

Getting Ready for Pesach

Pesach, despite the marathon preparations involved, is my favorite holiday of the year. I love the seder, I love cooking and baking our traditional Pesach treats, I love matza on picnics, I love the intentional gathering of friends and family during the eight days. And I love the message of Pesach – that this story of going out of Egypt, - is the beginnings of us, as a people, as a family. I love Pesach memories – my own from my childhood, and the one that I try to create for my own children, and for my friends. And I love taking a picture of everyone just before the seder, because it is a record of who is there, and who, sometimes sadly, is not.

I try to plan at least one special outing during the week of Pesach – this year, our congregation is going to the Grasshoppers (with Matza) , I 'm going to see The Dead (with some smuggled in macaroons) and I'm driving up to Ramah for a day to enjoy Pesach there.

We're also planning a few innovations for Pesach at the shul:

-We're blessing the sun! – Once every 28 years, according to legend, the sun is in the exact spot where it was at the moment of creation. . And that moment falls this year on April 8, erev Pesach. So after 7 am minyan that morning, and after the siyum Torah study, we'll troop outside and recite a blessing thanking God for the sun, and for cycles of nature, and then come back inside and eat our last chometz breakfast, courtesy of the Men's Club.

-We're finishing a volume of the Talmud – *Tractate Mezuzah*, so that all the firstborns, who might be fasting on the day before Pesach, can come and celebrate and break their fast with (last) chometz bagels.

-We'll be davening in the chapel for the first, second and seventh days of Pesach – These festival days are weekdays, so attendance will be lower than usual, and I love the intimacy that davening in the chapel provides. Space will be limited, so come early to get a good seat!

-We'll be hosting an "Iron Chef" matza ball competition for the youth of our congregation – on Friday morning April 10. Our Kadima and Chaverim youth groups (grades 4-8), under the leadership of Boaz Avraham Katz, will learn how to prepare matza balls, and we'll all have a chance to taste them at Kiddush after morning services that day.

-On Shabbat of Pesach, April 11, Dina Ackermann will chant chapters from the Bible's Song of Songs. And we'll be honoring Henry Levinson with an aliya, a continuation of the Henryfest at UNCG.

-On the seventh day of Pesach Wednesday April 15, we are starting services at 9:00, and we are guaranteeing Adon Olam, ending services, at 10:30 am. That day, we'll be singing Hallel, and chanting the Song at the Red Sea, in the original Hebrew, just as the Israelites did way back then! This is an opportunity to come to shul, and, if you must, still be at the office, school, or tee time before noon.

-Yizkor will be recited on the eighth day of Pesach, Thursday April 16. This is a four-times a year opportunity to formally remember parents and grandparents, friends and others who are no longer with us.

-and on Sunday April 12, we have special dispensation from the Grasshoppers management to bring in Pesach snacks to the ball park. It's a daytime game, so come ready to relive the old days of Pesach at Ebbets Field. Or the Bronx.

-Many of us will be enjoying second seder together at Beth David – We have some wonderful, interesting families and individuals coming to our community seder this year, there will be special activities for the kids, there will be good conversation, and of course, Brad is catering.

I hope to see many of you over the course of the Pesach holiday – I wish you a sweet and joyous Pesach.

Shalom,
Rabbi Eliezer Havivi

Before I close this column, I want to share with you a note I got from my friend Rabbi Arnold Resnicoff. Many of you remember Arnie from when he visited our congregation a few years ago – He's a retired Navy chaplain who spoke about Jews in the military.

Many of us who host seders are often asked by our guests what they can bring. But the food preparation part of the seder is often a labor of love for us, so we are hesitant give any of it up. What we really want is the presence of our friends – that's the best house gift we can receive. In that vein, I share with you a beautiful note that Arnie sends out to his seder guests each year – In it, he asks them to simply bring of themselves. I asked Rabbi Resnicoff if I could share his words with you, our congregation, and he generously agreed, I offer them to you for your consideration, and perhaps, for your own seders and guests:

To our Seder guests:

I am absolutely delighted that all of you -- my friends, my daughter Malka's friends, and our shared friends (and all of you will be in that category beginning the night you meet at the seder!) -- will be able to join with Malka and me for one of our Passover seders this year.

Some of you have asked me if you can bring anything to the seder -- and the answer is "yes," but NOT anything to eat or drink, and not even decorations, like flowers. The religious dietary rules for Passover are so complicated that everything allowed on Passover will already be in place -- and the decorations for the festival will be specific symbols that have a place in the story that we will retell and share, and we may not have room in our place for even one more vase or flower pot! But what you can bring -- and I would very much appreciate your bringing -- are stories, memories, insights, ideas, and questions (questions are very important, as the evening reminds us!) that will help us not only tell the story of Passover -- of slavery and freedom (in all forms) -- but also elaborate on that story, and those ideas.. In fact, the essence of the seder is to be found in these words. We come together to tell the story ("Haggadah," the book that sketches out the "order" -- the "seder" -- of the story, means "telling"), and in that book we read that "the person who elaborates [on that telling] is the person to be admired." In other words, the telling cannot be mere rote or ritual: it must become a springboard for a discussion that challenges us to learn from the past in a way that gives hope to the future.

Passover helps us think about many ideas, but remembering, and passing on our memories, is the central theme. In Judaism, we believe we should remember, not forget ("Zachor!" -- "Remember" -- the Bible tells us again and again -- "lo tishkach" -- "Don't Forget!") -- but we understand that the real challenge is not just to guard against forgetting; the real challenge is to understand HOW TO REMEMBER. We must remember in a way that keeps our memories from holding us back; we must

remember in a way that helps us use our memories to move forward. We remember slavery so that we never take freedom for granted. We remember hardship not only so that we can appreciate progress, but also so that we never turn a blind eye to the suffering of others. We remember, as the Haggadah (and so much of Jewish tradition) puts it: from the bad to the good -- so that we try to understand even the hardest of times within the context of a faith that tells us never to lose hope: to understand, and believe with all our heart -- even during the worst of times -- that the best of times are in our future, not our past. And, as the seder will remind us, "one size does not fit all": we must remember in different ways for different listeners: for different children (beginning with the four examples the Haggadah offers), and for adults whose childhood memories have driven them to grow up to be very different kinds of people.

For many of you, this will be one more of a series of Passover seders that you have celebrated throughout your lives -- and I hope you will share some memories of some of those past celebrations, as we read about some of the past seders recalled in the Haggadah. On the other hand, for some of you, this may be the first seder you have ever attended. So -- you should know that we will eat, but we will not eat for awhile...so plan lunch accordingly! (The meal -- the "feasting" -- is not central, as it is at some other Jewish holy days home gatherings, like Purim. Here it is just the hook for the telling and the remembering that will truly be the "food for thought" during the evening.) And, the eating -- the meal -- is only one part of 15 different sections of the seder, so this will NOT be an occasion to "eat and run"! Instead, please come in the mood to relax, talk, listen, reflect, teach, learn, and -- I hope -- enjoy: enjoy the evening, with friends, old and new; and enjoy the opportunity to celebrate the freedoms that we have today, even though we know that there is still much more work to be done, because (again, as the Haggadah puts it), so long as one person is enslaved, none of us are truly free.

Thank you for accepting our offer to join us at the Seder. Malka and I very much look forward to seeing you.