

Why Is This Seder Different From All Other Seders?

Resources and Options Curated and Suggested by Rabbi Debra Orenstein
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A quote for inspiration:

“This year, for the holiday, Earth got us a pandemic! Which, honestly, is a pretty terrible present. And also a little too biblically on-the-nose.... Every year as we go through the seder, we are meant to relive the ancient Israelites’ journey from slavery to freedom, and we are encouraged to think about how the story relates to modern times and our own lives. Well, the events of the past few months have felt not unlike an ever-escalating series of plagues, and like Moses, we are all getting a sacred call to work towards liberation whether we feel ready or not.” – Annie Weinberg, [How To Host a Virtual Passover Seder](#)

PREPARATIONS TO TAKE CARE OF NOW

A quote for inspiration:

“Prepare. Even when we gather together in person, a great seder is well-prepared in advance. A virtual seder requires even more advance work.” – Dr. Ron Wolfson, [Top Ten Tips for Seders This Year](#)

Here’s how to prepare, starting now!

- **Mail items.** Send Haggadot, favorite foods, greeting cards, favorite commentaries or articles related to Passover. Don’t forget Afikomen gifts! Be cautious and safe about what and how you send.
 - There may still be time to order Passover kits, books, and crafts. If not, you can do a lot with what you already have in the house. Consider the following: Check out [Kveller Crafts](#) and [NJ Family Passover Crafts](#) among others.
 - Suggestions from [A Different Pesach](#): “Ask each family member or friend write a paragraph, thought, or idea for [one or more] of the 15 steps of the seder.... This can function as its own family commentary on the haggadah, and as ‘conversation’ at your table [even if you are all in separate locations].... Or you can each send letters with the same theme, such as reflections on opportunities to create the conditions for liberation in the year to come.”
- **Invite or accept invitations.** It may be your usual crew – or an even bigger crowd from Zoom around the country, or a much smaller group than you are used to. The recommendations are for ten or fewer people together in person at the most. Think of folks who may not have a Seder to go to this year, because of all the disruptions.
- **Choose or make your Haggadah.** Depending on how and with whom you are holding a Seder, you can share your screen in an online platform, email a pdf or scanned pages to others, or even [make your own, new family Haggadah](#).
- **Prepare something extra for your Seder plate:** Many people add an orange to represent women’s inclusion and ritual equality. I also encourage folks to add a padlock to represent the 40 million people still enslaved around the world today. This year, choose your own symbol to add – in light of the pandemic and to

responses to it. If visiting with others on Zoom, “zoom” the camera in on your Seder plates and discuss your chosen symbols.

- **Set expectations.** Maybe you can’t cook the way you usually do. Maybe you shouldn’t. Maybe this isn’t the year to make your own Haggadah. It’s OK if this Pesach is different. It’s OK if you don’t stress yourself to do more.
- **Arrange for any technology you will need.** Now is the time to investigate and sign up for WebEx, Zoom, Google Meet, Free Conference Call, or other services.

DOING A SEDER ALONE

Dr. Michelle Friedman, a psychiatrist who teaches pastoral counseling, wrote an article on [Being Alone for Pesach](#). My favorite suggestion of hers was: “Create a phrase or a mantra that you can repeat to yourself to provide comfort. This phrase should resonate with you and soothe you. Some phrases that others have used include, “I am not alone”, “This too shall pass”, “I have overcome worse” or “This will only make me stronger”. Phrases might resonate with the holiday “this is my [Exodus from Egypt]” or “this is the birth of a new freedom for me.” Some find it helpful to write the phrase on a piece of paper and to carry it with them.”

Journalist Ben Sales wrote in “[Passover in a pandemic: Families on Zoom, solo seders and broken traditions](#)”: “Throughout the Haggadah, we read about many accounts of our ancestors, whether it be in Egypt or whether it be hiding in caves or any other times, that are going through some very challenging times,” Efreim Epstein, who lives alone in Manhattan, said. “I’m an extrovert. I like being around people, but I also know that there are sources saying that if one is doing seder by themselves, they should ask the Mah Nishtana of themselves. If that’s what I have to do this year, I accept it.”

