

Context

Pesach is one of the most well-known of our festivals. It holds memories of childhood *sedarim*; festival meals that use symbolic foods and readings to create a learning, storytelling evening of memories and meaning. It is also a time when many will keenly feel the absence of loved ones who have celebrated with them in years gone by. As with all Jewish festivals, it has seen innovations added year after year. Some of these are explored here by **Rabbi Debbie Young-Somers**, Community Educator at Reform Judaism. Of course Pesach isn't just about *seder*, but takes us out of our ordinary rhythms to cleanse and experience the rebirth of spring.

Content

The Pesach seder is experiential education in action. It might not always hit the mark, but for many it is the highlight of the Jewish year, embedded with family memories, jokes, and flavours that emerge once a year. Yet as with most things we hold to be Jewishly sacred, the seder meal and service has grown and developed over the centuries. As Rabbi Michael Hilton explains in the introduction to the Reform Haggadah; *Haggadateinu*:

Of the rabbis mentioned in the Haggadah, Hillel was a contemporary of Jesus. Akiva, Gamliel and the others named lived in the second century of the Christian era. These names give us the earliest date for the sections that name them, but even these parts of the Haggadah could have been composed later. The first accounts of the home seder are given in the Mishnah and Tosefta and come from the beginning of the third century, two generations after those rabbis lived. These give the basic order of the seder, some of the foods eaten, but very little of the text. In those days the seder included the four cups of wine, kiddush, the four questions known as mah nishtanah, Rabban Gamliel's explanations of the symbolic foods, the Hallel, and grace after meals. The afikoman is mentioned in these documents as something one should not do, although it had a different meaning; nuts and parched corn, according to the Tosefta. The Tosefta adds that it is an obligation to spend the night in study, and another part of the Tosefta (Pischa 2.22) mentions the 'Hillel sandwich'. Another paragraph from the Mishnah, Berakhot 1:5, about telling the departure from Egypt at night, can be found in the Haggadah as we know it today, but in the Mishnah it has nothing to do with Pesach.

So what does Pesach mean to us today? The first theme that usually presents itself is that of Freedom. Torah repeatedly asks us to remember that we were slaves, and that God redeemed us, but it usually does so in order to remind us of some responsibility we must take on, or an ethic we should be living. The Jewish calendar also reminds us that freedom is tethered to responsibility by connecting Pesach to Shavuot with the counting of the Omer – Shavuot, the festival of revelation and Torah, reminds us of our many responsibilities, and walking from Pesach (freedom) to Shavuot (responsibility) represents a beautiful arc of hoped for behaviour in our freedom.

Pesach has become an opportunity for us to reflect on our world and to raise awareness about those who do not experience freedom, or perhaps where our own freedoms are curtailed. In the twentieth century special additions to the seder began to be included; for Refuseniks and Ethiopian Jews, among others; groups who were not free to celebrate a seder. This trend continues with a variety of additions, both as readings or as modern seder plate symbols¹, helping us to remember how we enslave others with our chocolate and coffee purchases, or with our smart phones,

helping us to be mindful of those in the LGBTQ community who do not enjoy the freedoms others might do, or highlighting food poverty or feminist midrashim. The seder is designed to help us ask questions, so adding questions that speak to our modern world and encourage us to make positive changes in it are what seder was designed for. It is not an innovation to add to the seder – the cup of Miriam which many consider a modern feminist addition, is depicted in a medieval Haggadah, and ‘Pour out thy love’ (an addition to the ‘Pour out thy wrath’ part of the Haggadah) was first used in a 1521 manuscript from Worms.

Pesach preparation can feel like enslavement for some; masses of cleaning, cooking, ridiculously expensive shopping. But that doesn’t have to be the Pesach experience, and the cleaning in particular can, believe it or not, be harnessed for spiritual purposes! As we try to a greater or lesser extent to have a thorough clean of the house, sweeping out literal *chametz* – leavened goods, do we also take time to have an internal clean. Pesach offers us the catharsis of physical cleaning, but it is also an opportunity to have a spiritual and moral moment of checking in. Pesach falls roughly half way between one Rosh Hashanah and the next, and is thus a chance for us to revisit all those changes we wanted to make in our lives. If we follow the tradition of burning a few pieces of *chametz*, this creates a meaningful opportunity to ritualise this process. At Rosh Hashanah many remember their sins and ritually cast them away by throwing bread into a body of water. At Pesach we revisit those sins, and can name those ones we still haven’t overcome as we burn similar small pieces of bread. Thus Pesach becomes an important step not just in having a good clear out once a year, but in taking emotional and ethical stock of ourselves.

With the interactive nature of much of the seder, it is a time when children are often kept up late and given important roles in the proceedings. However many of the modern activities and songs for children focus on the 10 Plagues, a horrific collective punishment against a tyrannical regime and it’s over class. Within the seder when we recite the plagues we traditionally remove some wine from our cup for each one, reminding ourselves that the plagues were horrific and we should reduce our joy as a result. Ensuring we don’t fall into the trap of celebrating the downfall of our enemies is becoming increasingly challenging when you explore the games and toys available for Pesach. This makes the conversation about the difficult plagues even more important to have with our younger members.

Pesach focusses very much on the communal experience of seder, during which we also acknowledge the communal nature of the exodus from Egypt. ‘We were slaves’ ‘We came out of Egypt’. It is a moment when we align ourselves with the history of the Jewish experience, we are very much in the present, and we also ritualise a hope for a world that might be improved. In not eating *chametz* for an entire week, we continually return to that communal experience. But we must also remember that Pesach should not financially or physically enslave us. We do not need to spend a fortune on Kosher for Passover products, but perhaps embrace the simpler things in life – fresh produce, fewer chemicals and pre-packaged items, and in this way make Pesach a lived experience of how we might each play our part in improving the world for the future.

Contemplation

Passover and the seder meal can be noisy, hectic, tiring times. Yet if we give ourselves the time and space they can be packed not only with food and celebration, but also with reflection and awareness raising.

What issue do you want to create awareness of and add meaning to at your seder meal and how will you do that? What can you do to make the themes of Pesach more real?

ⁱ For ideas to add to your seder: <https://www.reformjudaism.org.uk/festivals/pesach/alternatives-and-additions-for-your-seder/>