the absence of the female voice in the Tenach. Therefore Miriam’s Well can be seen as a complement to the Elijah Chair. The biblical narrative tells of a woman (traditionally interpreted to be Moses’ sister, Miriam) who divined water for the Israelites along their journey out of Egypt. For me, Miriam symbolizes nourishment of all kinds—food, water, shelter, and love—all of which are the basic necessities of life. Miriam’s Well contains a video loop combining images of water with superimposition of text upon the water. The well itself is a construction of about 3½ feet high, round and covered in white satin to signify the feminine. To access the video imagery, the viewer looks down into a hole in the middle of the construction. This hole is not only meant to resemble a well but also to be reminiscent of a birth canal, thereby doubling the associations with the female.

After the introduction of Miriam’s Well, musicians brought out their instruments, and those in the soup kitchen began to sing “Chadgadya” and various other Passover favorites. Many people started dancing spontaneously to the Passover songs and a feeling of joy and optimism spread throughout the crowd. We even brought the singing out onto 42nd Street where people engaged in conversation and song. Just down the street one could see others playing with the final piece of the happening, an interactive video projection.

At 125 West 42nd Street, a few doors down from the Matzah Ball Soup Kitchen, I employed an artistic device that superimposed the people walking by that night onto the scene of Cecil B. DeMille’s famous movie “The Ten



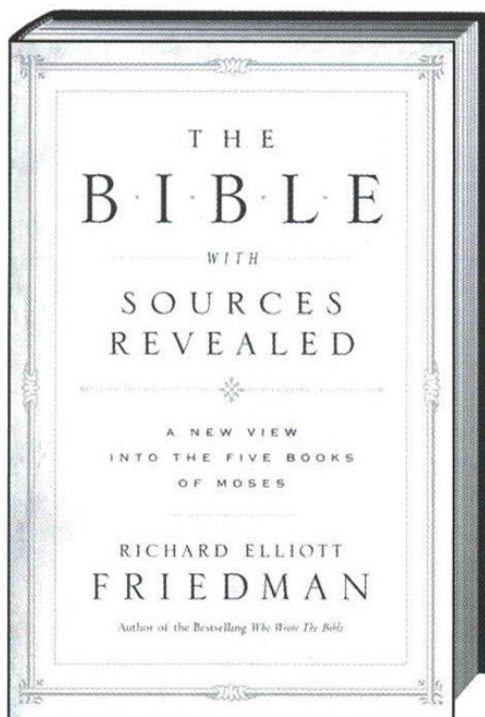
Commandments” where the Jews take flight from slavery through the parting of the Red Sea. The Jew and non Jew alike all became runaway slaves, thus literalizing the Passover injunction, “Remember you were slaves in Egypt.” The video interaction illuminated the humanist ideal, via a humorous reference to pop culture, that all of us are morally enjoined to empathize with the oppressed. Moreover, for a Jewish passerby, the superimposition would generate another layer of meaning. Even though most of us in this generation were never victims of slavery (or for that matter homelessness), we should remember that our ancestors were and that one should never become entirely removed from this subject position.

By combining Jewish religious ritual, community activism, performance art, installation art, and, most importantly, public art, I sought to create a multi-media, multi-layered event that would engage the person on the street—the non Jew as well as the Jew who happened to walk by that night—to think about the problem of homelessness. One interesting moment captured by videographer Peter Shapiro occurred when two German tourists happened to walk by and were initiated to the Passover Seder by being handed a piece of matzah. They asked, “What is this?” Strikingly, this question is similar to the one asked by the simple child, the child at the Seder table who does not know. By asking this question, these people on the street spontaneously enacted a

fundamental part of the Passover ritual. The Jewish woman who handed them the matzah told them, “This is the bread of affliction—the bread of poverty that my ancestors ate in the land of Mitzrayim.” At that moment, the injunction to pass on tribal history was accomplished and exceeded the mandate to keep it within a Jewish context.

If we recall, Mitzrayim is not only the Hebrew word for the land of Egypt—it also literally means “small spaces.” The Times Square Seder is a celebration of leaving these small spaces, which can also signify narrow-mindedness, using art to move from individual to communal experience, from self to other, in a way that opens and expands us. Art has given me the means to link a sacred tradition to contemporary social problems.

The Times Square Seder worked at the crossroads of Jewish religious ritual, postmodern installation art, performance art, and community activism. With the Times Square Seder, I created a symbiotic relationship between all of these methods of cultural production in an effort to illuminate the contemporary plague of homelessness. The Elijah Chair is just one vehicle to shed light on these larger social issues. So, if you happen to walk through the doors of the Jewish Museum in New York this Passover season, I hope that you will go and see the Elijah Chair. It is my hope that one of the doors that you will see in the Elijah Chair leads you out of Mitzrayim and toward social action and activism. □



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