

Ten Tips for a Great Seder

by Dr. Ron Wolfson

I don't know what the tradition is in your family, but in ours, Seder night is a dress-up affair. Suits and ties, dresses, new clothes for the kids - "Shabbes" clothes we call them. Imagine when our surprise when one year we arrived for 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 Beduins!

"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.

Draped from the beams if the vaulted ceiling were large white bedsheets, 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 ceremony is a simulation of what really happened on that first 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."

Well, you can imagine what followed next! In a masterfully-led, fun-filled experience, the families in attendance enjoyed a delightful, relaxed telling of the Passover story. Once we completed the Maggid 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 ceremony.

It was a Seder we'll always remember.

And that, in a word, is what the Seder is designed to help us do -- remember -- remember the story of the Exodus and, more importantly, our place in it. After all, the most important words of the *Haggadah* are: "B'khol dor va-dor hayav adam lirot et atzmo k'ilu hu yatzah mi-Mitzrayim" -- "All people, in every generation, should see themselves as having experienced the Exodus from Egypt." The Seder is much more than a history lesson; it is our yearly re-enactment of the liberation and continuity of the Jewish people.

Thus, Seder night is the family education experience par excellence. The rabbis who created its structure and content were brilliant family educators, filling the ceremony with an array of multi-sensory methods of transmitting the messages of the evening. The Seder is filled with symbolic foods, elaborate rituals, words and song, and most importantly, questions designed to keep even the youngest of children interested.

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 turns reading a paragraph out of the *Haggadah*. In some families, that is considered a "participatory" experience. It might be but it's hardly engaging.

When I interviewed families for *The Art of Jewish Living: The Passover Seder*, I learned that the search for creative ideas for Seder celebration is never-ending. So, here are ten tips on how you might enliven your family's Seder experience this year:

1. **Give homework.** When the Weber family invites the Wolfson family for Seder, we are asked to prepare a presentation on some aspect of the Seder ceremony. The presentation could be a d'rash -- 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

take-off on a game show. Not everyone in your family may be able to do this, but there is no better way to encourage participation in the Seder than by asking people to prepare something in advance to bring to the table.

2. **Buy time.** The Seder ceremony of my youth never lasted more than twenty minutes. That's how long it took to say Kiddush, do Karpas, break the matzah, and fight over who was the youngest grandchild who could say the "Mah Nishtanah." After a few minutes of everyone-take-turns-reading-a-paragraph, my Uncle Morton would ask the infamous "Fifth" "When do we eat?" End of ceremony.

One way to buy time to spend on the telling of the story is to offer your guests something to nibble on between the vegetables of Karpas and the meal. My very creative wife Susie often prepares an edible centerpiece. She and the kids slice jicama very thin and with "Jewish" cookie-cutters, stamp out jicama Stars of David, Torah scrolls, and Kiddush cups. She places the shapes on the end of bamboo "sheshkabob" skewers and inserts them into a head of red cabbage placed in a wicker basket. She adds color to the display by cutting flowerettes of green and red pepper, carrots, celery, and other vegetables and placing them on skewers and into the cabbage. The result is a spectacular vegetable bouquet which we use as a centerpiece on the Seder table.

After Karpas, we invite our guests to "set the centerpiece" by taking the skewers out of the cabbage and dipping the vegetables into saucers of Pesahdik salad dressings placed around the table. Our friends Gail and Shelly Dorph buy time by using artichokes for Karpas instead of parsley. They then dip the artichoke leaves into dressings for nibbling until the meal is served.

