

LET MY PEOPLE GO ... HOME!



Original art by Mira Menyuk

JEWS UNITED FOR JUSTICE THIRD ANNUAL SOCIAL JUSTICE SEDER

APRIL 3, 2016

B'NAI ISRAEL SYNAGOGUE ▲ BALTIMORE, MD

WHY A SOCIAL JUSTICE SEDER?

A traditional Passover seder^{*1} is a festive, ritual-rich meal in which we remember the ancient Jewish story of liberation from slavery in Egypt. Over the centuries, thousands of different versions of the Passover *haggadah**, or “narrative,” have been written. Tonight, our haggadah connects an ancient story to liberation struggles that are still ongoing.

The Passover* seder serves many purposes. First and foremost, it is a ritualized celebration of the Israelites’ dramatic journey to freedom. But the seder was never just about history. As the format was refined and expanded over the last thousand years, rituals were included to make each participant feel as if they personally were experiencing the journey to freedom – and to help every generation bring the lessons of the story into their lives.



Credit: Leah Sosewitz (Judaic Art Studio)

The Passover seder tells us that just as our people experienced slavery, and just as we could not free ourselves alone, we have an obligation to also fight for freedom in every generation. The injustices of the world are many, but the story of liberation reminds us of the words of Pirkei Avot*: “It is not your duty to complete the work, but neither are you free to desist from it.” Let us use our collective power to further the causes of justice and freedom in our own times and our own communities.

WHY THE FOCUS ON RENT COURT AND HOUSING ISSUES IN BALTIMORE?

The ancient Israelites in the time of the Exodus knew well what it was like to endure unequal treatment and unequal living conditions. The Torah* says that in Egypt, Jews found themselves at the mercy of a society that “dealt ill with us, and afflicted us, and laid upon us hard bondage.”² More recent history has seen Jews endure these burdens as well. For instance, for the better part of the 20th century, Baltimore’s best apartment buildings either excluded Jews altogether or limited our numbers by quotas.³

Today, our neighbors still struggle with the injustices Jews once regularly endured. For generations, our Jewish homes have been the center of our family and community lives, even as we were evicted or driven out from those homes over and over throughout history. We know in our bones that everyone deserves a safe and decent home in which to build a life and a community. Yet in Baltimore city, tens of thousands of families cannot find or make a real

¹ Words with an asterisk (*) are defined in the glossary at the end of this book.

² Deuteronomy 26:6

³ Pietila, Antero. *Not in My Neighborhood*, pp. 141-143.

home. Struggling communities of color – frequently deprived of wealth or homeownership by generations of discriminatory policies, including recent policies like redlining* – must rent homes, and find that the apartments available to them are unreasonably expensive and poorly maintained, even in dangerous, unlivable conditions. At the same time, they are evicted in shocking numbers — as we will learn tonight.

Housing issues are complex. In this seder, we aim to raise awareness of the crisis in affordable and livable housing in Baltimore, and focus on one place where real change would benefit thousands of families every year. “Rent Court” is the informal term for the District Court’s landlord-tenant docket, which sees 150,000 cases annually, largely brought by landlords filing claims to evict renters. A recent investigative report by the Public Justice Center (the “PJC”)* and the Right to Housing Alliance (“RTHA”)*, supported by JUFJ volunteers, details the ways in which renters in Rent Court find a system stacked against them.⁴

Rent Court has been described by our friends at the Right to Housing Alliance as an unnavigable “black hole” at the center of Baltimore’s larger affordable housing crisis. Judges regularly ignore the valid legal defenses of renters, and instead essentially operate as a collection agency for landlords. Because the courts favor landlords’ monetary interests over renters’ health and safety, large numbers of people from Baltimore’s most vulnerable populations are thrust into homelessness or forced to settle for substandard housing. In this way Rent Court forces people of color into poorer neighborhoods and poorer housing, and prevents them from achieving financial stability, helping to perpetuate Baltimore’s sad history of racial segregation and inequality.

It shouldn’t be this way. As Americans and as Jews, we believe in equality and fairness before the law. Even hundreds or thousands of years ago, Jewish law commands us to ensure that homes rented by others are “honorable;”⁵ that an unsafe house may “bring guilt upon” you,⁶ and that a tenant may be evicted only after extensive notice and as a last resort.⁷

The Passover haggadah commands us to recall slavery in Egypt as though it were a firsthand experience. This serves as a reminder that we must never disconnect ourselves from our fellow humans, that, as the poet Emma Lazarus once wrote, “until we are all free, we are none of us free.” Tonight, we will learn together and then work for justice for Baltimore’s renters.



Source: *Justice Diverted: How Renters are Processed in the Baltimore City Rent Court.* (Public Justice Center)

⁴ The report, “Justice Diverted: How Renters are Processed in the Baltimore City Rent Court” can be found at http://www.publicjustice.org/uploads/file/pdf/JUSTICE_DIVERTED_PJC_DEC15.pdf. All data and information cited in this Haggadah come from that report unless stated otherwise.

⁵ Rambam, Mishneh Torah, Laws Of Tefilin And Mezuzah 6:1

⁶ Deuteronomy 22:8

⁷ Rambam, Mishneh Torah, Laws of Rental 6:7

CANDLE LIGHTING

Leader:

We mark this time as sacred time. As we light our candles we pray for those in our community who don't have the comfort, safety, and dignity of a stable home, who suffer through the winter snow and summer storms in leaky, heatless, infested houses. We pray for those out on the streets, unfairly evicted through a biased court system or unable to afford a place to lay their heads.



(A representative lights the two candles in the front of the room.)

Recite together:

May it be Your will, our G-d and G-d of our ancestors, that You bless our entire community, rich and poor alike, with light and joy, comfort and warmth, security and justice.