[A Different Pesach: Ideas for the Solo Seder](#) is a collaborative Google Doc written from an Orthodox perspective.

Jordan Namerow [The Four Children and COVID-19](#) is relevant for any Seder, but especially if you are doing the Seder alone. You can find yourself in all four children.

DOING A SEDER WITH A SMALL (MICRO) GROUP

A quote for inspiration:

“We shouldn’t think that simply because we cannot be a part of the greater, physical gathering of Jewish people, that our rituals, our practices, our celebrations are not legitimate. G-d forbid. So long as we root down, as a tree does, and branch out into whatever experience our Seder is meant to be, with whoever is meant to be there to receive our questions, challenge us, and help us tell the Pesach story, we are all part of one experience. This too is spiritual community.” – Rabbi Rebecca Blady, Hillel Director, Germany in [Pesach in the Age of Social Distancing](#).

- If meeting with others, be sure that you are taking proper precautions. Has everyone been healthy and quarantined for 14 days?
- Even if the answer to the above is yes, be wise and wash hands frequently and sit apart from one another.
- Discuss how you will order, cook, and serve any food safely.

DOING VIRTUAL SEDERS

The Conservative movement and many rabbis in the Orthodox movement have allowed for “virtual” Seders this year, in which people will meet by phone or video conference. This provides the opportunity for even more relatives to get together (at least virtually).

[How To Host a Virtual Passover Seder](#) by Annie Weinberg has good humor and lots of valuable suggestions. A professional digital organizer and campaigner, she offers great advice to set yourself up for a successful virtual Seder:

[How to Make Your Virtual Seder Lively, Engaging, and Meaningful](#) is a Reform movement publication of short, manageable length with good, simple-to-implement suggestions about both the content and style of your Seder.

Some of My Favorite Suggestions (both original and borrowed):

- Make calls to any friends or relatives who haven’t used your chosen platform (Zoom, Google Meet, or other), so that you can talk them through the technology. This is a great task to assign to students who are home from college or to teens.
- Cook together on Zoom before the Seder with folks you will be sharing a Seder with, to get used to the format and to share recipes and informal conversation.
- Select a Haggadah, or direct everyone to the same open-source pdf. Alternatively, you can [make a Haggdah](#), as noted above. Just make sure you, a tech leader, or multiple participants are ready to Screen Share the right page (perhaps including pages from different Haggadot) at the appropriate time.
- Invite participants to prepare something in advance to share at the Seder. E.g.,
 - a quote about freedom
 - a photo or drawing (to be shown through Screen Share) that exemplifies freedom to them
 - Call on folks to share their photos (or quotes, above) when they seem most relevant or at specific times throughout the Seder
 - assign different family members to present something for different parts of the Seder.
 - If you have 15 or more guests at your virtual seder, just assign each person one of the sections of the Haggadah from Kadash to Nirtzah.
 - Or choose familiar sections to assign, like Four Questions, Four Children, Parsley, Ten Plagues, Daynenu, each of the four cups of wine, Bitter Herbs, etc.
 - Or ask people to create something original, tailored for this year (a poem, drawing, interpretation of the Haggadah or Book of Exodus, etc.)

COVID-19-RELATED READINGS, DISCUSSION STARTERS, & ACTIVITIES

- **Halachma Anya:** “This is the bread of affliction....*Let all who are hungry come and eat.*” How do we sustain our relationships in a time of social distancing? How do we open our homes, hearts, and pocketbooks? How can we ensure that everyone has enough food and supplies?

