Alone for the Seder : Thoughts, tips and encouragement

(Deutsch) (Español) (Français) (русский)

One who is alone should ask themselves: "Why is this night different?"
(Maimonides, Laws of Unleavened Bread 7:3)

הָיָה לְבַדּוֹ שׁוֹאֵל לְעַצְמוֹ מַה נִּשְׁתַּנָּה הַלַּיְלָה הַזֶּה:
(משנה תורה, הלכות חמץ ומצה ז׳:ג׳)

This sentence has been sitting in the Jewish law-books for a thousand years. While almost everything else written about Pesach has been analysed and commented on from dozens of directions, this sentence has been almost completely ignored. Being alone on seder night was not a practical possibility that anybody could imagine.

This year we see it differently. For perhaps the first time in Jewish history, thousands of people will be holding the Seder alone. We have no precedent for this, no collective memory to call upon, no commentaries on that theoretical law of being alone, no certainty of the right way to act, and no united leadership. But we still have a few tricks up our sleeves: chutzpah, creativity, and hope. We'll be telling the story of this year's Pesach to future generations, with God's help.

Let's turn back to that line in Maimonides' law code, and write our own commentary right now. "One who is alone should ask themselves: "Why is this night different?" It's a damn strange question, if you're alone. Pretty much everything is different this year, including the fact that we're alone! Although the reference is to the *Mah Nishtanah*, the formalised questions that are included in the Seder ritual, it might be better to translate this not as a question, but as a statement of wonder: "How different this night is!"

But we can look at all this from a different perspective, if we choose. Pesach is the festival of freedom, of spring-time springiness, of passing-over, of lightness. The Pesach seder was a home ritual that had very few rules or fixed texts: the emphasis was on encouraging children to be curious and adults to be creative. There was a powerful ancient story to be told - "We were slaves to Pharaoh in Egypt, and now we are free people" - and that story was meant to be recited in a way that would bring everyone around the table together as participants in the narrative. *We* were slaves, *we* are free. And not just free-from, but free-to: a whole set of values was to be discussed through the symbols of the story and the meal, children were taught the responsibilities that free Jews have taken upon themselves. And if over time the texts and the rituals became heavy and fixed and incomprehensible, there's something of the Pesach lightness that perhaps this crazy year allows us to reclaim.

While the difficulties of holding a Seder by oneself are many and obvious, there are also a few surprising advantages that come along with it. We're actually free. We're stuck at home and stuck with ourselves and stuck with our freedom - this is a unique opportunity to deconstruct the Seder rituals and truly make them ours. Make the story one that we find authentic, see the rituals as powerful, and eat a delicious meal on our own, everything at our own pace.

The Torah speaks four times, in slightly different ways, of telling the story of Pesach to children. (This telling is the meaning of the word *Haggadah*.) The rabbis were sensitive to the subtle changes in these four texts, and created a model of four types of children asking four types of questions: a wise child, a rebellious child, a simple child, and a child who does not know how to ask. The question-and-answer model of telling the story of Pesach was deemed to be the most important and most flexible, it allowed each telling of the story to fit the children asking it. And as many have pointed out over the years, the four children are not necessarily character types, but four different aspects active in every questioning soul. We all have our wise, rebellious, simple and silent sides. And yet: "One who is alone should ask themselves..." What is weird and wonderful about this year is that all those four sides get to enter into a conversation with each other.

Our wise side might ask: what are the instructions for doing a Seder correctly?
Our rebellious side might interject: why the hell should I do this, while the world is going crazy outside?
Our simple side might wonder: what's this all about?
Our silent side might not be able to put words to the enormity of the situation, and our powerlessness.

This guide is a collection of resources for those alone at the Seder this year. You are welcome to use anything here, adapt it, or ignore it. This is mainly a call to creativity, to embrace the strangeness of the situation that we've been flung into and to use it as an opportunity to reclaim the ancient Pesach Seder as our own.

Let's translate it like this: *One who is alone should exclaim - "How different this night can be!"*

Resources

- **Sefaria Haggadah - full traditional Ashkenazi text**
- **Haggadot.com - put together your own Haggadah**
- **Talmud.de - Die ganze Haggadah auf Deutsch**
- **The Minimalist's Guide to Passover and Seder - collection of tips for preparing a kosher for Pesach kitchen and meal**
- **Virtual Cantor - recordings of Pesach songs. Also here.**
- **A Different Night - a collection of ideas for Seder 2020**
- **Seder2020.org - Find a virtual seder to attend, or invite others to yours**

- **Seder for One - a menu suggestion for micro-Seders**

Ideas and Suggestions

Before the Seder

- Prepare for the night with friends and family over the phone or internet. Share at least the sense of the entire community being in this situation together - alone!
- Talk and compare your seder plans with others', if you want. Steal ideas!
- Write down some questions that you want to ponder over the seder.
- Prepare a great meal of things you want, from the food available to you. You can find some easy Pesach-friendly recipes here, towards the end of the page, or a simple menu here. But also don't let the cooking be a stressful part of the evening.
- If you don't have a haggadah, download one or create a personalised one (see resource section)
- Berlin: If you need specific Pesach ingredients such as Matzah, you can contact Berlin Tisch, or buy online from Kosher4U or Always Together.
- You can do the seder in nicer clothes than usual, or in pyjamas. Both are signs of liberty.