3. **Tell the story.** The core of the Seder experience 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 (Mah Nishtanah, the questions of the Four Children, "Tzei u-l'mad, and Rabban Gamliel's questions), 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 Beiner's Sedra Scenes is a good source. Another family we know of uses puppets and story books. The most unusual telling, however, had to be the family who presented a magical version of the Ten Plagues in costume. The father played the Pharaoh who, after complaining about how thirsty he was, asked one of the kids to fetch him some cool, clear water from the Nile. The child left the dining room and returned with a pitcher of water and an empty glass. As the "Pharaoh" poured the clear water into the glass, it turned red! It turns out the father was an amateur magician who incorporated a variety of magic tricks into their 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 the *Haggadah* is trying to tell us. A favorite point to do this is after the recitation of the Ten Plagues. "What are ten things that plague us today?" is a question anyone, no matter what their Judaic knowledge level, 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? The discussion resulting from these questions can be the highlight of your Seder.
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 and favorite songs children learn in religious school: "Go Down Moses," "One Day When Pharaoh Awoke in His Bed," and others. A favorite parody is "The Ballad of the Four Sons." We read *Only Nine Chairs* by Deborah Uchill Miller (Kar-Ben Copies), a hilarious account of a family Seder.
6. **Be inclusive.** Scratch the surface of most Jewish adults and you'll find a child who was upset at not finding the afikoman. We created a way to include everyone in the afikoman search. We make a chart with the order of the Seder (Kadesh, Urhatz, etc.) and select one letter from each word. We put these 14 letters on 3 x 5 cards and then hide them around the house. We tell the kids that each of them must find at least one of the cards for us to find the real afikoman. When the kids find all the cards, they bring them to the table. Then, we ask the adults to figure out a

jumble-word-search two-word clue from the letters. The letters spell "at refrigerator." Once the clue is deciphered, everyone runs to the refrigerator and finds the real afikoman! Then, of course, everyone who participated in the search gets a prize.

7. **Use materials.** One of the problems in keeping young children interested in the Seder is that most Haggadot are not designed for them. When our kids 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 the bricks of the pyramids, grape scratch-and-sniff stickers on pictures of the Kiddush cups. She put these in a loose-leave notebook and made copies for the kids at the Seder. They were immediately engrossed in the book, following along and participating at their own level in their own very special way. Susie also gave each child a "goodie bag" filled with Passover symbols, frog stickers, a bookmark, even moist towellettes for the inevitable spills of wine!
8. **Kiddushim (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 who pours some of her/his wine into it. This is a demonstration of the need to act to bring the Messianic era. The Sephardim pick up the Seder plate and place it over every person's head during the recitation of Ha Lahma Anya, the invitation to participate in the Seder. Another Sephardic custom is to beat the leader with green onions during the singing of Dayyenu as a reminder of the plagues. Save your lulav and use it instead of a feather to collect the last vestiges of hametz during the annual Bedikat Hametz search on the night before the Seder. Ask a set of modern "Four Questions" to discuss at the ceremony. Challenge your guests to sing all the verses to Had Gadya in one breath. Sing Had Gadya with sound effects: choose a person to create the sound of a goat, a cat, a dog, a stick, fire, etc., which they make after the words are sung. The most interesting sounds will be for the "Angel of Death" and "Ha-Kadosh Barukh Hu")!
9. **Choose a good *Haggadah*.** There are 3,000 editions of the *Haggadah* catalogued in the great library of the Seminary and every year, more versions appear. Jews have always felt comfortable in putting together Haggadot that reflect their particular slant on 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" Haggadot and that old standby, the Maxwell House *Haggadah*. In the Conservative Movement, we have the excellent Rabbinical Assembly *Haggadah*, The Feast of Freedom. Choose a *Haggadah* that fits your family's needs. Since the cost of multiple copies is often quite substantial, pick one that will last a number of years, both in style, substance and construction. Remember, the book itself should stand up to extensive use.
10. **Prepare.** Of course, the ultimate *Haggadah* may be one you yourself put together. With 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. By studying the *Haggadah* text with the help of guidebooks like *The Art of Jewish Living: The Passover Seder*, you can develop a text that reflects your understanding of the Seder story and that fits the needs of your family. This will take some time, but the reward will be a Seder experience that is meaningful and memorable.

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