

Four Modern Questions for Passover

By Zell Schulman

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This year, Passover and Easter will be celebrated in the same week. At sundown on March 27th, Jews all over the world begin the eight-day celebration of Passover with a seder, during which the Passover story is recounted. As part of the seder, four questions are asked by the youngest participant who can recite them. These questions clarify the difference the Passover seder has from other meals the family may share.

For members of interfaith families celebrating Passover for the first time, though, many other questions will also be asked. These may include:

- Does my husband have to be Jewish to lead the seder? [The answer is no. And your wife can also lead it.]
- What is the seder plate and where can I find it? [Most haggadahs, books that tell the story of Passover, will explain the significance of the seder plate. The plate itself may be purchased at stores that carry Judaica, including synagogue gift shops or online sites.]
- I know you can't serve bread, but are there special foods that must be prepared? [Most haggadahs or any Passover cookbook will include this information.]
- It's the first time my parents, who aren't Jewish, have been invited to a seder. Should they offer to bring something, and if so, what? [Many supermarkets sell special Kosher for Passover items at this time, and it would be appropriate to bring a dessert or wine that is marked Kosher for Passover, or a bouquet of flowers.]

Today, there are more interfaith seders being held than ever before--not only because of the high rate of intermarriage, but because it is a moving experience. Since September 11th the words "freedom" and "America" have taken on a new meaning for us all. The telling of the Jews' flight from slavery to freedom, the food, and the special Passover dishes provide an interesting adventure, and at the same time, a happy and fun occasion.

If this is the year you've decided to celebrate Passover with a seder in your home, just know:

1. You needn't be Jewish to lead a seder, but it is helpful to familiarize yourself with a haggadah, so that you will know what normally happens.
2. If you don't have a haggadah, check your public library, your local synagogue's library, or a bookstore near you. With a wide variety of haggadahs to choose from, you'll have an opportunity to select the one you'll be most comfortable with.
3. Most important, be sure and include your children in planning your seder. They can help you shop, make place cards, napkin holders, or help arrange the seder plate. If you are attending someone else's seder, allow your children to help select a gift they can bring to the host, hostess, or to their children.

You won't have "Passover Panic!" if you follow these tips.

For the Seder Leader

The most important part of a seder is telling the story of the Exodus, and making sure the children understand.

- Read through the haggadah you plan to use so that you can familiarize yourself with the story.
- Give each person a chance to read.
- Choose prayers and songs that appeal to you.
- Children's participation is very important at the seder. Assign the children their parts in advance so they will feel comfortable reading them.
- Using pretty paper or plastic plates and small glasses for the ceremonial portion of the seder is fine. There will be fewer dishes to wash and the wine may not get spilled on the tablecloth.
- Since Passover is the holiday of religious freedom, invite your guests to participate. One suggestion is to ask each person to share a short thought on "What being free means to me."

- Try to invite a newcomer to your community, a widow or widower, or a college student to share your seder with you.

For "First-Time" Seder Participants

- Bring a small token of thanks for the host family, such as flowers for the table or specially marked Kosher for Passover wine or dessert.
- If your host family has small children, consider bringing a Passover storybook or game.
- The seder is a religious occasion. Arrive on time.
- Don't ask to bring a friend along at the last minute. If there is someone special you would like to bring, ask your host family well in advance.
- It's all right to ask what the dress code will be.
- Should you have any special dietary needs, inform your host when you are invited.

Ten Tips to Enliven the Seder: Ways to Delay That Fifth Question

By Ron Wolfson

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NEWTON, Mass., March 6 (JTA)--In our family, the Passover seder is a dress-up affair: suits and ties, new clothes for the kids. So imagine our surprise when one year we arrived for the seder at the door of our friends, David and Shira Milgrom-Elcott, in our dressy clothes, and they greeted us wearing the long, flowing robes of Bedouins!

"Welcome to our seder!" they exclaimed. "Please take off your shoes before you come in."