Please introduce yourself to your tablemates and share what motivated you to attend today's seder.

בכל דור ודור B'CHOL DOR VA'DOR: FROM GENERATION TO GENERATION

Leader:

The story of Passover is the beginning of the Israelites' journey to find a home. B'chol dor v'dor, in every generation, we remember and relive that struggle.

All:

We are a people shaped by repeated expulsions. Despite almost two thousand years of repeated expulsions, from Jerusalem, England, Spain, Italy, France, Germany, and countries across the Middle East and North Africa, we made homes, raised families, and built community in every place we lived. We are a people that understand the importance of a safe home.

Leader:

Everyone deserves a home. As Jews living in Baltimore, we lift our voices, our cups, and our pens in solidarity with our neighbors to help bring affordable, safe, dignified housing to everyone in our city.

In every generation we must see ourselves as if we had personally been liberated from Egypt. Turn to the person next to you and find a personal connection to the issue of housing. You might use one of the following questions as a jumping-off point.

1. Have you ever had a disagreement with a landlord? What was it like?
2. Have you ever had a major issue with your home (loss of water, vermin infestation, severe leak, etc)? What was it like?
3. If you or your friends have worked for minimum wage or low wages, what was it like to try and find housing on such an income? What difficulties did you/they face?
4. Where were you during the January blizzard? How did your housing situation affect how you experienced “Snowzilla”?
5. Do you think housing is a human right? Why or why not?

FIRST CUP OF WINE: AFFORDABILITY AND HABITABILITY

Having a safe and stable home is the most basic building block of a healthy, stable life. But in some of Baltimore’s black neighborhoods, the life expectancy is more than twenty years lower than that of nearby white neighborhoods.⁸

The poor state of Baltimore’s rental stock contributes to this health crisis. Hundreds of new lead poisoning cases are reported in Baltimore every year.⁹ The Public Justice Center and the Right to Housing Alliance’s report on Rent Court found that nearly 80% of respondents in Rent Court proceedings reported at least one major hazard in their homes, ranging from pests, to mold, to a lack of heat or hot water.

almost 80 % of landlords at Rent Court hadn't fully complied with Maryland's lead paint law.



nearly 50% of landlords provided the Court with incorrect information about their standing with Baltimore Housing.

Source: Justice Diverted: How Renters are Processed in the Baltimore City Rent Court. (Public Justice Center)

Because housing stock is limited, landlords can charge top dollar even for rentals in poor conditions. Over half of Baltimore’s renter households are “housing cost burdened,”* paying over 30% of their income toward rent.¹⁰ Of course, those who are able to afford the overpriced cost of living in Baltimore’s defective and hazardous housing might be considered lucky compared to the estimated thousands¹¹ who are homeless in the city at any point in time.

It is traditional to drink four cups of wine during a seder. We drink this cup to honor our thousands of neighbors in Baltimore struggling to afford decent housing – and in hope that our gathering here tonight will galvanize each of us to take action in their support.

(Fill the first cup of wine or juice.)

⁸ <http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/wonkblog/wp/2015/04/30/baltimores-poorest-residents-die-20-years-earlier-than-its-richest/>

⁹ <http://touch.baltimoresun.com/#section/-1/article/p2p-85240301/>

¹⁰ <http://factfinder.census.gov/faces/tableservices/jsf/pages/productview.xhtml?src=bkmk>. U.S. Census Bureau Data, also reveals that over a quarter of renters pay more than 50% of their income toward housing

¹¹ The Mayor’s Office of Human Services estimates that there are over 2,600 homeless individuals in Baltimore on any given night. <http://human-services.baltimorecity.gov/homeless-services>

Recite together:

Baruch ata adonai, eloheinu melech ha'olam, borei p'ri hagafen.

ברוך אתה יי אלוֹקֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם בּוֹרֵא פְּרִי הַגָּפֶן

Blessed are You, Lord our G-d, Master of the universe, Creator of the fruit of the vine.

(Drink the first cup. Refill immediately.)

PERSONAL ACCOUNT 1: DENISE'S STORY

Collected by Right Housing Alliance and the Public Justice Center

Between bus transfers and walk time, it takes Denise anywhere from one and a half to two hours commuting from her West Baltimore apartment to her job at the Under Armour facility in Silo Point. So she was helpless to do anything at all, stranded miles away, when she received a frantic call from home. Raw sewage was pumping up from the bathroom sink, her boyfriend said. There was a slow-rolling flood of sewage spewed across the bathroom floor into her kitchen and dining room...

"After a few days I could see dark spots creeping up the drywall over there," she says, pointing to the doorframe separating her bathroom from the dining and kitchen areas. "I tried painting over it but you can see there, it's still coming through." On closer inspection there was little doubt that Denise had black mold growing up her wall. The door to her bathroom is closed but after a few minutes she opens it for the big reveal: a 4-foot-deep hole bored into the earth. It stretches halfway across the bathroom floor. Crowning the edges is all the rubble, mud, and shattered tile the workers hauled up from the ground. The site had been left untouched for the past five months...

Denise recalls her first visit to the property, when she responded to a flier posted outside Mondawmin Mall. Denise called the Washington, D.C. phone number listed on the ad and scheduled a walkthrough with her soon-to-be landlord. She didn't realize at the time this call would be one of their only personal encounters. For future concerns, she was told to contact an intermediary whose "office" was set up in the back of a west North Avenue hardware store.

On that nightmarish day when the sewage back-flowed, after Denise's repeated panic-stricken calls for help, the mysterious landlord remained out of sight. Following the initial (and most damaging) burst of sewage, lesser amounts bubbled up through her sink two or three times every day. Still no word from her landlord. "Every time I brought it up, she'd just say the same thing – 'I'll get someone taking care of it,'" she recalls. It wasn't until city housing inspectors issued a violations report that Denise's landlord sent out anyone to repair the plumbing. Months later, the landlord would finally visit the property and see the demolished bathroom and sinkhole left by his crew of unskilled workers.

