



# LET ALL WHO ARE HUNGRY FOR CHANGE, COME AND ACT

By Mandy Patinkin

Several months ago, I felt the power of the thousands-year-old Passover story as palpably as I ever have, when I travelled with American Jewish World Service (AJWS) to Cambodia. My sense of what it means for a people to go from slavery to freedom deepened when I spent time listening to the modern-day narratives of Cambodians who live in the shadow of a genocide that claimed 2 million lives. They are recovering from their traumas through the sheer force of will and, today, continue to fight oppression and lay the foundation for democracy, equality and freedom for all Cambodians.

*This year we were slaves, next year may we be free.*

This juxtaposition between the deepest injustice and the most transcendent hope reminds me of our own people's transformations—from slaves in Egypt to a free people at Sinai; from those Jews who did whatever they could to resist the genocide perpetrated against us, to Jews today who find meaning in that tragic chapter of our history by standing up for freedom for others in the new millennium.

In Cambodia, juxtapositions such as these are everywhere. We went to the Killing Fields and the Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum, where we saw thousands of photographs of young people who were murdered by the Khmer Rouge during the Cambodian genocide. Later that same day, we met extraordinary young activists whom AJWS is supporting, who are determined that their generation should know the sweetness of freedom. Like the Israelites escaping Egypt, these young leaders are looking forward, with a spirit and a quest for justice. They're fighting for their rights to food, education, medical care and opportunity; for a home to live in, for the right to vote without the threat of violence.

In Cambodia, I also met garment workers—many of them treated like wage slaves—who are striving to achieve justice for themselves. We visited a factory in Phnom Penh that was surrounded by barbed wire and shadowed by a prison tower. The young women who toil there are making just a few dollars per day, inhaling toxic chemicals

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Mandy Patinkin with Cambodian Youth Network activist in Cambodia on a Study Tour with American Jewish World Service.  
Photograph by Christine Hahn

in stifling heat to sew the clothes we Americans wear. They are afraid for their lives and yet afraid to lose their jobs—but they have found the courage to speak out.

One of their leaders, Sitha, is like a modern-day, female Moses. She is leading a movement of fellow garment workers demanding fair wages and better treatment, just as many of our grandparents and great-grandparents did in New York and around the world in the early 20th century.

The freedom these brave activists seek is not easy to attain. Cambodian youth are up against formidable forces: Their corrupt government puts up roadblocks to democracy; profit-seeking logging companies rob their villages of the land they need for survival; and the effects of climate change threaten their future. Similarly, the garment workers face an uphill battle. They have achieved significant wage hikes in recent years—from \$61 per month when they began to \$140 today—but their hours and working conditions get worse for every increase they win. They gain the courage to ask for water, but then are afraid to drink, because they'll have to go to the bathroom and won't meet their quota and will get fired. Within these paradoxes, they achieve incremental progress.

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

Like the *matzah*, which reminds us that we were once slaves and are now free, the Cambodian activists we met are confident that the unleavened bread will rise. There is no sense of defeat within them.

The young generation of Cambodia possesses the kind of optimism that is rare to see on this earth, much like the very optimism that freed us from Pharaoh's grip. Fighting for the rights of their families, their neighbors and their friends, they work with so little and in the face of obstacles so great. But they do so with perhaps the greatest hearts and imaginations, thus renewing my belief that moving from slavery to freedom is possible.

### ***Let all who are hungry, come and eat.***

Many of us interpret this passage from the *haggadah* literally: that we must welcome the poor and the hungry to our *Seder* table so they can partake in our bounty. But now, I read it differently: "Let all who are hungry for change, come and act." Cambodians are hungry for change. And getting to know them put me in touch with a deep Jewish hunger for change and for justice in our broken world. It also put me in touch with my own desire to support their cause.

Like so many Jews, I have always pondered what it means to be a Jew today. For me, it means *rakhmones*—compassion for other human beings. My Jewishness teaches me to dedicate my time to learning; learning about what is going on in other people's lives in the world; learning to feel compassion and then committing to doing something about it.

When I travel to places like Cambodia and hear the stories of garment workers fighting for a living wage and safe conditions, when I meet people anywhere who are rejecting suffering and striving for freedom, I feel that these

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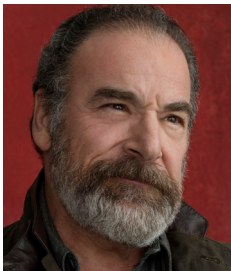
Sitha, whom Mandy Patinkin calls a "modern-day, female Moses," is leading a movement of garment workers demanding fair wages and better treatment in Cambodia. *Photograph by Christine Han*

experiences are my shul—my synagogue, my temple. The world is a sacred place. Now more than ever, to quote Arthur Miller, “Attention must be paid.” To me, *tikkun olam*—repairing the world, our world—is what it means to be Jewish; and this is the heart of the Passover narrative.

AJWS encourages me to attend to human rights. This is work I long to do for the rest of my life. It feeds the body and soul of every word that I say on stage or screen and helps to give life and breath to any song I sing.

Let us all lean forward from our reclining positions at our *Seder* tables, and awaken our hearts, our compassion and our abilities to listen. Let us find a way to join and support people like the AJWS grantees—people like the Cambodian youth; people like Sitha, the labor organizer, and the workers she fights for; and people all over the world who are hungry—hungry for action, hungry to realize their basic human rights. And let us remember:

Our actions are the ground we walk on.



**MANDY PATINKIN** is a Tony and Emmy award-winning American performer, known for his portrayal of Avigdor in the 1983 film *Yentl* and Inigo Montoya in the 1987 film *The Princess Bride*. He has appeared in major roles in television series including *Chicago Hope* and *Dead Like Me*. He currently plays Saul Berenson in the Showtime series *Homeland*.

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## ABOUT THIS PUBLICATION

This essay is part of American Jewish World Service’s Chag v’Chesed (“Celebration and Compassion”) series. Written by prominent leaders, Chag v’Chesed draws on teachings from the holidays to inform our thinking about Judaism and social justice. AJWS is committed to a pluralistic view of Judaism and honors a broad spectrum of interpretation of our texts and traditions. The statements made and views expressed in this commentary are solely the responsibility of the author.

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