We dutifully took off our shoes and entered their home. On the right we saw the formal dining room, the table set with fine china and crystal, seemingly ready for the seder guests. David and Shira, however, led us right past the dining room, down the hall and into their large family room. We should have known what to expect from the desert garb worn by our hosts, but we were hardly prepared for the sight of that room. Large white bedsheets were draped from the beams of the vaulted ceiling, forming a tent-like structure encompassing the center of the room. All the furniture had been taken out, except for some beanbag chairs and overstuffed pillows scattered around the floor. In the center of the "tent," on a low coffee table, was the seder plate.

"Welcome to our home in the desert," David and Shira explained. "The seder is a simulation of what really happened on that night of the Exodus from Egypt, so we've decided to conduct our seder in this tent. Please make yourselves comfortable. Take off your ties and jackets, and recline with your kids on the floor."

You can imagine what followed! In a masterfully led, fun-filled experience, the families in attendance enjoyed a delightful, relaxed telling of the Passover story. Once we completed the storytelling section of the haggadah, we moved into the dining room for the seder meal. After opening the door for Elijah, we returned to the tent to complete the seder. It was a seder we will always remember.

That, in a word, is what the seder is designed to help us do: Remember the story of Exodus, and, more importantly, our place in it. "All people, in every generation, should see themselves as having experienced the Exodus from Egypt" are the most important words of the haggadah.

The seder is much more than a history lesson; it is our yearly re-enactment of the liberation and continuity of the Jewish people. Although the seder is the single most observed Jewish celebration of the year in North American Jewish families, many of us base our conduct of the seder on a model we knew as children: Each person takes a turn reading a paragraph out of the haggadah. In some families that is considered a "participatory" experience. It might be, but it's not always very engaging.

How to Enliven Your Seder

1. Give Homework. When the Weber family invites the Wolfson family for the seder, we are asked to prepare a presentation on some aspect of the ceremony. The presentation could be a drash, an explanation of what the haggadah is trying to say. But over the years our presentations have also been given as a play, a song, and a takeoff on a game show. Not everyone in your family may be able to do this, but there is no better way to encourage participation than by asking people to prepare something in advance.
2. Buy Time. The seders of my youth never lasted more than 20 minutes. That's how long it took to say kiddish (blessing over wine), do karpas (the "greens" that represent spring, usually parsley), break the matzah, and fight over who was the youngest grandchild who could say the Four Questions. For a few minutes everyone took turns reading a paragraph, then my Uncle Morton would ask the famous Fifth Question: "When do we eat?" End of ceremony. One way to buy time to dwell on the story is to offer your guests something to nibble on between the vegetables of karpas and the meal. My wife, Susie, often prepares an edible centerpiece. She and the children slice jicama (a kind of vegetable) very thin and, with Jewish cookie cutters, stamp out Stars of David, Torah scrolls and kiddish cups. She places the shapes on the end of bamboo shish kabob skewers and inserts them into a head of red cabbage, placed in a wicker basket. She adds carefully arranged red and green peppers, carrots, celery and other vegetables. The result is a spectacular bouquet which we use as a centerpiece on the seder table. After karpas, we invite our guests to eat this centerpiece by dipping the vegetables into saucers of salad dressing placed around the table.
3. Tell the Story. The core of the seder is the telling of the story of the Exodus from Egypt. The traditional text of the haggadah contains four different tellings of the story, each one beginning with a question, a response, and praise for God. Think of ways to tell the story that supplement the haggadah. One year we were invited to a seder where the host family put on a skit. Stan Reiner's "Seder Scenes" (Alternatives in Religious Education) is a good resource for this activity. Another family we know of used puppets and storybooks. The most unusual telling, however, had to be the family who presented a magical version of the Ten Plagues in costume. The father played Pharaoh, who, after complaining how thirsty he was, asked one of the children to fetch him some cool, clear water from the Nile. The child left the dinner room and returned with a pitcher of water and an empty glass. As "Pharaoh" poured the clear water into the glass, it turned red! The father was an amateur magician who incorporated a variety of magic tricks into the telling of the story. It was amazing and unforgettable!
4. Ask Questions. The haggadah invites questions. Encourage your guests to liberate themselves from the book and discuss what it is that the haggadah is trying to tell us. A favorite point at which to do this is after the recitation of the Ten Plagues. "What are 10 things that plague us today?" is a question anyone, no matter what their level of Judaic knowledge, can answer. When the haggadah tells us that we should feel as if we were redeemed from Egypt, what does that mean? What are we doing about Jewish continuity--in our family, in our community?
5. Have Fun. Having family fun is serious business, especially at the seder table. The seder was never meant to be dull. Quite the contrary, it is to be a relaxed, informal educational experience. Some families add favorite songs that children learn in religious school--"Go Down, Moses," "One Day When Pharaoh Awoke in His Bed," and others. A favorite parody is Only Nine Chairs by Deborah Uchill Miller (Kar-Ben Copies), a hilarious account of a family seder.
6. Be Inclusive. Inside most Jewish adults is a child who was upset at not finding the afikomen, or ceremonial piece of matzah. We have created a way to include everyone in the afikomen search. We make a chart with the order of the seder (kadesh, urchatz, etc.) and select one letter from each word. We put these 14 letters on 3-by-5 cards and then hide them around the house. We tell the children that each of them must find at least one of the cards for us to find the real afikomen. When the kids find all the cards, they bring them to the table. Then we ask the adults to figure out a jumbled two-word clue from the letters. In one case, for instance, the letters spelled "at refrigerator." Once the clue is deciphered, everyone runs to the location and finds the real afikomen. Everyone who participates in the search gets a prize.
7. Use Materials. One of the problems in keeping young children interested in the seder is that most haggadahs are not designed for them. When our children were in nursery school, Susie created a "Pat the Bunny"-type haggadah using the coloring sheets sent home from class. She added

