

Shabbat HaGadol - Recalling the Very First Seder
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This year's Passover seder may, perhaps for the first time in Jewish history, or at least for the first time in a very very long time, be most similar to the Israelites' first seder, observed while the Israelites sheltered-in-place in their homes, on the eve of the descent of the Tenth Plague: the death of the first-born and their departure from Egypt.

Imagine back with me to that first seder: Moses and Aaron have just left a meeting with the leadership of Egypt, who, for one final time, refused to accept the reality and gravity of his situation: people were getting sick, the economy had been completely disrupted by a series of terrible disasters, and, one way or another, the Israelites were leaving Egypt. Upon his return, Moses has chilling news for the Israelites: tonight, the Angel of Death will descend upon Egypt, taking the lives of "every first-born in the land, from the first-born of Pharaoh who sits on his throne to the first-born of the slave girl who is behind the millstones; and all the first-born of the cattle"¹. To guard themselves against this descent of Death all around them, Moses tells each Israelite household to take a lamb, slaughter it as a sacrifice, and place some of its blood on the doorposts of their homes, and then shelter-in-place - no visits with their neighbors, no strolls around town.

Huddled in their homes, with their doors marked and their lamb roasting, they were to wait. Hoping and praying that that bit of blood on their doorways would be enough to protect them from the terrible Death all around them. Unable to leave until the all-clear was given, they could have just sat and waited, allowing their minds to wander and their worst fears to go unchecked, but Moses and God gave them a new ritual to fill those anxious hours: with their traveling clothes on and their sandals strapped to their feet, their bags packed and ready for departure, they were to sit down to a festive meal. They would eat their roasted lamb, with unleavened bread and with bitter herbs. From that moment, they were told, this would be an annual celebration from generation to generation, "an institution for all time," to recognize that on that day, God brought them out of the land of Egypt.

Just as the Israelites enjoyed light in their dwellings during the plague of darkness -- a darkness so dark, it was said, that one couldn't see their hands in front of their face, a darkness they could touch -- they found a way to cut through the incredible tension and anxiety, and to address their fear with a new ritual of faith and hope. Faith in the promise Moses, Aaron and God brought, faith that the marking on their doorpost will spare their family's lives, faith in their own strength to endure whatever challenges lay ahead. And a sense of hope in a new day that would bring them newfound freedom, and, perhaps the first steps on the long journey through the wilderness to a Promised Land.

¹ Ex. 11:5

Indeed, this year's seder may feel more like the first seder than any other seder we have experienced. It will certainly be different. Some of us will only have our spouses or children around our tables, some of us may be connecting with loved ones or friends who are far away - or even across town - virtually on platforms like Zoom or Facebook, and some may be facing the possibility of being alone in your homes. Please know, your Beth Am community is here for you: Rabbi Sarah is hosting a Virtual First Night Seder on Zoom, and we're also coordinating a Virtual Seder Matching: if you'd like to invite a few Beth Am members to join your family's Virtual Seder, or if you're looking for a virtual Seder to tune into, just let us know. You can go to betham.org/passover2020 to sign up and learn more. And, if you need some extra help with grocery shopping - either in preparation for Passover, or just to stock up on the basics - we have a wonderful group of volunteers in our Beth Am community who are ready to help you out. You can find more on the "[Need help / Want to Help](#)" section of our Virtual Beth Am site.

Speaking of shopping for Passover, I want to acknowledge that this year, in particular, it may be far more challenging - if not impossible - for us to observe Passover with the foods and traditions we're used to. But I want to bring us back again to that first Passover observance. In an article in the J-Weekly this week, Israeli psychologist Nily Shiryon offers a good reminder of the essential elements of Passover. She writes:

In the haggadah, there is a segment that we read, attributed to Rabban Gamliel (1st-2nd century C.E.): "One who has not discussed these three things is not considered to have fulfilled the obligation of Pesach: a) Pesach (the paschal lamb), b) matzah (the unleavened bread) and c) maror (the bitter herbs)."

These are not just symbols of a) God having passed over our people during the plague of the firstborn; b) the fact that we were taken out of Egypt quickly to freedom, with no time even to let bread rise; and c) the bitterness of our ancestors' slavery and persecution in Egypt. These three symbolic items are the exact items we were commanded to eat on that final, anxious night in Egypt:

"And they shall eat [the lamb] in that night, roast with fire, and unleavened bread; with bitter herbs they shall eat it" (Exodus 12:8).

This is the Passover food. All the rest is 3,500 years of joyous culinary development and the development of additional traditions. It's great, it's delicious. It adds depth and tastiness to Pesach, but it does not *make* Pesach.

More than the nourishment of food, look to the nourishment of content.²

The world in which we find ourselves observing Passover this year is indeed so different from any other moment in history that all three Jewish movements have issued statements from their

² <https://www.jweekly.com/2020/03/30/why-this-years-seder-will-be-similar-to-the-very-first-seder/>

rabbinic leadership bodies allowing for special leniencies and permissions for this year's Passover. Even the Orthodox Union³ notes that if there are certain stringencies a family may traditionally observe (like only eating the handmade Shmurah matzah or even arranging for the selling of *chametz*), given current circumstances, it's okay to temporarily forego those practices this year. Even though some people might traditionally observe Passover in a more strict way - cleaning the house, using separate dishes, buying only Kosher for Passover foods, the Conservative⁴ and Reform movements recognize this difficulty in finding Kosher for Passover food this year, and the potential inability to get to the right stores to purchase these items. They give us all permission to go easy on ourselves this year. (The Reform movement even has a great article on how to make your own matzah at home.⁵) As Conservative Rabbi Dan Ain of Congregation Beth Sholom in San Francisco wrote this week,

Forget all the *narishkeit* [the foolish minutiae] this year... Use common sense. Don't eat bread. Just don't eat bread. All of this other *narishkeit*, all the way down to the most minute thing — you don't need a \$30 bag of cookies certified kosher for Passover by the [Orthodox Union]. Just avoid leavened food and reconnect with the *ikar* [the essence] of what the holiday is all about.⁶

Don't make yourself crazy trying to do things "the way you've always done them." This year will be an exercise in reconnecting to the core essence of what Passover is all about and creating the emotional, mental, and physical space to allow ourselves to do things in a new and different way. Indeed, this is what the Jewish people have always done: we are resilient and our survival has been predicated on our ability to shift and adapt to new and changing circumstances throughout our history. To never let go of those core values of faith and hope.

