

How To Make Seders in a Time of Social Distancing

Resources and Options Curated and Suggested by Rabbi Debra Orenstein

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A quote for inspiration: “This year, for the holiday, Earth got us a pandemic! Which, honestly, is a pretty terrible present. And also a little too biblically on-the-nose.... Every year as we go through the seder, we are meant to relive the ancient Israelites’ journey from slavery to freedom, and we are encouraged to think about how the story relates to modern times and our own lives. Well, the events of the past few months have felt not unlike an ever-escalating series of plagues, and like Moses, we are all getting a sacred call to work towards liberation whether we feel ready or not.” – Annie Weinberg, [How To Host a Virtual Passover Seder](#)

PREPARATIONS BEFORE THE SEDERS

A quote for inspiration: “Prepare. Even when we gather together in person, a great seder is well-prepared in advance. A virtual seder requires even more advance work.” – Dr. Ron Wolfson, [Top Ten Tips for Seders This Year](#)

Here’s how to prepare, starting now!

- **Mail items.** Send Haggadot, favorite foods, greeting cards, favorite commentaries or articles related to Passover. Don’t forget Afikomen gifts! Be cautious and safe about what and how you send.
 - There may still be time to order Passover kits, books, and crafts. If not, you can do a lot with what you already have in the house. Check out following, among others: [Kveller Crafts](#) and [NJ Family Passover Crafts](#).
 - Suggestions from [A Different Pesach](#): “Ask each family member or friend write a paragraph, thought, or idea for [one or more] of the 15 steps of the seder.... This can function as its own family commentary on the haggadah, and as ‘conversation’ at your table [even if you are all in separate locations]. Or you can each send [emails] with the same theme, such as reflections on opportunities to create the conditions for liberation in the year to come.”
- **Invite or accept invitations.** It may be your usual crew, or an even bigger crowd from Zoom around the country, or a much smaller group than you are used to. The recommendations are for ten or fewer people to gather in person. Think of folks who may not have a Seder to go to this year, because of all the disruptions.
- **Choose or make your Haggadah.** Depending on how and with whom you are holding a Seder, you can share your screen in an online platform, email a pdf or scanned pages to others, or even [make your own, new family Haggadah](#).
- **Set expectations.** Maybe you can’t cook the way you usually do. Maybe you shouldn’t. Maybe this isn’t the year to make your own Haggadah. It’s OK if this Pesach is different. It’s OK if you don’t stress yourself to do more.
- **Arrange for any technology you will need.** Now is the time to investigate and sign up for WebEx, Zoom, Google Meet, Free Conference Call, or other services.

DOING A SEDER ALONE

Dr. Michelle Friedman, a psychiatrist who teaches pastoral counseling, wrote an article on [Being Alone for Pesach](#). My favorite suggestion of hers was: “Create a phrase or a mantra that you can repeat to yourself to provide comfort. This phrase should resonate with you and soothe you. Some phrases that others have used include, “I am not alone”, “This too shall pass”, “I have overcome worse” or “This will only make me stronger”. Phrases might resonate with the holiday “this is my [Exodus from Egypt]” or “this is the birth of a new freedom for me.” Some find it helpful to write the phrase on a piece of paper and to carry it with them.”

Journalist Ben Sales wrote in “[Passover in a pandemic: Families on Zoom, solo seders and broken traditions](#)”: “Throughout the Haggadah, we read about many accounts of our ancestors, whether it be in Egypt or whether it be hiding in caves or any other times, that are going through some very challenging times,” Efreim Epstein, who lives alone in Manhattan, said. “I’m an extrovert. I like being around people, but I also know that there are sources saying that if one is doing seder by themselves, they should ask the Mah Nishtana of themselves. If that’s what I have to do this year, I accept it.”

[A Different Pesach: Ideas for the Solo Seder](#) is a collaborative Google Doc written from an Orthodox perspective.

Jordan Namerow [The Four Children and COVID-19](#) is relevant for any Seder, but especially if you are doing the Seder alone. You can find yourself in all four children.

DOING A SEDER WITH A SMALL (MICRO) GROUP

A quote for inspiration: “We shouldn’t think that simply because we cannot be a part of the greater, physical gathering of Jewish people, that our rituals, our practices, our celebrations are not legitimate. G-d forbid. So long as we root down, as a tree does, and branch out into whatever experience our Seder is meant to be, with whoever is meant to be there to receive our questions, challenge us, and help us tell the Pesach story, we are all part of one experience. This too is spiritual community.” – Rabbi Rebecca Blady, Hillel Director, Germany in [Pesach in the Age of Social Distancing](#).

- If meeting with others, be sure that you are taking proper precautions. Has everyone been healthy and quarantined for 14 days?
- Wash hands frequently and sit apart from one another.
- Discuss how you will order, cook, and serve any food safely.

DOING VIRTUAL SEDERS

The Conservative movement and many rabbis in the Orthodox movement have allowed “virtual” Seders this year, in which people will meet by phone or video conference. This provides the opportunity for even more relatives to get together (at least virtually).

[How To Host a Virtual Passover Seder](#) by Annie Weinberg has good humor and lots of valuable suggestions. A professional digital organizer and campaigner, she offers great advice to set yourself up for a successful virtual Seder.

[How to Make Your Virtual Seder Lively, Engaging, and Meaningful](#) is a Reform movement publication of short, manageable length with good, simple-to-implement suggestions about both the content and style of your Seder.

Some of My Favorite Suggestions (both original and borrowed):

- Make calls to any friends or relatives who haven't used your chosen platform (Zoom, Google Meet, or other), so that you can talk them through the technology.
This is a great task to assign to students who are home from college or to teens.
- Cook together on Zoom before the Seder with folks you will be sharing a Seder with, to get used to the format and to share recipes and informal conversation.
- Select a Haggadah, or direct everyone to the same open-source pdf. Alternatively, you can [make a Haggdah](#), as noted above. Just make sure you, a tech leader, or multiple participants are ready to Screen Share the right page (perhaps including pages from different Haggadot) at the appropriate time.
- Consider a break (go offline or mute) during dinner.
- Invite participants to prepare something in advance to share at the Seder. E.g.,
 - a quote about freedom
 - a photo or drawing (shown through Screen Share?) that exemplifies freedom
 - Call on folks to share their photos (or quotes, above) when they seem most relevant or at specific times throughout the Seder
 - assign participants to present something specific for a section of the Seder.
 - If you have 14 or more guests at your virtual seder, just assign each person one of the sections of the Haggadah from Kadesh to Nirtzah.
 - Or choose familiar sections to assign, like Four Questions, Four Children, Parsley, Ten Plagues, Dayeinu, each of the four cups of wine, Bitter Herbs, etc.
 - Or ask people to create something original, tailored for this year (e.g., a poem, drawing, interpretation of the Haggadah or Book of Exodus. that relates to this virus and its effects).