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ויהי לב לעם לעשות FOR THE PEOPLE'S HEART WAS IN THE WORK

Running a Seder in Uncharted Territory

Are you hoping to conduct a seder for your extended family and friends this year, despite the fact that “sheltering in place” against spreading the Coronavirus will necessitate *not* gathering around a literal table together?

Good luck! Let’s admit that it will be quite a trick pulling off a seder without the pleasure of seeing everyone’s shining face and hearing everyone’s golden voice, not to mention cooking for a small handful of people (or even yourself alone) and not for a hungry horde.

Here are some thoughts on how to make it work – or at least work better than not.

1. Consider not staying on Zoom or Face Time for your entire seder. Instead, pick out one or two thirty-minute stretches and do those with everyone together online. It’s hard for people to maintain focus on a Zoom meeting for more than an hour at a time. For children, a half hour can be their limit.
2. Remember that Zoom has a slight delay. Having a discussion on Zoom is no problem, but singing is tricky. When you’re singing your favorite seder songs, either have everyone unmuted and put up with the resultant cacophony, or take turns having one person at a time unmute and lead the song while others sing along at home but muted.
3. Some people have always preferred to abbreviate their seder, especially if they have small children at the table. But for those who cherish the joy of a lengthy seder with lots of songs and special readings and plenty of free-wheeling discussion (as well as a few heated disagreements), this might be the year to do some abbreviating yourselves. A Talmudic dictum goes, “*tafasta m’rubei, lo tafasta*” – “if you try to grab too much, you end up grabbing nothing.”
4. Send out a few special readings to everyone in advance. Email everyone with some passages you want to include in the seder, and ask everyone to print them out ahead of time. You might want to assign parts to different people in advance, or even to ask everyone to find something special they would like to contribute while everyone else listens.

5. This year, why not invite your participants to free-associate with the passages and symbols of the seder. Ask them to use the familiar foods, songs, and readings as metaphors for our world's predicament. You might be surprised at how on-target the traditional elements of the seder are when it comes to framing our contemporary experience.
6. A seder is generally easier to conduct if every participant is using the same haggadah. Whether you make your own haggadah or supplement, or you always use a particular edition, it would help to get the same text in the hands of each participant. Simply put a copy of the haggadah in the mail to each person or family who will be "coming" to your seder, in hopes that it will arrive by *erev Pesach*.
7. Practice "loving talk" and "benefit of the doubt." This year, everyone is somewhat on edge after having stayed at home for so many weeks. Everyone is nervous about staying healthy. Therefore, go easy on each other. Make an effort to cut each other extra slack as you proceed through the steps of your virtual seder. Everyone means well. When a remark sounds like a criticism, count to ten (like the Plagues!) or at least to four (like the Questions or the Four Children!). This year's seder could be the very thing we all need in order to re-focus ourselves on what's important and meaningful in our discombobulated lives.
8. Right before we conclude the seder, we'll be opening the door for Elijah. We can imagine Elijah not coming in, but rather inviting us to come *out* and re-enter the world. That will happen soon enough. Let's let Elijah's message be one of hope against hope. When we finally utter *l'shanah haba'ah biy'rushalayim*, "Next year in Jerusalem," we can add "next year may we be privileged to sit together safely in the same house at the same beloved table."

May it indeed be so.

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