



THE SHIRA RUSKAY CENTER  
A JEWISH CONNECTIONS PROGRAM OF JBFCs

*IN PARTNERSHIP WITH*  
THE JEWISH COMMUNITY CENTER IN  
MANHATTAN

*INVITES YOU TO JOIN US FOR*

**COPING WITH THE EMPTY CHAIR**  
**AT THE SEDER:**  
*A workshop for bereaved Jews*



# **Coping with the Empty Chair at the Seder: A Workshop for bereaved Jews**

Presented by the Shira Ruskay Center/JBFCS

In partnership with

The Jewish Community Center in Manhattan

Monday, April 18, 2005

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Coordinator of Bereavement Services

Every seder table is surrounded by those who are physically present, filling the chairs around that table. At the same time, every seder is also populated by the loved ones who are present only in our memories. Often they become as much a part of the story of Passover as the tales of the Exodus found in the Haggadah. There are years when a loss is new; when the empty chair is clearly apparent, even if it does not have a physical space at the table. These are the sedarim when the loss is too fresh and full of pain and the memories have not yet become a comforting part of the Passover story.

Who is the loved one/ friend/ companion you have brought to the table this evening?

What is the story of your journey through this time of grieving?

At the Passover seder, we use symbols to help us to tell the story. Please use the symbols and questions on our seder plate to reflect on your story. Color the symbols if you would like, and write some of your thoughts on the back of this page. Most of the symbols and rituals of Passover, carry many levels of meaning. Even a simple piece of matza has at least two sides, describing both our national and our personal experience. Use the two sides of the matza to describe your experience at this time.

## Coping with the Empty Chair at the Seder

A workshop for bereaved Jews

A program focused around the symbols on the seder plate.  
Rabbi Stephanie Dickstein, Shira Ruskay Center/ JBFCS

Publicity: listed in the JCC Catalogue. Flyers sent to individuals who had called the bereavement center during the past year. Participants were asked to register in advance.

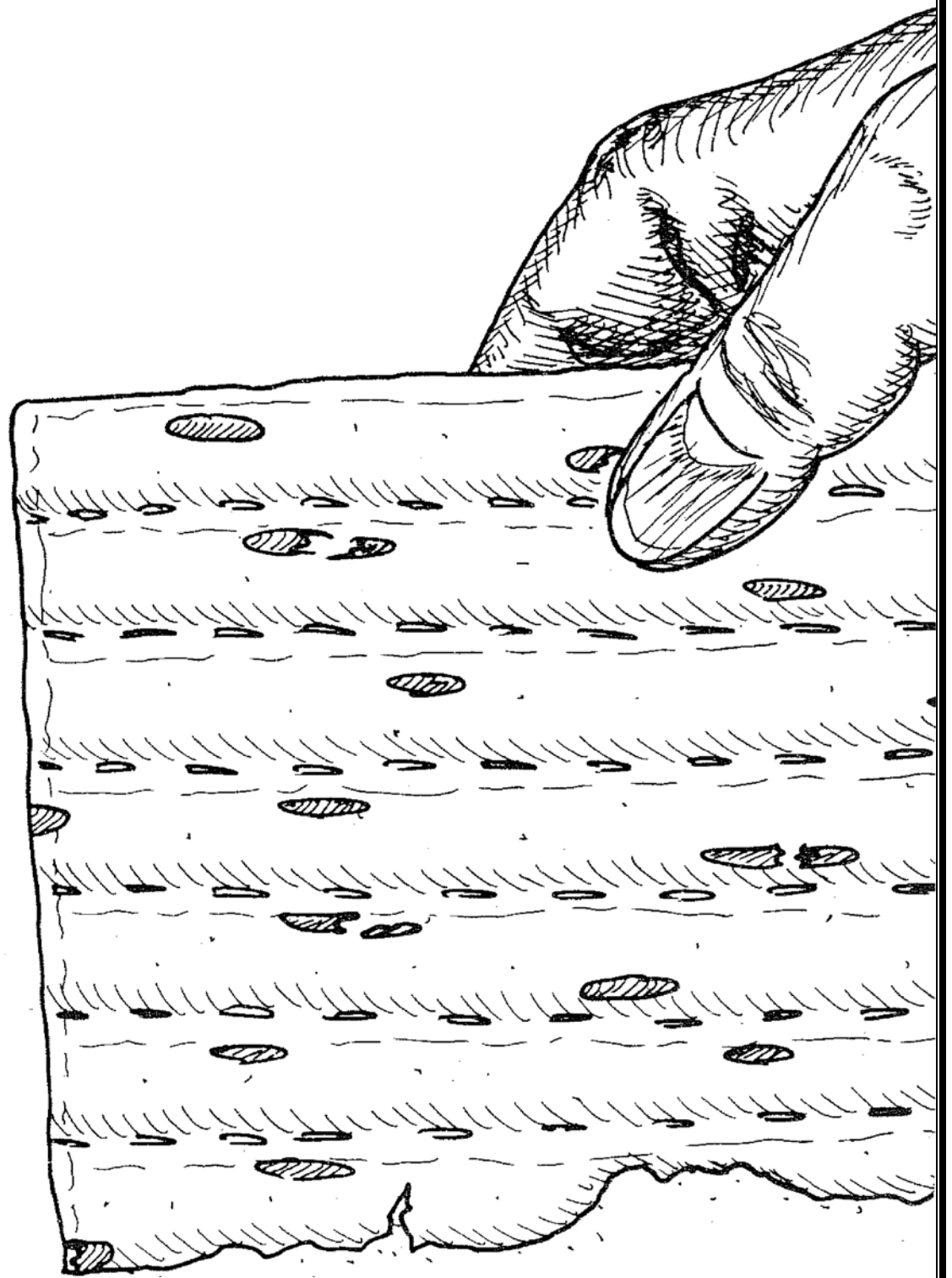
Room set up: The room was set up with tables that sat four, to encourage conversation as people came in and began the program. The room was made pleasant with colored table cloths and fresh flowers. Crayons and pens were put on each table, along with the program material. Refreshments were also out on a table.