By all accounts, Denise had a case to make in court to pay rent into escrow¹², but like so many Baltimore City residents she simply had no concept of the rent escrow law and how to use it.

¹² Putting rent into escrow means legally setting aside the rent money in a special type of account or with a court, until the landlord is in compliance with housing code or your serious issue has been addressed. Maryland residents have the right to withhold rent in escrow when a landlord fails to repair serious or dangerous problems in a rental unit.

Instead, she tried to force improvements by withholding her \$750 in rent. She is not one to take the easy way out, she says, but she had no other option. Consequently, Denise was summoned to the Rent Court.

Given the severe state of her apartment, Denise looked forward to having her day in court. She could finally make a public outing of her landlord, she thought, imagining a judge and presentations of both sides of the case and an order obligating the landlord to carry out the repairs.

At court, however, these hopes were dashed. As Denise stumbled over her words, the judge interrupted: “This is not a hearing – we are only here to discuss the amount of money you owe.”

This refrain had become familiar to Denise while she sat in the rent court awaiting her case. But her case was different, she thought. It was clear as day, and she had the photographic evidence and had prepared her testimony. Yet, like hundreds of tenants on the docket that day, she ended up with an eviction notice and the choice to leave or to pay to stay in an unlivable home.

יח'י

YACHATZ: BREAKING THE MIDDLE MATZAH

Leader:

Matzah—made of only water and wheat, unsiced and unleavened—is the bread of poverty. We break the middle matzah to intentionally bring our awareness to brokenness.

All:

We bring our attention to the profound lack of affordable, habitable housing despite blocks and blocks of vacant houses.

Leader:

We bring our attention to Baltimore’s Rent Court, which, more often than not, serves as a debt collection tool for landlords, rather than as a fair and just system for all.

All:

We bring our attention to the almost 7000 families that are evicted each year in Baltimore.

Leader:

Of the broken matzah, we set aside the bigger half knowing that there is often more that we don’t know than what we do. By the end of the seder, we hope to find the missing half of the matzah and unite in taking action. We will have learned about Baltimore’s housing crisis and learned how we can stand with struggling renters and bring our community closer to wholeness.

A representative from each table should break their table’s middle matzah in half and put the larger half aside.



הנה מה טוב

HINEI MAH TOV: HOW GOOD IT IS

*Hinei mah tov umah na'im
Shevet achim gam yachad.
Hinei mah tov umah na'im
Shevet achayot gam yachad.*

הנה מה טוב ומה נעים שבת אחים גם יחד

How good and pleasant it is for brothers and sisters to sit together!

MIRIAM'S CUP

Miriam's cup recognizes Miriam the prophet, Moses' sister. Her cup is filled with water in remembrance of the well of water that followed the Israelites through the desert as a reward for Miriam's courage and dedication. From the Egyptian women who defied Pharaoh by helping to rescue Moses and other Jewish children, to Miriam's role in saving her infant brother and later leading the Jewish people, in the Passover story, women are always at the forefront of triumph.

Baltimore's housing story would be incomplete without recognizing that women, and particularly Black women, make up the vast majority of defendants in Rent Court (to be exact, according to the PJC and RTHA's Rent Court Report, 79% of renters in Rent Court were women, and 94% of renters in court were Black). Race and gender have played a huge role in creating a court that rarely assists or listens to those who have already been marginalized by society. We need to listen and lift up the voices of women and people of color who are directly affected by Rent Court and Baltimore's affordable housing crisis, and find solutions that meet their real needs.

To celebrate the central and often overlooked role that women of color, play in leading us to a fairer society, we now each pour a little of the water in our glasses into Miriam's cup.

Each person pours a little bit of water into Miriam's cup.

