

The Seder

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

For some of us, every minute of the two Seder nights is an absolute delight. Even the preparation and the cleaning – the anticipation. There is no other occasion in the festive year quite like it. Different customs. The food. The songs. The exotica of it all. The Seder nights remind us of our childhood search for the Afikoman and the rewards for finding it. Family traditions and reunions. The familiar words. The intellectual delight of analyzing the text of the Haggadah and finding new meanings, explanations and fantasies of academic and not so academic interpretations and innovations.

If we are fortunate, the discussions are stimulating, challenging and involve everyone contributing according to their interests and expertise. The history. The constant return of hatred and struggles – “they” still try to destroy us as “they” always have and yet we have survived. Don’t forget the role playing and the acting. Freedom and slavery. We were there then and here we are now. This is, of course, the ideal.

Sadly, for most Jews it is nothing of the sort. If the pious want to say every word of a long text, everyone else is impatient, starving and cannot wait to eat. No one cares about the words except the old bore who is leading things the way he always has and who insists on doing everything by the book. His father taught him it all and he is not going to change one iota. And it takes very long. Most people present don’t know or understand the Hebrew. It is all Double Dutch and irrelevant. The “know it alls” insist on disagreeing about how to do things and then grumble and sulk when they do not get their way. Family tensions re-emerge like a typical American family forced to get together over Thanksgiving. Visitors have no idea what is going on and need explanations and page finders eager to help but only make matters more confusing.

In many homes it is the one occasion in the year when everyone gets together, and you invite as many guests as can fit into your home. It is a great jamboree, an orgy of hospitality. But bereft of anything spiritual or mystical. It's a party. A Jewish party. If, on the other hand, you want to void the hassle and the hustle, you can go on a cruise (if your wallet permits). But you may feel sea sick and be stuck in a hotel surrounded by people you don't know or do but don't care for.

Communal Seders are just as bad. They always start late. The rabbi wants to preach too much. The chazzan wants to sing too much. And everyone wants to talk to each other. No one is very interested in Torah or, indeed, in having a discussion. Most have been dragged there for other reasons. There are too many people, too much noise, the food is often sub-standard and the wine third rate. It becomes just a chore that we have to go through (usually) for only one night a year if we are lucky. The kids are running around, crying, shouting or at best dozing off. Everyone is peeved, frustrated and soon fed up to the teeth. So, as soon as the food is served (which cannot come too early) they will sneak out as quickly as possible. Who needs to hear *Chad Gadyah* (sang badly) anyway? Do I care about a goat? No, I do not! I want to go to bed and I am not going to stay to sing "Next Year in Jerusalem."

I have a solution. It is true that there are obligations. To eat an olive's amount of Matza (let's not go into detail as to how much an olive's measure is). Then there are the bitter herbs (you may have no idea how much disagreement there is about which herbs count as bitter). As for the four cups of wine cups of wine, thank goodness we no longer have to put up with sickly sweet concoctions. We can now find really top, expensive wine of every quality, degree and cru sanctioned by almost every single Beth Din in history. And if you care about the alcohol in your blood, there are grape juices with reduced sugar content, too. The other refinements (greens and eggs in salt water, *haroset* and Hillel's sandwich – which do not take up too much time) can be fun, talking points.

But the real issue is the Haggadah. Do we really need to know how many plagues were multiplied on the Egyptians from God's finger to hand to arm? And why repeat the song *Dayeynu* in prose as well as poetry?

The fact is that the Haggadah, like all our services, have been added to over the years. It is as if the longer we survive, the greater the amount of time we need to spend over multiplying words.

The Talmud is more interested in actual discussion and debate in an unstructured way. After all, the Talmud itself says it is enough to say, "I was there." And anything you say on the subject "has fulfilled your obligation to recount the exodus from Egypt." And if you ask why this night is different, you do not have to say "*Mah Nishtana*." Though that's about the least boring part of it all.

So, my advice is to go minimalist. Don't go by the book. By that I mean: don't feel you have to say every word if you do not feel like it. Only recite those parts you really have to or want to. But then open it all up for first hand experiences of being the underdog, refugee or, indeed, slave. Have discussion and debate. I know, you will tell me that in this day and age of Democrats and Republicans unable to be civil or Brexiteers regarded as suicidal traitors, you may be laying yourself open to fisticuffs or social ostracism. Why even Israeli policies and elections are dangerous now. Make sure you have security guards handy.

Perhaps it is safer to stick to the text of the Haggadah after all.