

10 Tips for Having the Best Seder Ever

By Dr. Ron Wolfson

- 1. Give Homework.** When the Weber family invites the Wolfson family for the seder, we are asked to prepare a presentation on some aspect of the ceremony. The presentation could be a drash, an explanation of what the hagaddah is trying to say. But over the years our presentations have also been given as a play, a song, and a takeoff on a game show. Not everyone in your family may be able to do this, but there is no better way to encourage participation than by asking people to prepare something in advance.
- 2. Buy Time.** The seders of my youth never lasted more than 20 minutes. That's how long it took to say kiddish (blessing over wine), do karpas (the "greens" that represent spring, usually parsley), break the [matzah](#), and fight over who was the youngest grandchild who could say the Four Questions. For a few minutes everyone took turns reading a paragraph, then my Uncle Morton would ask the famous Fifth Question: "When do we eat?" End of ceremony. One way to buy time to dwell on the story is to offer your guests something to nibble on between the vegetables of karpas and the meal. My wife, Susie, often prepares an edible centerpiece. She and the children slice jicama (a kind of vegetable) very thin and, with Jewish cookie cutters, stamp out Stars of David, [Torah](#) scrolls and kiddish cups. She places the shapes on the end of bamboo shish kabob skewers and inserts them into a head of red cabbage, placed in a wicker basket. She adds carefully arranged red and green peppers, carrots, celery and other vegetables. The result is a spectacular bouquet which we use as a centerpiece on the seder table. After karpas, we invite our guests to eat this centerpiece by dipping the vegetables into saucers of salad dressing placed around the table.
- 3. Tell the Story.** The core of the seder is the telling of the story of the Exodus from Egypt. The traditional text of the hagaddah contains four different tellings of the story, each one beginning with a question, a response, and praise for God. Think of ways to tell the story that supplement the hagaddah. One year we were invited to a seder where the host family put on a skit. Stan Reiner's "Seder Scenes" (Alternatives in Religious Education) is a good resource for this activity. Another family we know of used puppets and storybooks. The most unusual telling, however, had to be the family who presented a magical version of the Ten Plagues in costume. The father played Pharaoh, who, after complaining how thirsty he was, asked one of the children to fetch him some cool, clear water from the Nile. The child left the dinner room and returned with a pitcher of water and an empty glass. As "Pharaoh" poured the clear water into the glass, it turned red! The father was an amateur magician who incorporated a variety of magic tricks into the telling of the story. It was amazing and unforgettable!
- 4. Ask Questions.** The hagaddah invites questions. Encourage your guests to liberate themselves from the book and discuss what it is that the hagaddah is trying to tell us. A favorite point at which to do this is after the recitation of the Ten Plagues. "What are 10 things that plague us today?" is a question anyone, no matter what their level of Judaic knowledge, can answer. When the hagaddah tells us that we should feel as if we were redeemed from Egypt, what does that mean? What are we doing about Jewish continuity--in our family, in our community?
- 5. Have Fun.** Having family fun is serious business, especially at the seder table. The seder was never meant to be dull. Quite the contrary, it is to be a relaxed, informal educational experience. Some families add favorite songs that children learn in religious school--"Go Down, Moses," "One Day When Pharaoh Awoke in His Bed," and others. A favorite parody is Only Nine Chairs by Deborah Uchill Miller (Kar-Ben Copies), a hilarious account of a family seder.
- 6. Be Inclusive.** Inside most Jewish adults is a child who was upset at not finding the [afikomen](#), or ceremonial piece of matzah. We have created a way to include everyone in the afikomen search. We make a chart with the order of the seder (kadesh, urchatz, etc.) and select one letter from each word. We put these 14 letters on 3-by-5 cards and then hide them around the house. We tell the children that each of them must find at least one of the cards for us to find the real afikomen. When the kids find all the cards, they bring them to the table. Then we ask the adults to figure out a jumbled two-word clue from the letters. In one case, for instance, the letters spelled "at refrigerator." Once the clue is deciphered, everyone runs to the location and finds the real afikomen. Everyone who participates in the search gets a prize.
- 7. Use Materials.** One of the problems in keeping young children interested in the seder is that most hagaddahs are not designed for them. When our children were in nursery school, Susie created a "Pat the Bunny"-type hagaddah using the coloring sheets sent home from class. She added tactile materials to the sheets where appropriate: cotton balls on pictures of sheep, sandpaper on pictures of bricks of the pyramids, grape scratch-and-sniff stickers on pictures of the [kiddush](#)

cups. Susie also gave each child a "goody bag" filled with Passover symbols, frog stickers, a bookmark, even moist towelettes for the inevitable spills of wine.

8. **Innovations.** Each year, experienced seder leaders look for new ideas to incorporate into the ceremony. Here are a few of my favorites. Instead of filling Elijah's cup with wine at the beginning of the seder, wait until just before opening the door and pass Elijah's cup to each participant to pour some of his/her wine into it. This is a demonstration of the need to act in order to bring in the Messianic Era. The [Sephardim](#) pick up the seder plate and place it over every person's head during the recitation of Ha Lachma Anya, the invitation to participate in the seder.

9. **Choose a good hagaddah.** There are 3,000 editions of the hagaddah catalogs in the library of the Jewish Theological Seminary, and every year more versions appear. Jews have always felt comfortable in putting together hagaddahs that reflect their particular slant on the experience of the seder. So we have The Hagaddah for the Liberated Lamb (a vegetarian hagaddah) and The San Diego Women's Hagaddah (a feminist hagaddah). We have traditional unedited texts and greatly abbreviated liberal texts. We have new "family" hagaddahs and that old standby, The Maxwell House Hagaddah. Choose a hagaddah that fits your family's needs.

10. **Prepare.** The ultimate hagaddah may be one you put together yourself. With desktop publishing software and inexpensive printing widely available, it is not difficult to edit your own hagaddah text. You can easily combine traditional texts with modern interpretations and readings, songs and information. This will take some time, but the reward will be a seder experience that is meaningful and memorable.