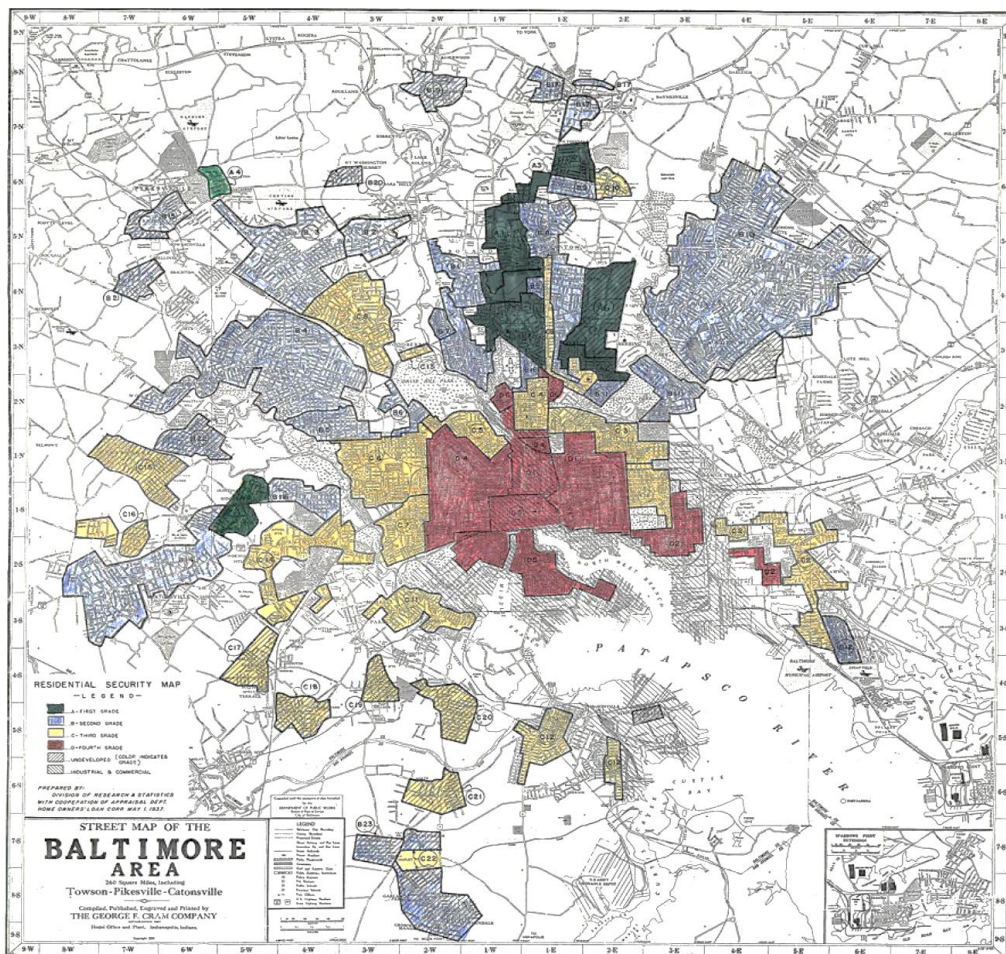


מה נשתנה

MAH NISHTANA: FOUR QUESTIONS

The four rhetorical questions in this haggadah illuminate the disconnect between our values and the reality of the affordable housing crisis in our city. Tonight, these questions call us to gather together, ask difficult questions and take meaningful collective action to achieve our mission of a more just housing system.

- Why do we as a community claim to be committed to making homelessness rare and brief when we have created a Rent Court system that is unjustly weighted towards eviction?
- Why do our laws require landlords to maintain habitable housing, but do not provide tenants with accessible avenues for enforcing those standards?
- Why does Baltimore have a scarcity of affordable, habitable housing, but an abundance of vacant homes?
- Why are the most vulnerable members of our community provided with the fewest resources and greatest burden of proof in Rent Court?



“Residential Security” – a.k.a. redlining – Map, 1937 (Source: JHU Library)

THE FOUR CHILDREN

In the Passover haggadah, we tell the story of the four children: one who is wise, one who is wicked, one who is simple, and one who does not know how to ask questions. In reality, we know that no one is fully wise, wicked, simple, or silent. The four children can be interpreted not as separate people, but rather as various aspects of ourselves. At different times in our lives, and sometimes even moment to moment, we might be seeing the world more prominently through the lens of one of the four children. By noticing which mindset we are coming from at any given time, we can more holistically and skillfully bring ourselves into the work as well as invite others to participate more fully with us.



The **wise child** within each of us understands the interconnectedness of all things, and has an intuitive sense of justice. As the wise child we might say, “I understand through my own suffering that others suffer too.” When we feel this way, may our natural empathy compel us to action.

The **wicked child** within each of us sees the issue from the outside and understands it as someone else’s problem. From the perspective of the wicked child, we see ourselves as *only* an individual, thus separating ourselves from the whole, and thinking, “That issue is not my problem because I am not directly experiencing it.” When we feel this way, may we reach past our disconnection.



The **simple child** within each of us sees the issue but does not think critically. As the simple child we may learn about the issue and be emotionally moved or over intellectualize the issue without realizing that we have the power to take action. Or, as the simple child we may be excited to bring about justice but hastily take action without building a powerful community that includes those most impacted in order to make change together. When we feel this way, may we take time to reflect and strategize in community.

The **child who does not know how to ask questions** within each of us may be self-conscious. We may have some understanding of the issue but we are afraid to reveal our limited understanding - or that we do not have the perfect vocabulary to express ourselves. When we feel this way, may we be brave and seek to learn!



Turn to the person next to you and choose one or two of the following questions.

- What do you already know (even from the seder so far) about Baltimore's housing crisis?
- Have you ever intentionally turned a blind eye? What motivated you to ignore someone else's situation? How is turning a blind eye different from ignorance?
- Have you ever been eager to help but accidentally acted too soon? What did you learn from that experience? Has there been a time where you were surprised that your actions made a positive difference for yourself or someone else?
- Have you ever felt overwhelmed by a social justice issue? What made you feel that way? What would you tell someone that feels overwhelmed and disconnected?
- Menaḥem Mendel Schneerson, the last Lubavitcher Rebbe, taught that there is fifth child: the child who is not at the seder. Who do you know that is not here tonight and not already involved in the fight for affordable and safe housing in Baltimore? How could you invite them into the conversation?



A street mural in Baltimore. (Source: WallHunters/The Slumlord Project Facebook page)

SYMBOLS OF THE SEDER



Matzah is the most basic of foods, a symbol of both poverty and of freedom. Whether or not we are wealthy today, our ancestors faced persecution and deprivation. The matzah reminds us to be compassionate with those experiencing oppression, poverty and homelessness.

We invite everyone to taste a piece of matzah.



Karpas (spring vegetable) represents the growth of new beginnings. JUFJ Baltimore is alive and kicking and proud to join with our neighbors and allies to reform Baltimore's Rent Court. As we dip the karpas in salt water, which symbolizes tears, we taste the sadness of eviction together with the opportunity for change.

We invite everyone to taste a piece of karpas dipped in the salt water.



Maror ("bitter herb," horseradish) symbolizes the bitterness of oppression and helps us to remember that legal segregation did not take place so long ago – and in Baltimore, de-facto housing segregation is still a reality.

We invite everyone to taste a piece of maror.



Charoset (fruit and nut mixture) reminds us of the sticky mortar that the ancient Israelites used in their toils in Egypt – and represents the crumbling bricks of Baltimore homes. The old homes of our city require maintenance, and like charoset, the work of repair can be sweet when communities come together to make justice and reinvest in neighborhoods.

