

TIPS FOR A SUCCESSFUL SEDER

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Each year as we prepare to host and be hosted at the *seder shel Pesach*, many of us wonder how much we can innovate and how much we ought to stick to the Haggadah. If guests get restless, what can we skip?

The Halakhic Essentials:

The Talmud specifies six *mitzvot* required at the *seder*. The first two are essential:

- 1) Eat at least a palm-size piece of *matzah*.
- 2) Have a child ask why we're doing the *seder*, and answer by telling the story of the Exodus from Egypt in any way that shows gratitude and includes someone's "spin" on the phrase from the Torah that "*arami oveid avi*" (my ancestor was a wandering Aramean).
- 3) Drink four cups of wine (each time draining at least half your cup, but you may drink grape juice or water down your wine).
- 4) Eat *maror*, the bitter herb, which the Talmud explains should be a leafy green (like Romaine lettuce) but for which our Russian ancestors substituted horseradish since they had no access to lettuce in their wintry climates.
- 5) Do *Hallel* (psalms of praise) after the meal.
- 6) Recline like aristocrats while eating.

If you have done these six things, with an emphasis on explaining how you have experienced redemption, you have fulfilled the *mitzvot* of the *seder*.

You'll notice that reading the entire *haggadah* is not on the list at all. This isn't surprising, really. "*Haggadah*" means "an [oral] telling" of a story. Is it really in the spirit of "oral telling" to read from a book? No. In fact, the invention of the printing press in the 15th century postdates the Talmud. It is clear that our Rabbis, so concerned with punctilious recitation of Torah, wanted the *seder* to be an exception, **a time for our own tellings, however imperfect, that communicated to our families and friends our sense of redemption.**

The Suggestions:

- ◆ Assign Parts In Advance: Assign the parts of the *seder* in advance to guests to present in any way they want. For example, say "You're in charge of presenting the 10 plagues." They could tell a personal story, act out a scene [fun for children], give a personal interpretation, sing a song or read a poem, raise a question for debate, dress in costume, or simply read from their *haggadah*. (Give guests a time frame: say, 3-4 minutes?)
- ◆ Photos from Family History: Invite guests ahead of time to bring photos or

sentimental objects from relatives and ancestors who escaped hardship or oppression. At my *seders*, people have brought pictures or family heirlooms of their Holocaust survivor (and victim) relatives, Israeli soldier relatives, African-American relatives, Mizrahi relatives, etc. Between sections of the *seder* have people present their item and tell that story.

- ◆ Dressing for The Journey: If you are the host, dress in costume as an ancient Israelite getting ready to leave Egypt. Ham it up as people arrive. Offer them Israeli scarves or a prop to include them in the fun. Alternatively, ask everyone who's coming to come in some form of travel clothes or to "dress for leaving Oppression." If they come with a bag, ask them what they brought.
- ◆ Kids Pack a Bag: If there are children and they are getting bored and you need to get them involved at some point, hand each a bag and tell them to "Go pack your bag with 3 important items for a journey to the Promised Land" and then have them tell you, upon their return (while you've been continuing the *seder*), what they chose. (Stuffed animal? Dog toy? Toothbrush? Night light? Bathing suit for crossing the Red Sea?) This could also be done pre-*seder* as what they will bring in their bag to the *seder* you're going to.
- ◆ Start it Strong: Start the *seder* off on an up note. Skip reading the *seder* "order" table of contents or explaining the items on the *seder* plate. Have people do the ritual washing before even beginning, so the early part of the *seder* doesn't get mired down in delay. Perhaps even start the *seder* with a song or Kiddush and get to the good parts quickly.
- ◆ What Does Yours Say?: Have each person at the *seder* use a different *haggadah*. Purchase an assortment of *haggadot* with different themes (many available on Amazon). For children, purchase colorful *haggadot* with pictures or games. As you move around the table, participants really need to listen to the person reading, and experience the variety of interpretations. Even a child gets to show what they have in *their* book. While this means people will be on different pages, it also means that everyone has to pay closer attention.
- ◆ The Curve Ball Haggadah: Even if too many *haggadot* aren't for you, have at least one person at the table with an unusual *haggadah* – say, *The Holistic Haggadah* – so that there's always an unusual perspective on each part of the *seder* as you progress through.
- ◆ Heavy Hors D'oeuvres! In order to keep people from starving, have an extensive *karpas* collection. Any food that takes the "*borei pri adamah*" blessing can be eaten following the *karpas* section, so all forms of potatoes (roasted, whipped, baked, etc.), sweet potatoes and yams, grilled vegetables, salad, carrots (grilled or *tsimis*), and so on. Invite people to keep helping themselves to these while the *haggadah* is being gone through. Eat and enjoy!
- ◆ Avoid the Margins: Choose sparingly from the Rabbinic commentaries in favor of

doing the actual *seder*. Remember, the *seder* is not an act of reading but of sharing our tellings.

- ◆ “When I Came Out of Mitzrayim [the constricted places]:” At a *seder* without small children, and if the atmosphere of your *seder* can handle the more serious reflections on “I was redeemed from bondage” in order to serve God and appreciate life, then have someone (yourself?) model a personal redemption. At my adult *seders*, we have sometimes focused on recovery from an addiction, recovery from cancer, recovery from an oppressive relationship, and then open it up where others reveal. Invite people to tell their story.
- ◆ The Teamwork Afikomen Hunt (From Ron Wolfson:) For the afikomen hunt, instead of having a single winner, have the searchers work together in the following way. Prior to the *seder*, decide where to hide the afikomen OUTSIDE of the “allowable search zone.” If you predict 12 searchers, then pick a spot you can describe in 12 letters. Using 3x5 cards, write a single letter of the solution on each card. Hide the cards in the “search zone” before the *seder*. When it is time for the afikomen hunt, give directions to the searchers that 1) she/he may only look in the search zone for a single 3x5 card with a letter on it, and 2) once she/he have found one card, bring it back to a place next to the table and wait for others to bring more cards. (You may not find more than one card.) As each searcher returns, they put the cards together. Once all cards have been found, the searchers now work as a group to spell out the location of the afikomen –say, “R-E-F-R-I-G-E-R-A-T-O-R” or “I-N-_-F-I-L-E-_-C-A-B-I-N-E-T.” Once you agree that they've spelled out the correct solution, they may go (usually in a running fashion) as a group and fetch the afikomen and return it to you. Since all have worked together, no one is left out of the reward.
- ◆ Afikomen Award For Charity: Especially for an adult afikomen hunt, whoever finds the afikomen gets to bargain with the host for an amount of a donation to their favorite charity. (This was suggested at the workshop.)
- ◆ Leonard Cohen Hallel: Though one should sing at least some of Hallel, perhaps hand out the lyrics to Leonard Cohen's *Hallelujah* and sing it all together.
- ◆ Simple Clean Up: Since the *seder* should not involve oppression for any participants, consider using compostable plates so no one is “enslaved” by having to do dishes for so many.

Most important, start off the *seder* with something amazing and don't belabor parts that don't speak to you. Make sure you fulfill the true *mitzvah* by saying what too often goes unsaid: *What* are *your* ideas of freedom? Spiritual, material, psychological, and emotional? How in your life and that of your relatives have you experienced redemption? What are children's real questions about why you're Jewish? Why do you do the *seder*? Why do you belong to a synagogue? Why do you eat *matzah* on *Pesach*? What did it all mean to your parents and grandparents? Tell the story of liberation that is in **your** heart: that is the gift

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