

Pesach 2020/5780
A Seder Supplement in the Age of Coronavirus
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The Seder this year will be observed during the corona storm. When lifting the seder plate at the outset of maggid, we will not say “ke’ha lachma anya” – this is LIKE the bread of affliction we as slaves consumed in Egypt, but ha – this IS the bread of affliction, as we are, in the very present, at this very moment, living through dark times.

What follows are suggestions that relate aspects of the seder to today’s COVID-19 crisis. It is a template meant to inspire thought where everyone can join in, sharing their own interpretations that reflect this year’s events.

KADESH

As we conclude the Kiddush, we recite the shehechyanu blessing. In the midst of the spiraling death count, we thank God for the gift of life. We remind the Lord of His words in Deuteronomy – “Behold I place before you life and death, choose life.” We choose life. We implore God to help us, help us live through this plague.

URCHATZ

During these days we are instructed to wash our hands over and over and over. As we do so at the seder this year, we can recite the following prayer:

In these difficult times, I commit myself, dedicating my hands to doing good for the world; giving charity; using my hands to help others in physical need; writing words that can make a difference; raising our hands to reflect the words of the Psalmist, S’eu yedeichem kodesh - lift your hands in holiness.”

YACHATZ

As we break the matza, we think of those whose lives have been split asunder; stricken with this terrible disease. We think of those who are sick; family members quarantined who cannot visit their hospitalized loved ones; the bereaved for whom there is less closure without a funeral, without normal shiva visitations.

FOUR QUESTIONS

Along with the traditional ones, we are also sadly reminded how this Pesach is different from others:

- On all Pesachs, we remember threats that came from visible human enemies, from Pharaoh to Hitler and beyond. COVID-19 is a humanless enemy – an invisible threat.



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- On all Pesachs, we've gathered at the seder table with our families and with those in need; tonight, we come together at our tables in small groups and some are sitting alone.
- On all Pesachs, we are careful to eat food certified kosher for Passover. The decree of this hour demands even more. Each box and package must be cleaned and wiped so we are protected from the contagion.
- On all Pesachs, the holiday coincides with the spring season -- allowing us to enjoy God's natural world in a time of rebirth. But on this Passover, even as spring arrives, we've been forced to remain indoors, unable to breathe in the rejuvenating air of spring.

LEANING

As we eat and tell the story, we recline on our sides, symbolic of freedom. This year, as we lean, we remind ourselves that only by leaning on each other will we make it through.

THE FOUR CHILDREN

Perhaps it can be suggested this year that they represent four different stages in life. As infants, we don't know how to ask questions (she'eino yodeah lishol). As young children, we ask questions simply (tam). As we grow into our teen years and beyond, we are sometimes mischievous and rebellious in the questions we ask (rasha). As seniors, we are blessed with the wisdom of life experiences (chacham).

This year we acknowledge that society has been sensitive to the older, more vulnerable population. Over the millennia there have been societies who, in crisis, have sacrificed the less fit. We have so far by and large passed the test of community as our world has done much to protect the elderly and infirmed. Let us hope that our community continues to protect those chachamim and zekeinim, those most in need.

MAGGID

For me, the Haggadah text that jumps out these days are the Biblical words describing God's listening to our anguished cries in Egypt when their pain reached the heavens (va'nitzak, va'yishma). The Psalmist similarly writes, "I am with you in your distress – Imo Anochi Be'tzarah." This verse not only refers to acknowledging God after we've been saved, but the belief that even beforehand, even when we are still suffering, God is with us. As God listened to our cries in Egypt, we respectfully ask today – Are You, O Merciful God, listening now?

DAYENU

Just like in the famous song where we articulate thanks each step of the way, today we have the chance to offer thanks to the heroes who have stepped up for all of us. Some suggestions:

- If we were only blessed with truckers who deliver food to our grocery stores, and clerks who shelve them and workers who carry them to our homes – dayenu.