The seder recognizes the complexity of liberation and instructs us to mix the sweetness of the charoset, the bitterness of the maror, and the central symbol of the matzah into a "sandwich." We invite everyone to eat their own small sandwich of matzah, maror, and charoset.



Beitzah (hard boiled egg) represents the hope born in each new generation. Every parent hopes that their child will grow into a strong, happy adult. As we fight for good, stable housing, we nurture and strengthen Baltimore's youth.



Zeroah (shankbone or beet) represents the blood that the Jews used to mark their doorposts in Egypt so that the angel of death would *pass over* during the tenth plague. Renters given judgement in court also become 'marked' - often preventing them from seeking a different landlord or healthier, safer housing. May we work to ensure neighbors cannot so recklessly be marked.



The **orange** is a custom that came from Susannah Heschel, "to suggest the fruitfulness for all Jews when lesbians and gay men are contributing and active members of Jewish life." Lesbian, gay, and trans people face additional barriers to safe housing. We hold space on our plate for the orange in hope that when those who are most marginalized by society are welcomed as active voices in our community, Baltimore shall be more fruitful.

TEN PLAGUES

The ten plagues were brought by G-d upon the Egyptians to prove G-d's power and convince the Egyptians to let the Israelites go free. Tonight, we recognize the ten most common housing defects experienced by renters in Baltimore today.

78% of respondents to the survey conducted by the Public Justice Center and Right to Housing Alliance reported at least one of the following serious problems in their rental unit. Furthermore, 72% of those who reported defects had notified their landlords before coming to court. Legally, when a rental unit has a major defect, renters are entitled to various defenses and forms of relief. In particular they are entitled to withhold at least some of their rent in escrow – legally set aside and not paid to a landlord – until the problems are fixed.. Yet in practice, very few renters are able to take advantage of these rules--many are not informed that they can raise such issues, or are ignored or dissuaded from doing so when they try.



Source: *Justice Diverted: How Renters are Processed in the Baltimore City Rent Court.* (Public Justice Center)

As we read each plague we remove a drop of wine from our glasses to symbolize our outrage on behalf of those who live under these conditions, and the system that allows these issues to continue unchecked.

TOP 10 HOUSING DEFECTS AMONG RENT COURT DEFENDANTS¹³

We read responsively: the leader says a phrase and the group repeats, while removing a drop of wine from our cups.

Housing Defect	Percentage of Rent Court Defendants who Reported Defect
1. Insect or rodent infestation	58%
2. Peeling or flaking paint	41%
3. Plumbing Leaks	37%
4. Mold	36%
5. Broken window or door	35%
6. Roof leaks	29%
7. Faulty electrical	28%
8. No heat or hot water	21%
9. Flooding	20%
10. Broken stove, oven, or fridge	20%

¹³ This chart is taken from page 14 of the Public Justice Center's and Right to Housing Alliance's report on Rent Court. See http://www.publicjustice.org/uploads/file/pdf/JUSTICE_DIVERTED_PJC_DEC15.pdf.

CUP 2: A RIGGED SYSTEM

Baltimore's housing crisis is rooted in decades of policies that marginalized People of Color and deprived them of opportunities for wealth and homeownership. Today's Rent Court is one of the more recent chapters in that history: though Rent Court was created to protect and support renters, these protections have gradually been eroded and replaced with a system that prioritizes landlords' convenience and profits over renters' wellbeing, safety, and due process.

One reason that renters' rights have been eroded is that the courts are simply overburdened—Baltimore's landlords place hundreds, even thousands of eviction cases on the dockets each day. The system compensates by sacrificing basic aspects of a fair trial: Proper notice requirements are often not observed. Defenses are frequently ignored. The right to appeal is essentially non-existent.

Even worse, the courts seem to apply landlord-friendly laws with vigor, but ignore the laws that protect renters. Shockingly, in 80% of the cases reviewed by the PJC, landlords had provided false or incomplete information about their compliance with lead-paint laws and other regulations. Though landlords are required by law to provide this information before they can bring their case, judges do not have time to review the documentation. As a result many families are being summoned to court, even evicted, based on invalid complaints. Similarly, as noted above, over half of renters surveyed by the Rent Court Report had a valid defense based on a housing defect--yet only a handful were granted relief on that basis.

Instead of neutrality and fairness, Rent Court is a rigged game, one where the referees only call fouls on renters but never on landlords. Though the majority of renters who show up to court are entitled to relief, they are denied justice by a court system that only holds one side accountable.

We drink this cup to honor those who have gone through the Rent Court system and fought for their rights and their dignity – we will raise up their struggles and work to prevent others from facing the same problems again.

Recite together:

Baruch ata adonai, eloheinu melech ha'olam, borei p'ri hagafen.

ברוך אתה יי אלוקינו מלך העולם בורא פרי הגפן

Blessed are You, Lord our G-d, Master of the universe, Creator of the fruit of the vine.

(Drink the second cup.)

PERSONAL ACCOUNT 2: LAROYIA'S STORY

Collected by Right Housing Alliance and the Public Justice Center

In September 2014, Laroyia moved her family into a home that had languished months on the real estate market. The owner had been looking to sell, but after so many months without a bite she chose to re-advertise the property as a rental. She repeatedly assured Laroyia that the rental was officially off the market. Setting up the house, Laroyia saw the house filled in a light of stability, security, and hopes for the future.

So imagine her surprise when, days after moving in, Laroyia was notified that her family had to vacate the property at the end of the month. In fact, the landlord was also filing a rent case against Laroyia to ensure her expulsion from the house.

The sudden threat of eviction was a shock to the family. It was never an issue of payment. The landlord simply didn't want her money. She repeatedly refused Laroyia's rent payment and instead demanded that everyone simply pack up and get out.