At the Seder

Kadesh

This is the first of the four cups of wine drunk on Pesach. Four cups alone?! Why not. Tonight is different. This is one of the signs of being a free person, and reminds us that this meal is a significant and sacred one. Lean back luxuriously on the couch or in the most comfortable place in the home while drinking the wine.

Urchatz

Washing hands has never had so much significance as this year! But take some time to enjoy a ritual hand-washing that has no rational hygienic purpose. Feel the water running over your hands. This marks the beginning of the Seder experience.

Karpas

There are different traditions of which vegetable is used for Karpas, but you can reclaim the ancient Roman origin of this tradition: a yummy vegetable to snack on while you do all the talking before the main course!

Yachatz

- What meaning do you give to this ritual, of breaking the middle matzah? Maybe, look at the broken and whole matzahs, and think what is broken and whole in the world around us.

- The traditional text here says something surprising: “This year we are slaves, next year we will be free.” What did this sentence mean last year? What does it mean to you now? What will next year’s Pesach look like?
- The text throws a welcome to the world: “Let all who are hungry, come here and eat!” Maybe we should skip this tonight. Maybe we should leave it as a wish for the future.

Maggid

- This is the core of the storytelling part of the Seder. This is where you can be most yourself.
- You can say the words from the Haggadah in any language you please, or savour the strange familiarity of the Hebrew texts.
- If you can bear how strange it feels: speak to yourself out loud!
- Take the question-and-answer tradition seriously. Perhaps prepare some questions in advance you would like to take the time to dedicate some thoughts to.
- Read parts of the Exodus story and find at least one phrase that seems relevant to where you are this year.
- A big bulk of the traditional Maggid section is a complex word-by-word interpretation of four sentences from the book of Deuteronomy. Look at the original text, and ask some questions about it. Make up some answers too.
- Say the words ‘Pesach’, ‘Matzah’, and ‘Maror’, point to them on the table (Pesach is symbolised either by a roasted bone on the plate, or just by the meal itself), and explore what they should symbolise this year.
- Find some books or poems on your bookshelf that you used to like but haven’t looked at for years. Read a passage out loud, ceremonially.
- Finish this section with another good glass of wine!

Rachtzah

Wash your hands again! Enjoy the silliness and seriousness of being alone and going through these rituals.

Motzi Matzah

Finally, eating this matzah! There are different symbolic meanings for the matzah, the *lechem oni*: a bread of poverty, a bread of simpleness, a bread of difficulties, a bread of giving answers. What is it for you?

Maror

It’s not obvious that at the celebration of freedom, we bring the bitterness of the Pesach story onto our table, experiencing it with our bodies. But we do: by eating Maror before the meal, we insist on reliving also the bitter aspects of a life of slavery and opression. Why? And the charoset,

the sweet apple-and-wine dish, is a symbol either of the cement made by the slaves in Egypt or the plague of blood. Strangely, these two symbolic foods, one sweet and one bitter, are eaten at the same time.

Korech

Even more paradoxical, we wrap up the maror and matzah and eat them together. Why?

Shulchan Orech

Treat yourself to a great meal, as much as you can afford.

Tzafun

Tzafun means 'hidden'. In big Seders with lots of children, half the matzah (the 'afikoman') is hidden at the beginning of the meal, and the children who find it bring it at this point to be eaten. This probably won't happen this year alone. But this is a time to reflect - on a full stomach - on the idea of hiddenness and uncertainty in our world. An unseen virus that has shaken confidence in the future. There's also another side to hiddenness - that anything could happen! One overlooked aspect of freedom is that we're open to all sorts of surprises. Dare yourself to engage in an optimistic fantasy.

Barech

Sing Birkat Hamazon out loud, and finish with a third glass of wine.

Hallel

This is a set of psalms that expresses thankfulness (although if you look at the text closely, especially in the middle, you'll find a much darker and more complex attitude to the fragility of life.) Take some moments to think about what you're thankful for, who you could and should thank, in these strange times. And end with a fourth cup of wine - the taste of strange liberty!

Nirtzah

At the end, there's all the classic Pesach songs. Sing any of them you like. Or sing or hum other songs you think speak to where we're at today.

Final Thoughts

How different is this night from all other nights. But in a way, how very Jewish! Jews are paradoxical people, holding onto a strict tradition, and always finding ways to adapt to a

changing reality. For over two thousand years, Jews have made Pesach fit to the situations they faced - whether under persecution, in exile, or in comfort and in flourishing communities. Pesach this year will be difficult and unfamiliar, and call for lots of creativity - and yet it will join the chain of thousands of years of Pesach seders calling for creativity. What we do this year will also echo into the future, and enter the story of our people. Our innovations could be the next generations' traditions. It might be hard to think like this, looking at our situation today from the perspective of thousands of years, and it's also ok to just be where we are, doing the best we can with what we have. That's what Jews do!

Wishing everyone health, strength and moments of joy and calmness.