



*Westchester's Most Influential Weekly*

## Passover for the Rest of Us

**By Rabbi FRANK TAMBURELLO**

A *New York Times* article about Passover dated April 9, 1855, possibly the first mention of Passover in that newspaper stated: "(Passover) is an imperishable record of the unaltered nationality of the Jews."

And so it has been. For over 3,300 years, Passover has played a central role in the ongoing history and culture of the Jewish people. The Seder ritual, with its curious mixture of customs and laws, created and evolved over many centuries epitomizes the Jewish communal experience. Passover's theme of redemption and freedom is reenacted at the Seder with lessons and songs, feasting and solemnity. The Passover Seder is ageless. It is at the same time, both scholarly and popular, ancient and contemporary.

According to the Jewish National Population Survey, about 68% of Americans who identify themselves as Jews routinely hold or attend a Passover Seder, in contrast with the 46% who are actually members of a synagogue.

Clearly, the observance of Passover in some form is very close to the hearts of a great many Jews. For some, this occasion is marked by scrupulous adherence to special Passover preparation and Kashrut (Jewish dietary laws); and to customs particular to certain individual communities and groups.

For others, it can be just simply getting together for a Passover meal on one of the nights during the holiday observance. Most often these meals include nostalgic dishes that may remind us of our childhood: gefilte fish with horseradish, chicken soup with matzo balls, brisket or turkey and macaroons... even matzo lasagna for Italian Jews!

Jews who are accustomed to regularly observing Jewish law and ritual, and who are familiar with Hebrew, generally have an easier time executing this holiday. The traditional text of the Haggadah, the ritual manual for the Seder, is carefully recited in its entirety. Traditional Seders can last for hours with deliciously prepared food and deep theological discussion and prayer. It is for many of those families the highlight of the year.

I am an avid collector of Haggadot and books about Passover. Recently, I came across two books, one called "[Haggadah: A Passover Seder for the Rest of Us](#)" by Henry Kellerman Ph.D., and "[Pesach for the Rest of Us](#)" by Marge Piercy.

I found it interesting that both titles contain the same words: "the rest of us."

I would assume that the "rest of us" pretty much know who we are. We are Jews who are trying to figure out what it means to be a Jew; what it means to believe or not believe, to doubt and to reason. We are Jews who are trying to figure out what it means to live in a world that is constantly reshaping and redefining itself. Many of us are looking for ways to avoid slipping into a cultural ghetto of our own devising, while seeking to develop a Jewish consciousness for ourselves and our children that will survive the scrutiny of both science and reason.

Many of us Jews who fall into the category of the "rest of us" may be uncomfortable observing Passover at all, because we cannot connect with concepts assumed to be "religious." We prefer calling ourselves secular or cultural Jews, and we generally do not adhere to the precepts of organized denominational Judaism. However, we do have strong connections to our Jewish identity and to what we consider Jewish values. We appreciate

having been raised in Jewish homes where there were unique attitudes and interest in things such as politics, education, literature and the arts, Israel, and the Holocaust, even in Jewish languages such as Yiddish and Ladino.

This Jewish connection does not require acceptance of any religious belief. Unlike other religions, Judaism does not have a specific dogma, but rather a set of customs. There is no one way to be a Jew, and that definitely has been one of Judaism's greatest strengths.

The Passover tale, like all good stories is both timeless and instructive. And although there is no firm historical evidence for the Biblical narrative, the quest for freedom and justice that forms the basis for the Exodus from Egypt has been and still is, a universal model of inspiration and hope for generations of those suffering the pain of oppression and injustice.

Some of us may find the concept of the "Chosen People" exclusionary; or are uncomfortable with conventional definitions of G\_d. We may be atheists or agnostics. There is no reason why we all cannot connect with our tradition in meaningful ways, without sacrificing the integrity of our beliefs.

Since the first Passover Haggadah was printed in Spain in 1482, there are now over 4,000 different versions of this book, and there are more published every year. There are hundreds of editions of the traditional version, many with interesting commentaries. There are many unique versions of the Haggadah that address our own particular way of being Jewish. There are secular humanist Haggadot such as Dr. Kellerman's mentioned above, feminist and egalitarian, gay and lesbian. There are African-American, Christian and ecumenical Haggadot. There are even Haggadot developed especially for vegetarians.

A quick online search of Haggadot will give us access to many downloadable versions, We can find instructions on how to write our own or easily find a version that speaks especially to us. We have come a long way since 1482.

The Passover celebration is rich in symbols, sounds, and stories. It has been evolving for thousands of years, and will continue to evolve. Passover can be a wonderful holiday for the rest of us if we allow ourselves, whether we believe in a Supreme Being or not, whether we believe in miracles or not, to take that time-honored journey through the Haggadah, with our families, friends and loved ones on our own terms. We can even write our own chapters as we find ways to extend the concepts of freedom peace and understanding, so intrinsic to the Passover story, to our own generation, and generations to come. A Sweet and Happy Passover to all!

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