

## A FAMILY AFFAIR, WITH WINE

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Lest your imagination lead to any prurient conclusions, let me assure you that the wine in the title is meant to convey a ceremonial, not a carnal connotation. That will become clear as we proceed. My earliest recollection of a holiday was of our family attending a Passover Seder at my Zaydeh's house. Zaydeh is the Yiddish word for grandpa, in this case my mother's father. As the head of the family, he had the honor of conducting the family Seder, a combination banquet and religious service on the eve of the eight-day Passover holiday. Seder simply means the order of the service to be followed. The procedure is all spelled out in a booklet called Haggadah. Copies are often distributed to everyone sitting at the Seder table so that all can follow along. Passover is a family-centered festival; most of my aunts, uncles and cousins usually attended the Seder. It is also the most cherished of Jewish holidays, since it commemorates the dramatic deliverance of the Jews from bondage in Egypt more than 3200 years ago, as recounted in the book of Exodus. During Passover, no bread or any leavened products are eaten. Instead what is eaten is an unleavened bread called matzos, pronounced mott-sez in Yiddish. They come in thin, flat ridgy oblongs, and are semi-perforated so they can be easily broken. Matzos commemorate the kind of unleavened bread the Jews fleeing Egypt ate because they could not pause long enough to wait for the dough to rise.

Of course to a youngster of six the Seder was all rather mystifying, especially since the entire ceremony was conducted in Hebrew, a language I had not yet learned. The only languages I knew then were English and Yiddish. But my Zaydeh, who was very Orthodox, felt compelled to recount the whole story in Hebrew. That was the boring part.

But some aspects of the Seder were fun. The Passover service calls for everyone at the Seder table, young and old alike, to be served four cups of wine during the course of the ceremonial meal. It was wine my Zaydeh himself made for Passover, using Concord grapes and sugar. It was sweet and delicious. Little did I know then that I was being conditioned to enjoy the wines of Manischewitz later in life. I don't recall ever having gotten drunk on Passover wine; the amount served to me and my young cousins was quite small. But years later, after I married and we had children of our own, we did have an unusual Seder experience. We held a Seder at our house, which I conducted. After the meal everyone left the table and gathered in the living room. Our eldest

daughter, who was then three, came traipsing in later, singing merrily. How strange, we thought; she seemed a bit tipsy. When we went back into the dining room, we discovered that she had gone around the table and had drunk up whatever wine was left in each of the wine glasses. She continued to sing and dance until 2:00 a.m. when she was in her crib. At the next year's Seder we instructed all the adults to be sure to drain their wine glasses before they left the table. Today that daughter is in her fifties and has become something of a wine connoisseur. But her discriminating taste has more to do with having lived in California for a time and having visited wineries there than with any remembrance of sneaky wine sippings as a youngster at Passover Seders.

One of the central features of a traditional Passover Seder is to have the youngest child present ask the elder conducting the Seder the famous four questions about the history of Passover and the meaning of its special customs. Thus is the story passed on from one generation to the next. It was a moment of pride for my mother and father when I was finally able to ask the four questions in Hebrew. My Zaydeh, an immigrant who barely knew English, replied entirely in Hebrew and related the full story of how the ancient Jews were able to escape bondage in Egypt by crossing the miraculously parted Red Sea. I couldn't understand his lengthy Hebrew reply but to this day I remember the Hebrew version of the first of the four questions: MAH NISHTANAH HA LAILAH HA ZEH MICALL HA LAILOT—why is this night different from all other nights?

Years later, as an adult, I came to enjoy a cross-lingual pun based on this question. It seems that King Arthur decided to hold a full dress review of his knights. They all gathered in the courtyard and formed a reviewing line. As King Arthur and his adjutant came slowly down the line to inspect them, he was pleased to note that each knight's suit of armor was bright and shiny, until he came upon one whose armor was dull, dirty and dingy. Whereupon King Arthur turned to his adjutant and asked: MAH NISHTANAH HA LAILAH HA ZEH MICALL HA LAILOT?

There is yet another tradition involving wine that is part of the Seder. Zaydeh places an empty glass in the center of the table and fills it with wine. Then the front door is opened. Zaydeh explains to the youngsters that the wine is meant for Elijah, the Messiah, in case he should visit our house that night. The open front door signals that he is welcome. The children are to watch the glass of wine carefully, for no one knows when the Messiah might arrive. During the course of the long evening there comes a time, usually after the main meal, when the children have either wandered out of the room or

fallen asleep. At that point Elijah's wine glass is passed among the adults and each takes a good gulp. When the glass is empty, it is placed back in the center of the table. The children usually come back to the table when it is time for dessert. Invariably one or more of them will notice that Elijah's glass is empty. Excitedly they begin to ask what happened to the special glass of wine. Zaydeh then explains that Elijah must have visited while they were all out of the room. The older ones are skeptical. Fortunately, learning the truth doesn't make them cynics. Instead they look forward to the following year to see the reactions of their even younger cousins.

In the end the children really gain the upper hand in this playfulness. Traditionally the Seder cannot end until everyone at the table has been given and has eaten a piece of the afikoman. The afikoman is a special matzah that is carefully wrapped before the meal and placed behind Zaydeh on the chair where he is sitting. The children have to figure out a way to get the afikoman without being noticed by Zaydeh. Their chance comes when Zaydeh finds an excuse to leave the table for a brief moment. The children then quickly seize the afikoman and after a brief debate on the best place, they hide it. When Zaydeh returns to the table and notices that the afikoman is gone, he has to go find it. To shorten the quest, he negotiates a price for its return so that he can conclude the Seder. The kids have the upper hand and they know it. Some of the older ones can be tough bargainers. Ultimately a deal is struck, the afikoman is found, a piece is distributed to each one at the table, a blessing is said and the Seder comes to an end.

Of course in the Jewish tradition there are also holidays without wine. The favorite among my children is Channukah. It involves eight days of gift-giving, which they think is more fun than the one day of gift giving at Christmas. But that is a story for another budget.