tactile materials to the sheets where appropriate: cotton balls on pictures of sheep, sandpaper on pictures of bricks of the pyramids, grape scratch-and-sniff stickers on pictures of the kiddush cups. Susie also gave each child a "goody bag" filled with Passover symbols, frog stickers, a bookmark, even moist towelettes for the inevitable spills of wine.

8. Innovations. Each year, experienced seder leaders look for new ideas to incorporate into the ceremony. Here are a few of my favorites. Instead of filling Elijah's cup with wine at the beginning of the seder, wait until just before opening the door and pass Elijah's cup to each participant to pour some of his/her wine into it. This is a demonstration of the need to act in order to bring in the Messianic Era. The Sephardim pick up the seder plate and place it over every person's head during the recitation of Ha Lachma Anya, the invitation to participate in the seder.
9. Choose a good haggadah. There are 3,000 editions of the haggadah catalogs in the library of the Jewish Theological Seminary, and every year more versions appear. Jews have always felt comfortable in putting together haggadahs that reflect their particular slant on the experience of the seder. So we have The Haggadah for the Liberated Lamb (a vegetarian haggadah) and The San Diego Women's Haggadah (a feminist haggadah). We have traditional unedited texts and greatly abbreviated liberal texts. We have new "family" haggadahs and that old standby, The Maxwell House Haggadah. Choose a haggadah that fits your family's needs.
10. Prepare. The ultimate haggadah may be one you put together yourself. With desktop publishing software and inexpensive printing widely available, it is not difficult to edit your own haggadah text. You can easily combine traditional texts with modern interpretations and readings, songs and information. This will take some time, but the reward will be a seder experience that is meaningful and memorable.

Passover (Pesach) Themes and Theology

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Passover is one of the most important Jewish festivals of the year, and its high point is the seder. Experiencing this wonderful Jewish meal and interactive "happening" is to live through all the varied themes of the Passover festival.

