

In the face of COVID-19, Jews set the table for virtual Passover Seders

By **Steve Maas** Globe Correspondent, Updated April 3, 2020, 6:01 p.m.



Rabbi Michael Rothbaum at Temple Beth Elohim in Acton. JONATHAN WIGGS

Webcams and monitors will take their places along lamb shank bones and horseradish as Jews gather at the Seder table for Passover, which begins Wednesday night.

Over two millennia, the Seder has served as a powerful vehicle for passing on the story of Moses and the 10 plagues that forced the Egyptians to let the Israelites go. Traditionally, children, parents, and grandparents crowd around the same table, sharing ritual foods

from a common plate. This year, that scenario has all the ingredients for passing along the worst plague in current memory, COVID-19.

But a people who have survived the Spanish Inquisition, the Cossack hordes, and the Nazis won't let a microscopic virus stop them from carrying on their foundational tradition.

"Jews are built for this," said Rabbi Michael Rothbaum of Congregation Beth Elohim in Acton. "You knock us down; you kick us out of someplace — we move on; we figure it out; we recreate."

Indeed, it was in response to a historic calamity 2,100 years ago — the Roman destruction of the Second Temple in Jerusalem — that the Jews refashioned Passover to be celebrated at home.

Two weeks ago, Rothbaum began planning a virtual Seder for Thursday, April 9, the second night of the eight days of Passover. He is teaming up with friend and fellow rabbi, Louis Polisson of Congregation Or Atid in Wayland. More than 50 people are expected to participate using the web conference tool Zoom. Anyone with an Internet connection is invited to join.

It's perfectly kosher, by the way. The top Orthodox rabbis in Jerusalem have made an exception this year to the religious law forbidding the use of electricity on a holiday.

Rothbaum and Polisson are divvying up leadership roles for the Seder, among themselves and congregants. Four children have been lined up to ask the Four Questions. Still to be determined is how to manage the hunt for the afikomen — a piece of matzo set aside for children to find for a prize.

Participants can opt to have their cameras and microphones off or on. "We'll mute people when we need to," Rothbaum said, anticipating ringing phones, barking dogs, and crying babies.

Singing the many Passover songs may be tricky because of a slight audio delay on the Internet. Fortunately, the rabbis and their spouses have that covered. Rothbaum's husband, Anthony Mordechai Tzvi Russell, is a renowned Yiddish singer; Polisson plays guitar and his wife, Gabriella Feingold, sings.

Robin Wolk, president of Congregation Or Atid, normally celebrates Passover at her parents' home in Boston. This year, she plans to replicate her mother's Seder plate as best she can as she sits around the kitchen table with her husband, David Klein; their three teenaged children; and an iPad mounted on a tripod, tuned to the service.

"I think if we can see the faces of the people who we love it will be just as heartwarming," said Wolk, who lives in Sudbury. She hopes her parents and other relatives will tune in, too.

In preparing the Seder, the rabbis are harmonizing their synagogue's different practices: Beth Elohim is independent, and Or Atid follows the Conservative tradition. As a guidebook, they chose "The Passover Haggadah: An Ancient Story for Modern Times" (Artisan, March 2020) by Alana Newhouse, the editor of Tablet magazine.

Rothbaum ordered 50 copies from the Silver Unicorn Bookstore, to help the Acton business weather the lockdown. Owner Paul Swydan personally dropped copies off at congregants' homes – his way of keeping in touch with customers, "even if it's only to wave from 15 feet."

Like many other synagogues, Beth Elohim and Or Atid have gone virtual in recent weeks. "This whole experience has paradoxically made people want to connect with the synagogue more, even though they can't physically," Rothbaum said. His temple's online offerings include meditation, Torah study, Shabbat candle lighting, and children's religious classes.

In an Ask the Rabbi session with fifth and sixth graders, he fielded questions about parceling out scarce ventilators. In response, he cited a Talmudic dispute over which of

two people wandering the desert would get the water if there was just enough for one to survive.

“One girl said, ‘I would give the water to my little brother, and I would die,’” the rabbi said. “Another kid said, ‘I would give it to my grandmother.’”

Polisson conducts Shabbat services with Zoom. Among those watching are former Or Atid members who now live hundreds of miles away. “They get to see their old friends,” he said. “They see the community they helped create.”

Rothbaum, who has encouraged social activism since coming to Acton nearly three years ago, plans to bring a political message to the Seder. “Passover is a holiday that celebrates the liberation of an oppressed class of immigrant workers,” he said. “The Egyptians oppressed these Israelite laborers, and God says, ‘Hey, I’m on the side of the migrant laborers.’”

Especially now in the pandemic, Rothbaum added, immigrant workers are essential, harvesting and delivering food, stocking grocery shelves, and caring for seniors in nursing homes. He knows he might ruffle some feathers. “Passover isn’t about being nice,” he said. “Passover is about telling the truth and getting free.”

For more information, visit the temples’ websites, bethelohim.org and congregationoratid.org. To learn how to set up your own virtual Seder, visit jewishboston.org.

Steve Maas can be reached at stevenmaas@comcast.net.



Rabbi Louis Polisson of Congregation Or Atid in Wayland. SANDY GOTLIB

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