Before Laroyia's tenancy, the property had sat unoccupied for 15 years, during which time it became overrun with mice and other vermin. Stained, flaking paint was peeling off the walls. Appliances were in various stages of disrepair. There was no kitchen sink. Still for all this, Laroyia fought tooth and nail to stay.

From October 2014 and through January 2015, she was routinely summoned to Rent Court. The reality of the situation, that Laroyia's landlord flatly refused payment month after month, was never disclosed in court. She tried to proffer the text messages on her phone to demonstrate the landlord's true motivation, but the judges consistently refused the evidence. Digital photos of mouse droppings and bite holes in her sock drawer were also excluded as evidence. When asked why she didn't fight harder to prove the poor living conditions and the landlord's duplicitous behavior, Laroyia finally acknowledges an underlying truth: she felt intimidated in the courtroom.

So it went, each month a judge ruling in favor of the landlord until the tenant's right to redemption was foreclosed. Now there was nothing to stop the eviction of Laroyia and her family. All the while, she had pleaded with her landlord to accept the money. But there was a buyer finally, and with all the rent court judgments in hand, the owner's 12-month lease agreement with Laroyia didn't matter.

Over the next couple of weeks Laroyia frantically searched for new housing between shifts at work and off-work hours or packing up. All the stability and security the rowhouse once embodied had vanished over night. The daunting task of rapid relocation began to wedge the sisters apart as they each juggled differing needs – proximity to school, public transit, jobs. Time was not on the family's side, and soon the swiftly diminishing timetable forced them apart, each fending for herself in the interest of their young children.

LET US ALL GO HOME 🎵 🎵 🎵

Sung to the tune of Go Down Moses

The original lyrics to “Go Down, Moses,” written by enslaved African and African-Americans in this country, tell the story of the triumphs of leaving Egypt. These new lyrics celebrate the triumphs of the coalition’s work for Rent Court reform so far. May this African-American spiritual inspire us to work creatively in the fight for freedom and remind us to learn from our history. The processes of leaving Egypt and ending slavery in the US were not quick or easy. As in that struggle, we must have persistence in times when the system greatly resists change.

With housing in this Rent Court’s hands, Let us all go home
Oppressed, with nowhere else to land, Let us all go home
Go down families, to the legislature of this land.
Tell ol’ Rent Court - Reform for justice now.

We came together, observed the court, Let us all go home
Across the land they read our report, Let us all go home
Go down families, to the legislature of this land.
Tell ol’ Rent Court - Reform for justice now.

A coalition we did build, Let us all go home
To Annapolis we sent a bill, Let us all go home
Go down families, to the legislature of this land
Tell ol’ Rent Court - Reform for justice now.

Bill sponsorships do come our way, Let us all go home
Democracy will have its day! Let us all go home
Go down families, to the legislature of this land
Tell ol’ Rent Court - Reform for justice now.

TAKING COMMUNAL ACTION!

Find the Afikomen

During a family seder, someone hides the broken middle piece of matzah - the *afikomen* - during the meal, and everyone else must find it before the seder can resume. The afikomen represents the “dessert” we do not eat, as we linger instead on symbolic flavors of our seder plate. At the start of tonight’s seder, we broke a piece of our center matzah, representing the broken system of Rent Court. When we collectively find the broken half of the afikomen, and heal the broken system, we can move forward together as a joyful and unified community.

CUP 3: HAZARDOUS HOMES, EVICTIONS, AND DISILLUSIONMENT

The rigged Rent Court system worsens life for Baltimoreans in several alarming ways. First, the housing stock itself is harmed. When our legal system fails to hold landlords to housing code laws, it contributes to Baltimore's housing stock becoming more hazardous and deficient. Landlords know they can use the courts just to collect money, and they have no incentive to provide livable housing to their renters.

Second, families are trapped in structures that hurt them. The emphasis on landlords' convenience over renters' rights leads to thousands of preventable judgments and evictions. Currently, Baltimore's Rent Courts evict 7,000 families each year, the second highest rate of any city in America. Many others are not evicted, but are forced to pay money they don't legally owe – or they're unable to get legal recourse for a valid grievance. Additionally, being named in an eviction complaint can serve as a "mark" on renters' records, making it harder to find decent housing in the future – even without being evicted. These outcomes keep families trapped in cycles of poverty and homelessness.



[Sky Kalfus/NextCity](#)

Finally, people lose their sense of trust in the system. Disillusionment grows when people discover that the courts function as a collection agency rather than a fair intermediary that applies the law and ensures just results. The cognitive dissonance between our shared democratic values and the unfair reality that renters live through contributes to our city's conflicts and divisions.

We drink this cup in hope that fighting for change will heal our city on multiple levels – building dignified housing, helping struggling families find homes, and regenerating trust and fellowship among diverse communities.

(Fill the third cup of wine or juice.)

Recite together:

Baruch ata adonai, eloheinu melech ha'olam, borei p'ri hagafen.

ברוך אתה יי אלוקינו מלך העולם בורא פרי הגפן

Blessed are You, Lord our G-d, Master of the universe, Creator of the fruit of the vine.

(Drink the third cup. Refill immediately.)

PERSONAL ACCOUNT 3: ANDREA'S STORY

Collected by Right Housing Alliance and the Public Justice Center

When I kept getting these court notices and evictions, I would always pay the amount to stop the eviction, assuming it was part of my rent. The last time they were going to do an eviction it was a rainy day, and they can't do evictions when it's raining. The same day, the manager came to the house and said "Oh you don't have to move. We can talk about this." Four days later on May 3rd when I came home from work I went to put the key in the door and the key didn't work. Then I saw the padlock on the door. I called my son crying that I was locked out. That's when the neighbor's husband came out and said that they had padlocked both our doors. He said he didn't know that they had padlocked his door until he had left the apartment and came back and saw them. I called my son and we saw that the window had been broken. We tried to get in but the windows were locked.

