

How to Make Your Passover Seder More Meaningful

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The most important secret of making your Seder more meaningful and successful is to understand that the Seder is dinner-theater. 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!

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. And so tonight, the theme of my teaching is: “How to make your Passover Seder more meaningful.”

So here are my seven secrets of highly meaningful – and successful – Seders:

1) Feed people sooner rather than later. If you don't they won't pay attention to the Seder for long. Nor is it considered a mitzvah to make your guests starve. So serve an appetizer early in the Seder. At my home Seder we do it at *Karpas*.

2) Throw out your Maxwell House! Just do it! Go buy a good Haggadah with modern English, contemporary commentary, and aesthetic graphics. You will find many choices at your favorite bookstore. One Haggadah I highly recommend is called “The Open Door” edited by Rabbi Sue Levy Elwell.

3) Ask questions and invite questions during the Seder. Did you know the Talmud teaches that you can begin the Seder with any question, not just the traditional “four questions”? So here are some possible questions for you to get some discussion going:

Why is Moses mentioned only once?

Why do we drink 4 cups of wine?

Why are questions so much a part of the Seder?

What are the 10 plagues of our time and why?

4) Give everyone an opportunity to participate by reading a Hebrew or English part. Go around the table.

5) Incorporate creative prose and poetry that are modern, thought-provoking, and teach the meaning of Passover, freedom, and slavery in new ways. For example, in addition to, or instead of, the traditional four sons, use the four daughters, which reminds us of the vital role women have played and continue to play in our history. In addition to the recitation of the traditional ten plagues, try using “The ten plagues for our time.”

6) Incorporate contemporary songs like Miriam’s Song by Debbie Friedman, Make Those Waters Part by Doug Mishkin, Blowing In the Wind by Bob Dylan or If I Had a Hammer by Peter, Paul, and Mary. Put in a few Passover parody songs. They are always fun. End the Seder with Hatikvah.

Now the seventh and perhaps most important secret of making your Seder more meaningful is to understand that the Seder is dinner-theater.

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 1 of the Passover drama is much like the overture of a Broadway show. Act 1 lays the foundation for everything else that is to follow. And so, Act 1 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 afikoman, 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 2 of our Pesach drama is called *maggid*, the telling of the Passover story. Now 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 of how the Haggadah really works. The goal of the Seder is to reach people, to find a way to convey the Passover story which really connects. Long before the concept of multiple intelligences, our sages intuitively understood that different people learn in different ways. So they devised four different ways to teach the same story—four different possible ways to connect.

The first telling of the Exodus is the four questions. The second telling is the questions of the four sons and the fixed answers. 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. Knowing this, your Seder will flow much more smoothly. Act 2 concludes with the second cup of wine.

Act 3 is the festival meal. After the meal, we eat the *afikoman*, we recite *birkat hamazon*, the grace after meals, and we drink the third cup. As you may have noticed by now, the drinking of the wine marks either the beginning or the end of an act in the Seder.

Finally, we come to Act 4. Act 4 is like the final act of a Broadway show. Can you imagine leaving before the end of a really good Broadway show? But this is often the part that people skip, and it's a shame. For this is the climax of the entire Seder. In Act 4, 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 birushaylayim* – 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 free you, I will bring you out, I will deliver you, I will redeem you.” 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. The drinking of a fifth cup, acknowledging the miracle of Israel's existence, is gaining increasing acceptance. And that is what we do at my home Seder.

I close with these words: author Andre Neher writes, “... [L]ike an unfinished play, the night of the Exodus continues through the centuries, seeking actors to relive it perpetually, and to grasp its essential meaning.”

I hope your Seder will be more meaningful, more successful, and more fun by virtue of something you learned tonight.

I wish everyone a joyous, joyous Passover!