

Pesach (day 1) 5781 evolution seder:

Last night we joined Jews all over the world in doing something that Jews have been doing for nearly 2,000 years – hosting or joining a Passover Seder.

Passover is the most widely observed of all major Jewish holidays. In Israel, over 98% of Jews host or attend a seder – far more than the 60% who fast on Yom Kippur. In America 73% of all Jews attend a seder. We don't have specific numbers for seder attendance in Canada, but a 2018 survey found that 94% of Canadian Jews said celebrating Jewish holidays with family was an essential or important part of being Jewish, so we can assume close to that percentage celebrate Passover with their families.

If you were paying attention, you noticed I said Jews have been going to Passover Seders for nearly 2,000 years. But the exodus from Egypt happened over 3,000 years ago – why the difference?

The Passover Seder is an innovation that the rabbis adopted after the destruction of the Temple. During the millennium that the Temple stood – and in the years before the First Temple was built – our ancestors didn't have a seder to talk about the Passover sacrifice, they ate the Passover sacrifice. We have not had the actual Passover sacrifice in 1,950 years, ever since the destruction of the Temple and the end of sacrifices in the year 70.

The Passover Seder is the quintessential Jewish celebration. This quintessential Jewish meal, however, has its origins in a bit of “cultural appropriation.” But perhaps that's also a quintessentially Jewish approach. Even though the Torah cautions us against following the customs of the Canaanites or the customs of the Egyptians, we have always found ways to repurpose things from other cultures, whether it's religious rituals, melodies, or food.

The destruction of the Temple was the single most cataclysmic and transformative event in Jewish history. Prior to the destruction of the Temple Judaism was a very Temple-centric religion with an emphasis on animal sacrifice. The essence of the celebration of Passover in the days of the

Temple was eating the Passover sacrifice. The rabbis were forced to make major adjustments.

The rabbis substituted prayer for sacrifice – and talking about the Passover sacrifice in the place of eating the Passover sacrifice.

There was a pre-existing model for an evening devoted to philosophical discussion: the Greek symposium. Comparing the rituals of the symposium with the rituals of the seder makes the connection very clear.

Asking questions is essential to the seder. The Talmud tells us the son **MUST** ask questions about Passover, and if the son isn't smart enough to come up with his own questions, the father coaches him and teaches him some questions. Symposia typically had philosophical discussions as part of the evening, and the host would get the ball rolling with questions. Plutarch, a Greek philosopher who lived during the time of the destruction of the Temple, recorded a symposium in a book that we have, "The Dinner of the Seven Wise Men." At Plutarch's symposium, he has his guests ask questions about fish, meat, vegetables, and wine – four questions!

The last of the four questions we recited last night is "On all other nights, we eat either sitting upright or reclining. Why on this night do we all recline?" This question isn't really answered in the Haggadah; the assumption is that it's because only free people eat reclining. The real answer is that at a Greek symposium, the guests reclined on couches, holding their heads up with their left hands and eating with their right hands.

Seder means "order" – we have a very structured order we follow in the seder, and symposia were similarly well ordered. Plutarch said that "the greatest profuseness in a feast appears neither delightful nor genteel, unless beautified by order." There was order to what dishes were served when (including vegetables, our *karpas*, before the main course), the garlands, the ointment, the music, and even who sat where.

At our seders, we sprinkle a drop of blood at the mention of each plague; at the symposium they poured wine libations to their gods.

Speaking of wine, at a symposium they had at least three glasses of wine – we do them one better by having at least four glasses of wine.

A symposium featured hymns, and our seder features hallel.

The symposium ended, as ours does, with the afikomen.

One major difference in the ending though: the afikomen at the Greek symposium was the comedians and dancing girls. Afikomen comes from the Greek word komios, which means comedy. So we actually do NOT have the afikomen. We have a little bit of matzah, but with that move the rabbis are saying we're not going to allow the evening to degenerate. We may borrow from Greek culture, but not all the way – we only go so far.

Even though the rabbis modeled the seder on the symposium, they infused the entire evening with Jewish meaning. They truly transformed the seder from a Greek evening of philosophical discussion and entertainment into a religious experience, and the transformation and adding layers of meaning to the evening continues to this day.

And perhaps that explains the enduring popularity of the seder as the most widely observed of all Jewish experiences. It combines food, drink, friends, family, with layers of meaning that we can relate to, and that we can add to.

There are literally thousands of different versions of the Haggadah, and there's a website, <https://www.haggadot.com>, where you can create your very own Haggadah, drawing on work that others have done, traditional sources, and adding your own words or pictures.

There's the "bird's head Haggadah" from 14th century Germany where people are illustrated with human bodies and bird heads. There's a Hogwart's Haggadah for Harry Potter fans, a Haggadah beautifully illustrated by Israeli artist David Moss, and the Dave Barry Haggadah, "For This We Left Egypt?" There's even a Canadian Haggadah in Hebrew, English, and French, illustrated with archival photos of the Canadian Jewish community.

But the real meaning comes when we make the story our own. There's a "Prisoner's Haggadah" that a group of women prisoners in the California prison system wrote with the help of a rabbi who served as chaplain.

And this year, after a year of so many restrictions in our lives, we have all felt like we were in “mitzrayim,” which means a narrow or constricted place. We may not be completely free yet, but with supplies of the vaccine coming in larger amounts the government says it will inoculate every Canadian by Canada Day. Just as our ancestor’s journey from mitzrayim to the promised land took a while – in their case 40 years – our journey from mitzrayim to normal life is also a gradual process, but it’s on the way.

L’shanah haba’ah birushalyaim! Next year, as free people, whether in Jerusalem, Montreal, or wherever else we may be.