

How To Make A More Meaningful Passover Seder

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Abstract: The key to making your Seder more meaningful is to understand that the Seder is dinner-theatre. The Seder is a dramatic play in four acts. This play tells the Passover narrative through story and symbol, ritual, prayer and song, food and wine. And we are the actors in the play!. Now let's turn our attention to each of these four acts...

This Shabbat, the Shabbat before Passover, carries a special distinction in Jewish tradition. It is called *Shabbat Hagadol*, “the Great Sabbath.” Traditionally, this Shabbat is devoted to the study of Passover observance and the customs of the Seder. Tonight, very fittingly, the theme of my teaching is: How to make your Passover Seder more meaningful.

How many of you are going to be leading one or more Passover Seders this year? The key to making your Seder more meaningful is to understand that the Seder is dinner-theatre. The Seder is a dramatic play in four acts. This play tells the Passover narrative through story and symbol, ritual, prayer and song, food and wine. And we are the actors in this play! Now let’s turn our attention to the structure of these four acts:

Act I of the Passover drama is much like the overture of a Broadway show. Act I lays the foundation for everything else that is to follow. And so, Act I includes the blessing over the candles; the recitation of “*kadesh urchatz*,” a mnemonic device that lists the Seder’s 15 steps: the *kiddush* made over the first cup of wine; the washing of hands; the eating of *karpas*, the green vegetable symbolizing both the tears of slavery and the coming of spring.

With *yahatz*, the breaking of the middle matzah to be hidden as the *afikomen*, and the recitation of the famous words, “This is the bread of affliction our ancestors ate in the land of Egypt. Let all who are hungry come and eat,” the curtain rises and the play is about to begin.

Act II of our Pesach drama is called *Maggid*, the telling of the Passover story. This is where many a Seder leader starts skipping pages like crazy. The *maggid* section seems repetitive because it is. It tells the Passover story four times. Now wouldn’t once be enough? I mean, *dayyenu*.

Now here is a second key to your understanding. Long before the concept of multiple intelligences, our sages intuitively understood that different people learn in different ways. So they devised four different ways – four different modalities – to teach the same story.

The first telling of the Exodus is the four questions. The second telling is the questions of the four children and the fixed responses. The third telling of the story is the ten plagues and the singing of *dayyenu*. The fourth telling describes the symbols on the Seder plate. As the Hebrews ate matzah, *maror*, and the paschal lamb on the eve of the very, very first Passover, so do we. Act II concludes with the second cup of wine.

Act III is the festival meal. After the meal, we eat the afikomen, we recite *birkat hamazon*, the grace after meals, and we drink the third cup.

Finally, we come to Act IV. Act IV is like the final act of a Broadway show. This is the climax, the denouement, the reason why you paid a hundred dollars or more per ticket! This is often the part that people skip. In Act IV, we pay homage to those Jews who suffered solely because they were Jews. We open the door to welcome Elijah the prophet, the symbol of a new and better world that we must bring about together. We sing the fun songs without which Passover would not be Passover: songs like *Chad gadya* and Who knows one?

We drink the fourth cup and we proclaim our intention to return to the land of Israel: *Leshanah ha ba'ah birushalayim* – next year in Jerusalem! For our ancestors “Next year in Jerusalem” was largely impossible, a messianic pipe dream. In their day, God had fulfilled only four of the five promises concerning the Exodus from Egypt: I will bring you out, I will deliver you, I will redeem you and I will take you to me to be my people.” And this is the reason why we drink only four cups and not five. The empty cup of Elijah represents the fifth cup, the fifth, unfulfilled promise: I will bring you into the land of Israel.

But for us, Israel is a reality. Millions of Jews have returned to our ancient homeland to reconstitute the third Jewish commonwealth. In our day, the fifth promise, the miracle that is Israel’s existence, has come true. We are the only generation in 2,000 years that can rightly drink a fifth cup.

“...Like an unfinished play, the night of the Exodus continues through the centuries, seeking actors to relive it perpetually, and to grasp its essential meaning.” (Andre Neher) I hope your Seder will be more meaningful by virtue of something you learned tonight. I hope you feel liberated as a Seder leader.

I wish everyone a joyous, joyous Passover!