

How Different Will This Night Be: 10 Tips for Your Virtual Seder

BY DR. RON WOLFSON | MAR 24, 2020 | BLOGS _

The greatest gathering of the Jewish year is nearly upon us and this year, the Passover Seder will be celebrated like no other. Mah Nishtanah Ha-Leila Ha-Zeh, indeed!

Most translations of this famous line from the portray it as a question: “Why is this night different from all other nights?” In my reading, this is incorrect. The Hebrew word “mah” does not mean “why.” The proper meaning is “how” or “what.” The phrase is not a question at all: it’s a declarative statement: “How different is this night from all other nights!” Then, we get the questions designed to stimulate the engagement of the young...and elderly...at the table: why matza, why maror, why dipping twice, and why reclining? In this year of the coronavirus crisis, there is no question our Seder experiences will be different. The question is how to make the evening engaging, educating, exciting, and memorable.

So, here are my top ten tips to “zoom” in on crafting a great virtual Seder:

1. **Prepare.** Even when we gather together in person, a great Seder is well-prepared in advance. A virtual Seder will require even more advance work, but it most definitely can work. Many families and friends have already experienced a virtual Jewish ritual, celebrating Shabbat online these past few weeks. My wife Susie and I have done just that from our shelter-in-place location at Mayo Clinic in Rochester, Minnesota, where Susie recently received a life-saving kidney transplant. These virtual Shabbat experiences with our children and grandchildren have lifted our spirits beyond measure. So, imagine how thrilled we were to receive a photo (above) from our daughter Havi picturing “the Paperny next generation cousins” (“Paperny” was my maternal grandfather’s name) – young people in their 30’s and 40’s and their kids – on a Zoom call discussing preparations for the virtual Seder we will be invited to join. To see Kate and Emma from Seattle, David and Miriam from San Diego, Lisa and Hannah from Irvine, and Havi, Ellie and Gabe from San Jose all together on that Zoom conference brought tears to my eyes. So, Tip Number One is to get your Seder leaders together online now to think through how and what and why you will do what you’ll do on Seder eve.
2. **Give Homework.** I have been advocating this since the publication of my book (with good friend Joel Lurie Grishaver) *Passover: The Family Guide to Spiritual Celebration* (Jewish Lights Publishing) way back in 1988. There is great empowerment by handing out assignments to your Seder participants. It’s even more important in organizing a virtual Seder. Consider asking each group calling in to take responsibility for leading one of the ritual practices, or explaining a section of the Haggadah, or even reading the text aloud. Especially the kids...so many of them are already reading stories to their grandparents (and vice versa!) online. Get a PJ Library book about Passover and have the kids (or grandparents) read it aloud.
3. **Tell the Story.** Keep your eye on the actual purpose of the Seder – to tell the story of the Exodus from Egypt, our story that begins with our people in slavery and ends in our redemption. In this time, we ought to start the experience feeling constricted in a “narrow” (the literal meaning of “mitzrayim”) place (like being stuck at home) and freedom (if the weather is nice, consider walking outside after your Seder). If there is one overarching theme of the evening, it is to feel as if you yourself have experienced this “exodus.” “b’chol dor va dor chayav adam lirot et atzmo k’ilu hu yatza mi’Mitzrayim – in every generation, it is your responsibility to think of yourself as if you had actually been present at the Exodus from Egypt.” So, how do we achieve this feeling? We use every storytelling technique in our tool box. Certainly, take turns reading sections of the Haggadah. But, also take time to get your heads out of the book and tell the story by acting it out, singing parody songs (there are hundreds on the Internet), doing magic tricks (I’ll never forget the Seder night when the leader made the afikoman literally disappear!), making a video, writing your own Haggadah. Your goal by the end of the evening is simple: tell the story.
4. **Ask Questions.** An easy way to engage your virtual Seder participants is to pose questions to them. Sure, begin with the Famous Four, but spice up your evening with a few provocative and well-placed queries. An obvious one this year: “The Seder recalls the Ten Plagues – what’s something that plagues us today?” Duh! Or, “The Seder begins by inviting anyone to join in – Ha Lachma Anya. How do we sustain our relationships in a time of social distancing?”
5. **Innovate.** I cannot wait to see what folks will do by adding a symbolic food to the Seder plate to mark this time in our lives. Too bad beer isn’t kosher for Pesach: a Corona would do the trick! For some additional innovations, check out this [Los Angeles Times](#) story about our creative Seder a few years ago:

6. **Have Fun.** Find ways to infuse some humor in the evening. There are the old standbys: beating each other with green onions during “Dayenu” to recall the experience of slavery, searching for the afikoman, singing those parody songs at key moments in the storytelling.
7. **Afikoman gifts.** At our face-to-face Seder, Susie and I give a gift to each of the kids who look for the afikoman. This year, we’ll be sending them via one of the online platforms. Just be sure you send them early to arrive in time – even Amazon is behind in deliveries.
8. **Be Inclusive.** It can be challenging to keep the attention of everybody on a Zoom call. You don’t want to see the message on your screen: “Shmuly has left the meeting.” So, if one person is “leading” the Seder, be sure to ask questions, call on people, and otherwise engage as many of the participants as possible. There is a challenging short delay on Zoom to sing together, but do the best you can. You may want to mute when one party is giving a presentation.
9. **Make Changes: It’s Your Story.** For those of us in that “elderly” category the CDC keeps talking about, you will remember the days when the Seder consisted of everyone around the table taking a turn to read a paragraph from the Maxwell House Haggadah. Boring! Thankfully, over the last forty years or so, more and more of us have felt liberated from that model, understanding that over the centuries, our people have made Jewish ritual a living thing. There is a reason there are thousands of editions of the Passover Haggadah. We have embraced the permission to make the experience meaningful for us in our generation. So, be creative...especially this year.
10. **Wash Your Hands.** Isn’t it a bit ironic...or even prophetic...that the Seder calls for us to wash our hands...not once, but twice?!? The first hand washing – Urchatz – is often done by the leader alone on behalf of everyone. This year, I recommend everyone wash hands at the beginning of the Seder...and at Rochtza before the meal. Unusual for a Jewish ritual, there is no blessing recited for Urchatz. Why? There are various explanations: it is done before eating an appetizer – Karpas, not a full meal. A more likely reason is that the first Seder experiences probably began with the meal and then the storytelling commenced; only later did the rabbis move the meal to after the story was told. I mean, c’mon...do you think you could keep Uncle Harry at the table after he’s had dessert? Moreover, I suggest we add a blessing when we all wash for Urchatz – a version of “Birkat ha-Gomel,” a blessing of gratitude usually recited by someone who has escaped injury or successfully completed a perilous journey: Baruch ata Adonai, Eloheinu melech ha-olam, ha-gomel l’chayavim tovot she-g’malani kol tov.

Blessed are You, Adonai our God, Sovereign of the universe, who has bestowed every goodness upon us.

How about this: instead of washing hands for twenty seconds to the tune of “Happy Birthday,” sing a chorus of “Dayenu!” It’s enough already with this virus!

You might also consider adding a “Mi Shebeirach,” a prayer for healing, at this or some point during the ceremony.

Wishing you a safe and wonderful Pesach!

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