For some, the inability to hold their traditional family seder is particularly painful. In a touching article on ReformJudaism.org, social worker Margie Bogdanow reflects on the importance of taking the necessary time and space to mourn your seder that will not be this year. She writes:

Each of us is giving up so many things this year – and for me, the hardest thing to lose is our Passover seder.

It feels eerie, almost, *not* to be running around buying dozens of eggs and jars of horseradish and gefilte fish, *not* to be cooking, cleaning, and schlepping. As a planner and a prepper, I had already bought some of my supplies for the season – so now, for better or worse, I have enough wine and matzah to last throughout this pandemic.

³ <https://oukasher.org/passover/articles/covid19-and-pesach-related-issues/#WHATIF>

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<http://www.rabbinicalassembly.org/story/kashrut-subcommittee-recommendations-passover-5780-light-covid-19>

⁵ <https://reformjudaism.org/jewish-holidays/passover/video-how-make-18-minute-matzah>

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<https://www.jweekly.com/2020/03/30/how-bay-area-jews-are-planning-to-have-meaningful-seders-with-everyone-stuck-at-home/>

My back appreciates not having to lug tables and chairs up from the basement, and not moving furniture out of the living room to make room for those tables, but my heart isn't happy about it. And last year, I sewed 50 Passover-themed napkins with the idea that they would become part of the tradition, but now they will mostly remain alone with their white tablecloth friends in our Passover Box.

I know the virtual seder will have some components of our regular seders. There will be laughter, spills, interruptions, a few bad jokes, good food, bitter horseradish, dry matzah, signs of spring, talk of freedom, off-key singing, and memories of loved ones.

But I will also be sad that I can't touch, feel, and snuggle with my grandchildren, nor kvell as they play together. I will be sad that my pregnant daughter won't be the center of attention she deserves to be, and that our family won't have our morning matzah brei together, and so much more.

Rather than push those feelings away, I confess that I recently had a good cry – and it made me feel better. It felt good to feel sad, and then it felt just as good to wipe my tears and think positive thoughts about the future.

Fortunately, Judaism is a religion of cycles. As we learn in the Book of Ecclesiastes, “to everything there is a season,” and as we sing at our family's seder, “the painted ponies go up and down.” Although I am usually sad as the seder ends, it is possible that this year, one of the most powerful moments our seder will be the end, as we drink a toast l'chaim: “Next year together!”⁷

In this world where the devastation of this terrible virus is all around us, where the days ahead are filled with uncertainty and new challenges, as we celebrate Passover this year - *Z'man Cheruteinu*, the Season of our Freedom - perhaps we will find that we are able to connect on a deeper, more emotional level to the experience of our ancestors, sitting in their homes praying and preparing for freedom, with Death descending all around them. I want to end with this prayer, “Let it Pass Over,” by Rabbi Naomi Levy, perhaps something you may want to incorporate into your own seder this year:

Let it Pass Over

[by Rabbi Naomi Levy](#)

On this sacred night
Divided in space
United in voice

7

https://reformjudaism.org/blog/2020/03/30/its-ok-mourn-seder-will-not-be?utm_source=Facebook&utm_medium=Social&utm_campaign=BlogPost&utm_content=Bogdanow

As we start our Seder
We cry out to You, God,
From our place of confinement and worry.
Hear our Passover Prayer:

Let it Pass Over, God
Let this plague Pass Over us.
Let it Pass Over every nation, every people,
The young and the old.
Let it Pass Over
Every city and every village
All across Your world.
Let it Pass Over,
Heal those stricken
In every hospital bed
And in every home.

Let this night of Liberation
Mark the birth of a great healing.
Give all souls the wisdom and the strength
To sacrifice their freedom of movement
For the sake of life.
Send healing to all who are ill.
Fill doctors and nurses and all those in the front lines of this battle
With the full force of their sacred healing powers.
Watch over them, God.
Enlighten scientists all across the world
With insight and discoveries
That will lead to effective treatments,
And some day soon,
A cure.

Free us, God,
From this plague.
Shelter us with your comforting presence.

On this Passover Night
We pray to you, God,
Let it Pass Over us.
Hear us God,
Heal us God
Amen.

This year, may we all find a way to tap into that well of strength deep inside each of us, to find our own sense of faith and hope in what the new day will bring.

Dayenu – Enough, God!

[by Rabbi Naomi Levy](#)

Let those who are ill find healing – Dayenu
Let our worries be calmed – Dayenu
Let the weak and the vulnerable be protected - Dayenu
Let all healers find paths to bring healing - Dayenu
Let scientists grasp a higher knowing
That will lead to a cure – Dayenu
Let there be an end to this plague, God – Dayenu
Fill our hearts with hope
And our souls with faith,
Our bodies with health
And our homes with love.
Unite our world to bring on a day of freedom
Let the seeds of rebirth take root tonight
And grow in blessings
In Your light.
Dayenu – Enough, God.
Amen.