

Every Passover at my grandparents' house, I placed a faded Maxwell House Haggadah at each place setting, reserving the Haggadah with a sticker of a sneaker on the front for the head of the table. This Haggadah was my grandfather's copy. For in this Haggadah, my grandfather had written notes—notes of what to read when, how to perform certain rituals, and, admittedly, what parts to skip over. This Haggadah contained the secrets to our family practice. My grandfather passed away two weeks after my Bat Mitzvah and my grandmother became sick during my first year of college. My family gathered for Passover, sitting around my grandparents' table for what was the last time. Without the patriarch and with the matriarch too weak, my family lacked its regular seder leader and they turned to me. I sat in my grandfather's big leather armchair and opened the Haggadah with a sticker of a sneaker on the front. I poured over my grandfather's notes, the slanted, penciled-in script that fills the margins revealing our family secrets one letter at a time. Leaving no note unread, I led my family precisely through my grandfather's seder that year, dreading that it would be our last family seder. *Even the most mundane of notes—"read this" or "pass the Matzah"—carried the weight of my family's story and rituals, just as all Jewish sacred texts reveal their true depths to those who seek them.*

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The summer before my senior year of college, I began my long journey of coming to terms with my newly-discovered chronic illnesses. After months of inconclusive doctor appointments, I was sent for a three-day in-patient treatment in the hospital. While there, a hospital chaplain, who was a rabbi, came to visit and sat at the foot of my hospital bed as we spoke. When she asked if I'd like her to recite the Mi Shebeirach, I wasn't so sure that it was what I wanted-- I had developed a notion of God who does not interfere in this world. If that were the case, how could God grant me a *refuah shleimah*, a complete healing, as the prayer implored? But, not wanting to foil the rabbi's plans, I gave her my Hebrew name. She chanted the prayer, the words melting away, but the melody washing over and through me. Suddenly tears streamed down my face. For the first time since my illness started, I felt a sense of release. In that moment, the space changed and I changed in the space. I felt immeasurably small and felt the room swirl. I felt so incredibly alone in my pain, and at the same time, I felt seen in a way that the doctors did not see me. At the time, I attributed the feelings to simply being overwhelmed and confused. Now, looking back, I can say strongly that "God was in that place

and I did not know it” (Gen 28:16). God was there, but God did not take away my pain or give me physical strength. God did not give the doctors the ‘answers’ and God did not prevent me from getting more painful treatments. *But in those mere moments in which a rabbi sat at the foot of my bed and recited a prayer, God was present and that presence was transformative-- perhaps even healing in a way I did not know was possible.*

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The alarm beeped at 5:00am. I threw on my comfortable shoes, grabbed my tallit and kippah, and ran out the door to meet Women of the Wall supporters gathering for the short ride to the Kotel. Anat Hoffman calmly gave instructions and guidelines as we approached. As we made our way through security and to the women’s section, the screaming and whistling began. I opened my WOW siddur and stumbled through the prayers, unfamiliar with many of them. We go through the Torah reading, the noise and commotion ever increasing at the site of a real Torah scroll. Anat turned to the women gathered and said ‘we need an HUC student!’ Not knowing why, I stepped forward. ‘Do you know how to do hagbah?’ she asked me. I smiled hesitantly and approached the Torah that was no bigger than my forearm. I unrolled the scroll a little, lifted it into the air, and—the world stopped. I turned slowly, the Torah hoisted above my head for all to see, numbing me to my core. I could not hear the men shouting over the mechitzah. I could not hear the women shouting ‘hillul HaShem’ and blowing whistles. *I only saw the pure joy on the faces of the women surrounding me, in awe of this little Torah scroll and our ability to read from it at a sacred site. This was a quintessential Israel moment, combining prayer, protest, history, community, and joy—holding all of these together in a messy bundle.*

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This past year, everything looked different as Passover approached. Our communities and families were isolated, staying home because of COVID-19. My family had changed considerably since the last time we gathered for Passover—losing some and gaining others, becoming a new amalgamation of families with different traditions. Once again, I found myself tasked with leading a seder. But this time, my grandfather’s copy of the Maxwell House Haggadah was in a box in my aunt’s basement, unused for several years. And with family planning to Zoom from three locations, a physical Haggadah was unattainable. With that in mind, I set out to create my own Haggadah from scratch. I kept the principles of my

grandfather's seder in mind—brevity, clarity, and fun—but used modern language, colorful design, and innovations for a virtual world. I wish that I could have held that Haggadah with a sticker of a sneaker on the front, but I know that I carry its secrets within me, and that my Haggadah now contains new elements of my family's stories. *Through the Haggadah-creation process, I felt a deep connection to my past, honored my family's traditions, and embraced the people and demands of the present, just as we must do with each text study, each pastoral encounter, and each prayer service.*