Program material: Paper plates with the seder plate objects and a question for each (see below.) The objects and questions were copied in a circular shaped and glued on to the plate. There was a tan colored sheet with a picture of matza on each side, one side reading: "This is the bread of my affliction" and the other side, "This is the bread of my journey to freedom". A program sheet, with the introduction to the project, copied on a spring green paper.

Program: Participants were greeted as they came in by Myra Shendell, the bereavement program coordinator and asked to check in by their name. Most had spoken with Myra on the phone, and so the personal connection was very nice. She began the program by welcome everyone. Stephanie explained that we would begin with a niggun- humming the melody of " Adir hu". She welcomed everyone, acknowledging the courage it took to come to the program. She explained the project briefly. We express things, including bereavement, using different modalities, just as the seder service does. By being open to different kinds of expressions, we get in touch with different feelings. Look at the questions connected with the symbols on the seder plate, and write some answers for your experience as well as the two sides of the matza. Use the crayons to color if you want. After about 10 minutes, we would come together as a group. No one had to write, they could just think if they preferred. Most participants began writing soon, a few talked with each other. Myra and Stephanie circulated, and encouraged a few who seemed overwhelmed by the task, just to think about how they would answer one question.

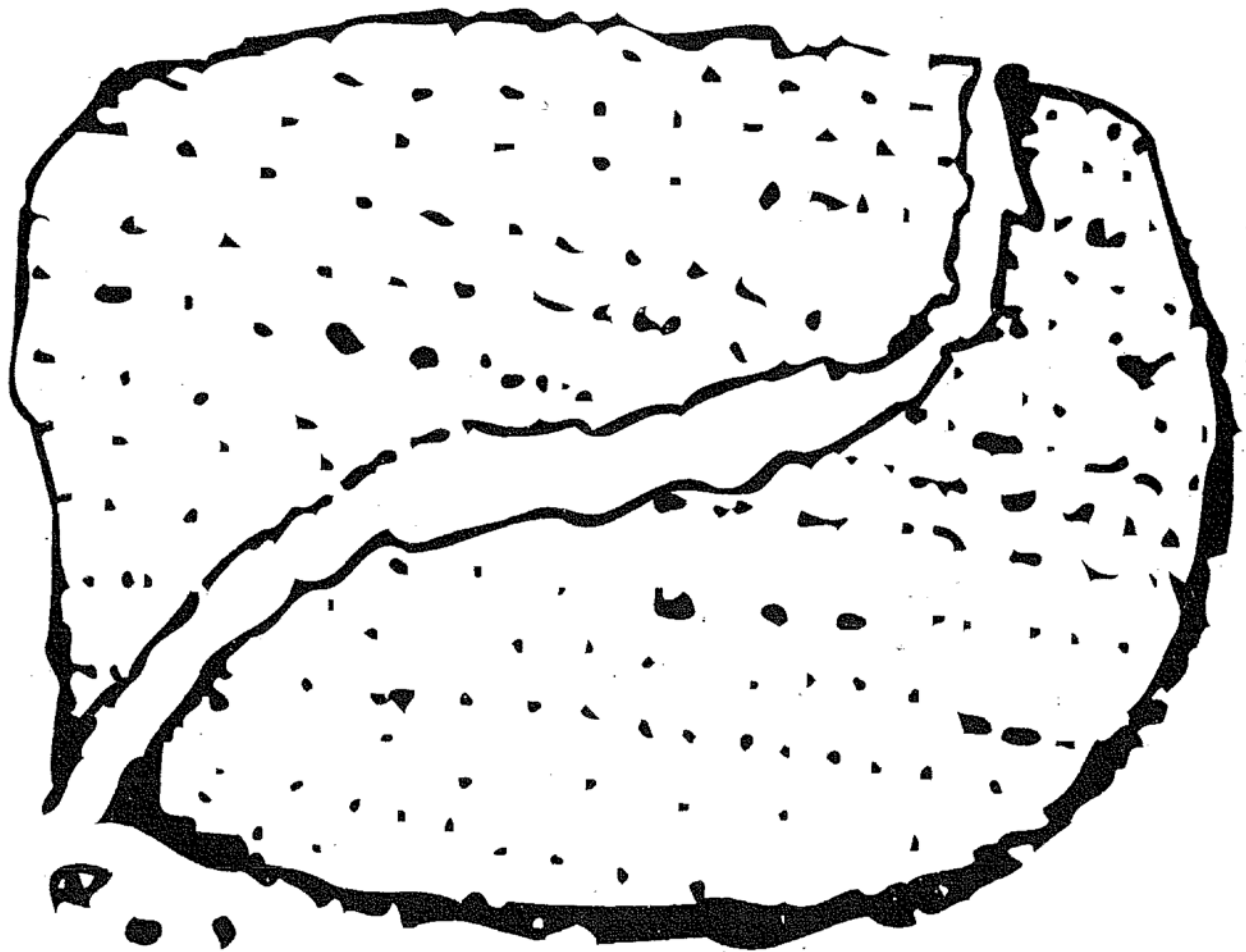
We were unsure if we should divide into two groups or do one- there were 27 present. We did do it as a whole group, which worked fine, but even one or two more would have been too much. Stephanie called the group together and asked that people introduce themselves and the loved one in the empty chair, and then to speak about what they wrote for one of the more painful symbols and one of the more hopeful symbols. No one would have to speak- they could just indicate that they wanted to pass. Comments should be brief, so everyone could have time. We knew one participant from other programs and asked her to speak first. We