

Coronavirus Will Be Unwelcome Guest As Jews Celebrate Passover While Social Distancing

WRITTEN BY

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The perennial Passover Seder question – “Why is this night different from all other nights?” – will be replaced in April by “Why is this Passover different from all other Passovers?”

The coronavirus, like an unwelcome and uninvited guest reminiscent of the biblical plagues of the Exodus, will force the most-observed annual Jewish ritual experience, the Seder, to be practiced very differently.

Social distancing – or the more severe “shelter in place” restrictions – will require a rethinking of the normal pattern of overflowing guest lists for this most quintessential of Jewish home gatherings.

The presence of at-risk populations, including elderly grandparents who normally play a critical leadership and educational role, will have to be weighed carefully in each instance to prevent endangerment.

Synagogues normally have a spike in attendance during this season, but by now all have or should have closed their doors to prevent the spread of the virus, and will not reopen before the holiday begins at sundown April 8.

Tens of thousands of Jews normally flock to resort locations to celebrate the holiday in Israel, Florida, Italy and beyond, but this year all Passover destination vacations will surely be canceled.

For the meticulously observant, a vast spring cleaning of the kitchen and changeover to Passover utensils and dishes are required preparations – the one Passover practice paralleling COVID-19 prevention.

But the tradition of shopping for kosher for Passover food in crowded supermarkets may be replaced by an uptick in online orders to forestall the spread of the coronavirus, especially in cities across the country that now are living under “shelter in place” mandates.

All of these adjustments will be fully in the spirit of Jewish tradition, which prioritizes the preservation of life above all. Even the stringent laws of Passover dietary restrictions would necessarily be violated if their observance endangered lives.

In short, the Jewish values of family and community will be under assault by the coronavirus this Passover.

Responsible rabbinic leaders have already acted to shut down synagogues that provide public prayer services and the necessary quorum of 10. This is a cataclysmic shift, especially for Orthodox Jews, whose lives are governed by thrice-daily communal prayer.

Many synagogues, primarily from the liberal denominations that espouse more flexible interpretations of halakhah (Jewish law) have continued services with livestreaming and the like.

Some families will necessarily have smaller Passover Seder tables or use interactive technologies like Zoom or FaceTime to mitigate the separation of families and communities. This is not an option for the most traditionally observant, who eschew activating electrical and recording devices during the initial and final days of the holiday.

Creativity will lessen but not erase the threat to Passover traditions this year. But what foundational values will be gained?

Early in the Passover Seder, we recite these words, in ancient Aramaic: “All who are hungry, let them enter and eat. All who are in need, let them come celebrate Passover. ... Now we are enslaved, next year we will be free.”

These words will take on deeper meaning this year and heighten our sensitivity and core Jewish values. It will give us an opportunity to perform mitzvot – literally commandments, proverbially good deeds – that are always present but even more so this Passover season, including feeding the hungry, supporting the poor, visiting the sick, freeing the bound and comforting the mourner, among other mitzvot.

We will not be able to perform these mitzvot in the ways we have in the past, but we must find alternative ways to sustain and increase our core values.

The other day, when several members of my immediate family were hunkering down and working from home, we received a phone call from a lay leader in our synagogue who, together with others, was reaching out to check on the hundreds of households in our congregational family.

Normally these calls would go unanswered in the middle of the day, but not these days when more and more people are necessarily at home. These leaders are identifying needs and will, no doubt, assure that those who

are experiencing coronavirus isolation, food shortages, and logistical complications will be extended the support that they need.

As the number who are infected increases, visiting virtually with the sick and their caregivers and comforting mourners will become, out of necessity, more commonplace. I am certain that mine is not the only family to offer tutorials on FaceTime and Zoom use for elderly members of the family most at risk for infection and isolation.

Every year when we recite, “Now we are enslaved, next year we will be free,” I ask the assembled at our Seder how this could possibly be relevant to fortunate American Jews who are anything but enslaved.

We often conclude that the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.’s oft-quoted teaching in his “Letter from the Birmingham Jail” is the best response: “Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly.”

On this Passover, we are indeed enslaved by this pandemic, but if we focus on our common humanity, our “inescapable network of mutuality,” next year we will be free.

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