The most obvious theme of the festival is redemption. In the Exodus story, which Jews are commanded to tell their children every year on Passover, the Jews were redeemed physically from slavery. While Pesach is "z'man heyruteinu," the season of our freedom, it is also a festival that speaks of spiritual redemption. Jews were freed from mental as well as physical slavery. It was as a physically and spiritually free people that the Jewish nation prepared to receive the Torah on Mt. Sinai.

The notion of spiritual redemption is in part demonstrated by the fundamental Jewish idea that in every generation every individual is obliged to view him or herself as though he or she had actually gone forth from Egypt. Egypt is "Mitzraim" in Hebrew. It stems from the root "tzar," which means narrow or constrained. In order to leave Egypt, each individual must break out of personal narrowness, becoming free to achieve his full spiritual potential. Another explanation of the root "tzar" is calamity. In this view, "Mitzraim" represents the country of calamities that befall the Jews.

The seder includes many allusions to a future messianic redemption. One of the clearest symbols of the presence and hope of future redemption is the Cup of Elijah that is placed on every seder table.

Contained within the salvation from Egypt are the seeds of future redemption, as the Torah states, "This same night is a night of watching unto the Lord for all the children of Israel throughout their generations" (Exodus 12:42).

An illustration of the coexistence of past and future redemption at the Seder is the unusual way of reciting Hallel (Psalms of praise). The Haggadah splits Hallel into two parts, so that from kiddush at the beginning of the seder until the meal in the middle, the seder emphasizes past redemption, such as the Exodus, and from the meal to the end it looks to the future redemption.

Passover also contains a strong connection to the theme of creation. It is one of the four new years of the Jewish calendar. Nisan, the time the festival occurs, was traditionally seen as the first month of the

Jewish year. Pesach celebrates spring, rebirth, and renewal, symbolized by the green "*karpas*" and the egg on the seder plate. It is also a time of "beginning," as exemplified by the first grain harvest and the birth or creation of Israel as a nation. As a newborn nation, the Jews began their journey to receive Torah on Mt. Sinai.

Meticulous preparation is the theme of the weeks and days leading up to Pesach. Every speck of *hametz* (yeast or leaven) must be removed from the house in the days before sitting down to the seder table. On Passover, we also rid ourselves of spiritual "hametz"--any type of arrogance, indulgence, or self-assertion. As slaves, Jews had no choice but to be self-denying. After liberation, they had to freely choose to humble themselves and subject themselves to God's sovereignty. Traditional Judaism interprets hametz as a metaphor for the "*yetzer ha-rah*"--the evil inclination. The absence of leaven is epitomized by *matzah*, the flat bread Jews eat during Passover. Matzah is also a link between exile and redemption. It is the bread of affliction, eaten by slaves who did not have decent food. It is also a symbol of freedom, because when the Jews left Egypt, they rushed away with unleavened bread. Another notable theme of the Pesach seder is the repetition of patterns of four. This is based on the verse in Exodus that states, "I am the Lord, and I will **bring** you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians, and I will **deliver** you from their bondage, and I will **redeem** you with an outstretched arm and with great judgments, and I will **take** you to Me for a people, and I will be to you a God..." (Exodus 6:6-7). Among many other patterns of four at the seder, we drink four cups of wine, ask four questions, and speak about four types of children.

In telling the story of the escape from Egypt and the plagues that preceded it, Jews also highlight God's role in the redemption. Moses is not mentioned in the traditional Haggadah lest too much focus center on him and his role rather than on God, the Sovereign of the Universe. The Haggadah emphasizes that it was not a messenger or angel, but the almighty God who redeemed the Jews. The events and circumstances of the Exodus, from the calling of Moses at the burning bush to the plagues brought against the Egyptians, proved beyond any doubt to Pharaoh and all humankind that the one God is Sovereign over all the earth. Beyond that, the Exodus is a formative experience for the Jewish people. What was once a group of slaves gains an identity as a nation. This event laying the foundation for a covenantal relationship with God.