then went around, with almost all participants choosing to speak. Most did make use of the seder symbols in their comments. When someone got a little too long, Stephanie would gently comment either reminding to use the seder symbols, or connecting something they said back to the seder. A few people commented that they were looking for coping strategies at the seder its self, not just remembering, so we commented on that as well- very briefly in response to some comments and then as a summary. We started just about on time, and finished close to an hour and a half later- the ending time listed. This cut the socializing time we had from the half hour or so that we often have after these programs. A number of people stayed for a while, talking to each other and to the facilitators. We also handed out copies of the "empty chair step by step at the seder journal from our previous programs, and some people asked if they could take an extra copy.

Some additional notes: Judging the number of people who show up is always difficult with these programs. We had 39 reservations and 27 show up. This is typical- a some potential participants, and even those who come, are very ambivalent about attending a program like this. We neglected to request a microphone that can be passed around, and that would have helped. It is very difficult for people who are grieving to speak out in a loud voice, and some participants are older and have a hard time hearing. It would also have been helpful to have printed the material, like the seder plate questions in a larger print to make it easier for some participants.



*This is the bread of my  
journey to freedom...*

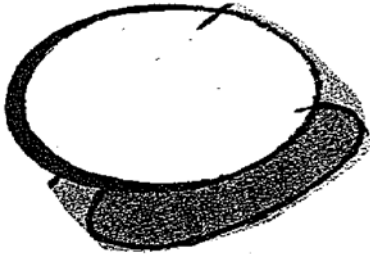
**This is the bread of my  
affliction.....**



# The Seder Plate

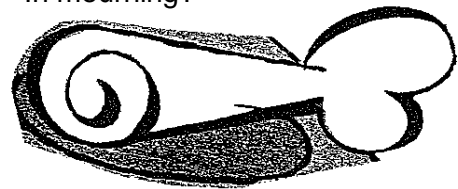
*Beitza / Egg*

How has the cycle of life been / Interrupted? How is it ongoing?



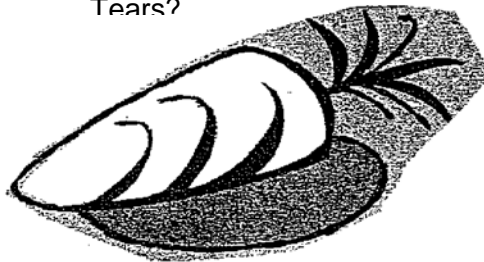
*Zarofah / bone*

The "meat" of the story.  
What sacrifices have you made as a care-giver or In mourning?



*Maror / bitter herb*

What have been the Sources of bitterness or Tears?



*Karpas / spring vegetable*

What is being renewed in you? To what do you look Forward?



*Haroset / fruit & nut relish*

What has been sweet for you? Where is the love in your life?