- **Urechatz/Rachtzah:** What is different about washing your hands at the Seders, as opposed to washing for physical cleanliness or decontamination? What are you readying yourself for? How has your relationship to washing changed, if at all: do you see it as holy, protective? Are you just raw and tired of it?
- **Recitation of the Plagues:** Read and discuss the following excerpt from Meryl Ain’s article, [How To Celebrate Passover During the Pandemic](#): “Now, more than ever, it’s imperative that we have a seder, and not allow it to be another casualty of this year’s plague. We may be temporarily enslaved by the coronavirus, but we still have a responsibility to give our children and grandchildren the comfort and strength of ritual and tradition — and the optimism that this crisis will also pass.”
- **Motzi Matzah:** What nourishes you now? What has nourished you – and the Jewish people – to this point?
- **Vhi-Sheamdah:** tells of resilience and overcoming challenges. What challenges are you overcoming during this crisis – or have you heard others overcome? What have you have overcome in your life? Who supported you? Who have you supported? How have the Jewish people shown resilience, among your ancestors and in your lifetime?
- **Dayeinu:** Add to the list of things we can be grateful for now, even if we are not assured of the last (or next) chapter of the story. “*Since I have _____, Dayeinu.*”
- **Afikomen:** Let older relatives hide the afikomen in their house and have kids question them about where it is hidden. Hints of “you’re getting hotter” or “colder” can be given for younger children.
- **Leshana Haba’ah Biyerushalyim:** “Next year in Jerusalem” represents hope for a better tomorrow. What acts of kindness or glimmers of progress have you seen during this pandemic that give you hope for better times ahead? What are you committed to doing, to make sure that next year is healthier and more free – for you and for others?
- **Questions, Comments, Stories, and Humor Throughout the Seder:** Encourage people to contribute. Some Seder leaders give out a story card, a question card, and an interpretation card to each person, encouraging them to play each card at least once throughout the Seder. This year, folks will have to make their own cards. And since we all need an extra dose of laughter, collect and share jokes, too.

GENERAL RESOURCES FOR MAKING GREAT SEDERS

- [9 Seder Activities You Haven’t Thought of Yet](#) from Rabbi Leora Kaye
- [Resources from Rabbi Debra](#), including “Seder Solutions: 72 Ideas for Making Your Seders More Meaningful and Fun.”
- Download the book [Creating Lively Passover Seders](#)

“Joy in Difficult Times”

Information from *Awakening Joy for Kids* by James Baraz and Michele Lilyanna pages 92-96

- I. Use mindfulness to **be present with sorrow**
 - a. DO wisely accept the sorrow, hold it, stay with the it, and feel it
 - b. DON'T resist it, deny it, or try to change it; also do not exaggerate it or spin stories about it
- II. Use “RAIN” to help you do use mindfulness to be present:
 - a. **Recognizing** what you're feeling,
 - b. **Allowing** it to be here,
 - c. **Investigating** how it feels in your body, while
 - d. **Not**-identifying with the feelings; the feelings are energy that has come to visit you; it's not you.
- III. You may only be able to be present with the sorrow **a little at a time** -- ie. one moment at a time, or in manageable doses, so as not to be overwhelmed.
 - a. In being present with sorrow, if you are struggling or feeling overwhelmed, then **back off** and try looking around for something to appreciate.
 - b. Or, **switch the focus** to something to discharge the negative energy before returning to this work. This could include taking a walk or speaking to a friend
- IV. In being present with sorrow, **take extra measures** as needed to help you with this.
 - a. One extra measure is the practice **self-compassion**. Place your hand on your heart.
 - i. Mindfulness: This is a moment of suffering
 - ii. Common humanity: Suffering is a part of life
 - iii. Compassion: May I hold my suffering with kindness and compassion
 - b. Another extra measure is to **surround yourself with a field of benevolent energy**: “call on a benevolent force to help you, whether you think of it as God or a higher power . . . Invite a field of benevolent energy to surround you. If it had a color, what color would it be? Let yourself be held in this field of benevolence as a protection and connection to something larger than yourself. Relax your body. Trust in it. Feel its support as you let yourself be held in it. Know that it is always here for you if you call on it.”
- V. **Remember that this too shall pass.**
- VI. **Be mindful of and attentive to the good moments** that are interspersed between the challenging moments

ADDITIONAL RESOURCE: <https://www.billionacts.org/sharejoy>

“You can improve your life in just 40 days (and 40 nights) just by sharing joy! Every day over the next 40 days, we will suggest a simple act for you to perform. We are confident it will bring you happy rewards — because being on the giving end of kindness is joyful. Start sharing now!”