It was just heartbreaking to come and find a padlock on the door like that, before I even got a date to talk to them about it. ... When I finally got in to see the apartment and get the rest of my stuff, things had been thrown around, things were missing, stolen. They couldn't even give me an explanation. It looked like someone had taken a tornado or something through there. We called the police but they didn't take this matter serious at all. It made me feel like they were just believing the landlord. They didn't want us to get in there because they knew what they did. I was okay because I had the support of the Right to Housing Alliance, but inside it was eating me up because I just couldn't believe what I was seeing.

I had to come and live with my daughter. Whereas it used to take fifteen minutes to get to work now it takes up to two hours to get to work. At nighttime I'm getting home sometimes at 1am or 2 because of the buses and I have to walk for a ways in the dark. I walk in the middle of the street because I don't know if anyone's lurking around there.

It's stressful living with family, especially when you're used to having your own. It can cause a strain on the relationship. Arguments. We're both blunt persons. She's me all the way and I'm her all the way. Both outspoken. And I'll always have her back because she's my child. But it's hard.

Now I'm trying to find another place, but it's kind of hard because if I go through a rental agency, because I have to put [the company that evicted me] down, and they're not going to have anything positive to say. So I have to find a private landlord. That's the only way I see me getting an apartment or house. ...

With the support of Right to Housing Alliance and myself hopefully I can find something before the year's up. And hopefully we can make sure this doesn't happen to other people.

CUP 4: A VISION FOR THE FUTURE

JUFJ, RTHA, PJC and other members of the 7000 Families Campaign are working together to put forth the Fairness and Integrity for Baltimore City Renters bill in the General Assembly. Here are some of the key ways we want to reform Rent Court:

- o Talk First, Sue Later – A 14 day notice period will give tenants one more paycheck to get the rent together, which is often all they need, and will ease the number of cases in court so judges have time to listen to renters' concerns. We're one of only 9 states in the country without a pre-filing notice period.
- o Make Landlords Accountable –Landlords need to back their claims with evidence before hearings are even put on the docket. This would help to reduce the volume of cases in court and push landlords to comply with housing laws.
- o Help Renters Navigate the Process –Build and expand a Rent Court navigation program, in which lawyers and advocates will provide advice and access to information to help renters understand the court process and their rights.

We drink this cup to celebrate our coalition's campaign for justice and the courage that comes from knowing what specifically we are fighting for! May clarity of purpose lead to success.

Recite together:

Baruch ata adonai, eloheinu melech ha'olam, borei p'ri hagafen.

ברוך אתה יי אלוהינו מלך העולם בורא פרי הגפן

Blessed are You, Lord our G-d, Master of the universe, Creator of the fruit of the vine.

(Drink the fourth cup.)



לשנה הבאה L'SHANAH HABAH: NEXT YEAR

Leader:

The Passover seder traditionally ends with a statement of hope: “*l’shanah haba’ah birushalayim* (next year in Jerusalem)” This ancient phrase expresses our longing for a better world, epitomized by the ideals of peace, health, and justice. Tonight we focus this vision on the issues of housing and Rent Court in our community. As we conclude, we will sing “next year in a safe home.” We pray for a Baltimore where affordable, safe housing is readily available. We pray for a Baltimore where the court system does its job to protect the most vulnerable. We pray for a Baltimore free of homelessness. Let us join together to make that dream a reality.

Sing Together:

L’shanah haba’ah b’makom batuach

לשנה הבאה במקום בטוח

Next year in a safe home



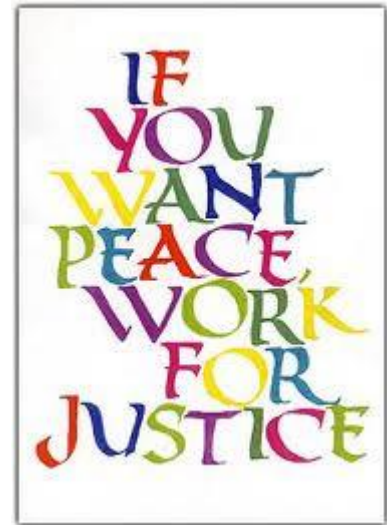
A mural off I-83 (Source: uncustomary.org)

BRINGING IT HOME: RESOURCES FOR YOUR FAMILY SEDER

Thank you for joining us for tonight's exploration of the inequalities in our housing system. While our seder has come to an end, the fight for equality has not. As we conclude, how can we bring the knowledge gained tonight out into the world? How can we incorporate this learning into our family and community seders, and how can we be vehicles for change?

We encourage you to use your family or community seders as an opportunity to share what you have learned and help your family and friends to feel equally invested in this critical issue. Issues around housing and the legal system are not unique to our city. Tonight's haggadah speaks to nationwide questions about affordable housing, fair laws for renters and landlords, and the necessity of a well-organized justice system to address housing grievances. These questions are relevant and timely no matter where your travels take you this Passover.

Here are some key places where you might be inspired to bring tonight's knowledge and message. Of course, feel free to also find your own opportunities to share tonight's message, be it at your seder, in your workplace, among your friends, etc.



- **After singing Dayenu**, encourage participants at the seder to share some of the blessings they are thankful for in their own lives. Then share some of the issues around housing and Rent Court facing low-income renters in Baltimore and other cities.
- **After the recitation of the 10 plagues**, invite participants to spill one more drop of wine onto their plate to share in the anguish of those who do not have the blessing of safe and affordable housing.
- **During the *maggid* section of the seder, when we explain the shank bone**, we retell how G-d spared the houses of the Israelites during the plague of the first born. Today, many but not all of us live in houses that are spared - spared from habitability issues and spared from the threat of eviction. Share how Rent Court in Baltimore and other cities fails to help people whose houses have not been spared. Invite participants to discuss housing problems they have experienced, and how they solved their issues.
- **When someone finds the afikomen**, consider making a donation in their honor to the Right to Housing Alliance, an organization led by low-income residents of Baltimore to address issues related to housing inequality.

