

2008 LABOR SEDER SUPPLEMENT:

BRINGING DC VOTING RIGHTS TO YOUR PASSOVER SEDER



The following readings and discussion questions may be incorporated into any Passover seder. Passover traditions are not only about remembering the past - they can and should speak to today's struggles for equality. The use of this supplement provides one way to pursue justice on the seder night and beyond.

TAXATION WITHOUT REPRESENTATION

Nearly 600,000 Americans living in our nation's capital pay federal taxes, serve on juries, and defend our nation during times of war, but do not have voting representation in either chamber of Congress. Washington, DC has a larger population than the state of Wyoming. DC residents pay more in federal taxes per person than residents of every state. And the District's economy is larger than those of fourteen states. Yet residents of Washington, DC have never had a voice in the U.S. Congress – even though Congress treats the District as a state for the purposes of 500 of the nation's laws.

Washington, DC has endured legislation and taxation without representation by the federal government ever since its founding in 1801. In 1970, when he was Assistant Attorney General, former Chief Justice of the U.S. Supreme Court William H. Rehnquist said that, "Continued denial of voting representation from the District of Columbia can no longer be justified." Yet nearly forty years later, the situation has not changed.

Excerpted from the Leadership Conference on Civil Rights Education Fund: www.civilrights.org



OUTSIDE THE BEIT MIDRASH: A READING

Every day, the great sage Hillel would work and earn one tropaik. Half would go for food for himself and his family. He would give the other half to the guard at the Beit Midrash, where he would study.

One day, he earned no money and the guard at the Beit Midrash would not permit him to enter. Hillel climbed up on the roof and listened through the skylight so that he could hear the words of the living God from the mouths of the rabbis Shemayah and Avtalion. It was the eve of Shabbat in the middle of winter, and snow began to fall.

When dawn came, Shemayah said, "Brother Avtalion, every day this house is light and today it is dark. Is it a cloudy day?" They looked up and saw the figure of a man on the skylight. They went up and found Hillel covered with three cubits of snow. They took him down, bathed him, and placed him in front of the fire. They said, "This man deserves that we violate the Sabbath on his behalf." (Babylonian Talmud, Yoma 35b)

The residents of Washington DC are very close to the national conversations that take place among American's elected representatives. They know people who work for senators and congressmen; they live in physical proximity to the halls of Congress. Unlike most Americans, however, DC residents do not have a representative in the U.S. Congress add *their* voices to these conversations. They are so close, but they aren't let in – they participate in these conversations the way Hillel did; with their ears pressed up against the outside of the beit midrash.

It seems clear from the story in the Talmud that the rabbis in the beit midrash had never intended their policy of charging half a tropek to leave anyone out of their study circle. Indeed, as soon as they see that they have left Hillel out, they show him tremendous honor.

Barbara Jordan, the first Southern black woman to serve in the U.S. House of Representatives, used to say that her faith in the Constitution was complete, and that she believed – as an African-American and a woman – that George Washington and Alexander Hamilton had left her out by mistake. Many residents of the District of Columbia, who are barred from full representation in the national government, likewise feel that the framers left them out by mistake – that they never intended to disenfranchise 600,000 permanent residents of the District.

Just as Hillel's exclusion blocked the light in the beit midrash, DC's disenfranchisement detracts from the democratic nature of our government. Like the Talmudic rabbis, we who notice the darkness should do everything in our power to combat this injustice and restore the light.

Joelle Novey. Adapted from a dvar tikkun (social justice teaching) at Tikkun Leil Shabbat in July 2006. Tikkun Leil Shabbat is a songful, soulful Shabbat service in Washington, DC featuring a teaching about a social justice issue and followed by a potluck vegetarian dinner: www.tikkunleilshabbat.org.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Research shows that **78% of Americans don't know** that the residents of Washington, DC are not represented in Congress. Were you aware of this fact before tonight? If not, what is your reaction?
2. This reading makes a comparison between the consequences of the rabbis' decision to charge half a tropaik for the privilege of studying in the beit midrash and the Framers' decision to write, in the Constitution, that senators and congressmen would represent "the states." Do you agree with the writer that the exclusionary consequences of these policies were probably unintended? Why or why not?
3. In this Talmudic story, the rabbis become aware of the flaws of their policy: they find that Hillel has nearly frozen to death as a result. What types of consequences or actions might similarly raise awareness of DC's disenfranchisement?



TAKING ACTION

Find out more: Visit the website of DC Vote, an organization leading the fight for voting rights in DC, for information, news, and ways to take action: www.dcvote.org.

Contact your senator: The DC House Voting Rights Act, which was introduced in Congress in 2007, would give DC a voting member of the House of Representatives. It easily passed in the House with a vote of 241-177 but is being blocked by a filibuster in the Senate. Call or email your senators to let them know that you support representation for the citizens of our nation's capital.

Spread the word: Let your family, colleagues, and community members know that DC residents do not enjoy the same rights that they do.