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- If we were only blessed with police and firefighters who walk the streets to protect us, risking their lives to save us – dayenu.
- If we were only blessed with hospital custodians, pharmacists, EMTs, nurses and doctors on the front lines who administer to the sick, doing all they can to heal them – dayenu.

RABBAN GAMLIEL'S PESACH

Here, we recall the Angel of Death passing over our homes in Egypt, sparing those inside. During these days, too, it's critical to **stay home**, “blocking” the virus from entry.

TZAFUN

We eat the afikoman, symbol of redemption, whose time is tzafun – literally, hidden. One of the great challenges of COVID-19 is the fear, the uncertainty, yes, the hiddenness – we just don't know when we will be free of its horrors.

ELIJAH THE PROPHET

In these times, we are told not to open the door for anyone. Yet, there is one exception--the mystical figure of Eliyahu HaNavi. As he enters our homes, he is our sole guest, and hope that next year or even sooner, we will be able to welcome him in together with our families and friends.

HALLEL

Min ha-meitzar, from distress will come relief. During these difficult times, our communities have rallied and come closer. When it's over, we pray, we will be stronger than ever. As Leonard Cohen wrote: “There is a crack in everything, that's how the light gets in.”

NISHMAT

This prayer accentuates the holiness of every human being – a necessary prerequisite to redemption. Nishmat **Kol** Chai teaches that we're all in this together. This virus knows no color, no nationality, no ethnic group, no border. May we transition from reactively to proactively recognizing our commonality, this year and beyond.

CHATZI HALAYLA

Night is the metaphor for despair. Midnight represents its peak. As we acknowledge how we have overcome midnights throughout history, we know, we just know, that with God's help this night of night will also be overcome.

CHAD GADYA

The opening words of this last song of the seder may be a play on the word aggadata – life is an Aggadic tale that is hard to understand. But just like we sing playfully the story of Chad Gadya, often, too, in the direst of circumstances, we must remember to laugh. And the memes, videos and jokes that are going around can serve to balm our emotions at this tragic time.

HATIKVAH

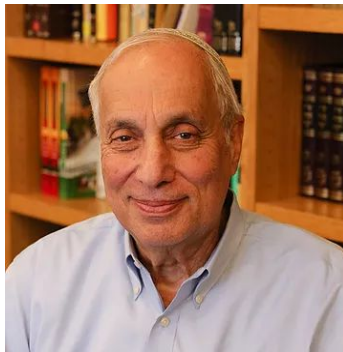
My parents would always end the Seder by singing the Hatikvah as an expression that the redemption, especially with the establishment of the State of Israel is already upon us. The words ring powerfully these days – od lo avda tikvateinu – we will forever be hopeful, we will overcome.

Yes, with patience, trust and will, we'll make it. Patience, no matter how long it takes; trust in God, in our healers; and personal resolve, as the rabbis say, ein davar she'omed bifnei haratzon – nothing stands in the way of the will.

On this Passover, too, we pray that we will begin the journey from twilight to dawn, from darkness to light.

Lu yehi – if only.

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Rabbi Avi Weiss, Co-Founder, is founding rabbi of the Hebrew Institute of Riverdale –the Bayit, Bronx, New York, and founder of Yeshivat Chovevei Torah Rabbinical School. He is also co-founder of the International Rabbinic Fellowship (IRF), an international organization of Modern Orthodox rabbis, and PORAT: People for Orthodox Renaissance And Torah. Rabbi Weiss served as National Chairman of the Student Struggle for Soviet Jewry (SSSJ) from 1982 to 1991 and subsequently as National President of AMCHA –the Coalition for Jewish Concerns, raising a voice of moral conscience on behalf of the Jewish people and humankind throughout the world. Rabbi Weiss has authored numerous books, articles and editorials published in journals and newspapers around the world. His new book, Journey to Open Orthodoxy, will be published later this year.