GLOSSARY

Haggadah: The Hebrew word for “telling” or “narrative,” it is the name of the text that sets out the order of the Passover seder. Reading the Haggadah fulfills the Torah commandment that we must tell our children about our liberation from slavery in Egypt.

Housing Cost Burdened: Spending 30% or more of income to cover the cost of housing and utilities. People who are severely burdened spend 50% or more of income on housing and utilities.

Mishna: An authoritative collection of Jewish law compiled around 200 CE. The Mishna is based off of earlier oral collections of Jewish law (also known as the oral Torah).

Passover: The name of this holiday comes from the Hebrew word, *pesach*, whose root is to pass through, to pass over, to exempt, or to spare (referring to the story that God passed over the homes of the Israelites when slaying the firstborn sons in Egypt during the 10th plague). *Pesach* is also the term for the sacrificial offering of a lamb that was made in the Temple on this holiday.

Pirkei Avot: A tractate of the Mishna that deals with ethical teachings.

Public Justice Center (PJC): A non-profit legal advocacy organization that focuses on pursuing systemic change to build a just society, by working with people and communities to confront the laws, practices, and institutions that cause injustice, poverty, and discrimination.

Redlining: The process of denying services, either directly or indirectly, to residents of certain areas based on the ethnic or racial makeup of those areas as part of official city or federal policy. For most of the 20th century, federal and local policies marked predominantly black neighborhoods in red on maps and designated them as “high risk,” making it extremely difficult for people of color to secure mortgages or other loans which would enable them to buy property, accumulate wealth, or escape areas of concentrated poverty.

The Right to Housing Alliance (RTHA): The Right to Housing Alliance is a human rights organization led by low-income residents. RTHA is a partnership of community members, organizers, and attorneys working to elevate housing to the level of a human right and secure community control over land. Through direct action, coalition building, education, and advocacy, they are empowering new community leaders and building a movement to transform the housing system in Baltimore to value the principles of human rights.

Seder: A Hebrew word meaning “order,” this is what we call the ritual festive meal celebrated the first one or two nights of Passover. The meal is called a seder because there is specific information and rituals that must be included, and tradition has come to specify a particular order for the rituals.

Talmud: Discussions and elaborations on the Mishna’s collection of Jewish law, compiled around the year 600.

Torah: The Hebrew name for the part of the Bible that consists of the Five Books of Moses.

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WITH SIGNS & WONDERS / OTOT U-MOFETIM

Michael Rubin serves as Managing Director for IMPACT Silver Spring and is a member of the JUFJ Board of Directors.

WITH A MIGHTY HAND / B'YAD CHAZAKAH

BAYITT is a group of young adults in their 20s and 30s building a thriving urban Jewish community in Baltimore. Hosted by Beth Am Synagogue, an egalitarian congregation located in Reservoir Hill, BAYITT holds religious, social, volunteer, and educational programming for members of diverse backgrounds, including singles and couples, affiliated and non-affiliated, students and young professionals, and everything in between. bayitt.org

Beth El Synagogue, a progressive and inclusive congregation affiliated with the United Synagogue. Based in Pikesville, under the leadership of Rabbi Steven Schwartz, Beth El fulfills the spiritual, educational and social needs of its members by nurturing religious practices and tradition, Jewish values and Tikkun Olam. bethelbalto.com

Deborah Marcus

Maryland Working Families is a grassroots independent political organization fighting for a government that represents the values and works for the needs of Maryland's working families. Maryland Working Families achieves our goals by: developing and electing candidates who share our values; organizing issue campaigns to move progressive legislation; and building a movement of working families to hold our leaders accountable. Maryland Working Families is affiliated with the national Working Families Organization. workingfamilies.org/states/Maryland/

Moses Montefiore Anshe Emunah Hebrew Congregation (MMAE) is an open, Modern Orthodox congregation guided by Rabbi Yerachmiel Shapiro. MMAE seeks to inspire and enrich Jewish identity and to apply the Torah's teachings to our lives while pursuing the highest ethical standards of kindness and communal responsibility. mmae.org/

INDIVIDUAL SPONSORS

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Terry Fitzgerald

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WE WOULD ALSO LIKE TO THANK:

B'nai Israel Congregation, for providing the venue for our third annual Baltimore Social Justice Seder. We are also grateful to the staff of B'nai Israel and particularly to **Rabbi Etan Mintz, Alison Reingold** and **Kathleen Petersen** for their help in preparing for this event.

Baltimore community rabbis for leading parts of tonight's seder.

Mira Menyuk for the beautiful artwork on the postcard and haggadah cover.

Our 5776 Social Justice Seder Team: **Eli Allen, Erica Allen, David Blank, Liat Melnick, Laura Menyuk**, and **Daniel Rifkin**.

The **Right to Housing Alliance** and **Public Justice Center** for inspiring us to act on this issue and for the important work that they do to make Baltimore a more just and equitable city.

Pearlstone Conference & Retreat Center for donating our compostable plates and utensils and composting the waste from tonight's program.

Fran and Scott Rifkin and **Eli and Erica Allen** for providing the wine.

Our **co-sponsors and allies** who so generously supported this program.

Everyone who attended this program and believes in our power to create a better, more just Baltimore. We are honored to be working alongside you!

WE NEED YOU!

If you are interested in joining next year's Baltimore Social Justice Seder committee, please contact Laura at LaMenyuk@gmail.com. We welcome your ideas, energy, and enthusiasm!