

# THE SEDER IS ALREADY VIRTUAL

## Reflections for a Ritual in Extraordinary Times

MOMENT'S HAGGADAH SUPPLEMENT FOR PASSOVER 2020

Prepared by Amy E. Schwartz

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Elijah is a thoroughly virtual personage none of us has ever seen—a person whose defining characteristic is that he isn't there.

### ABOUT THIS SUPPLEMENT

This multi-denominational supplement draws on *Moment's* popular “Ask the Rabbis” section, which includes rabbinical wisdom ranging from independent to Orthodox. We've also included insight from interviews with scholars and writers as well as articles and poems from the *Moment* archives and other sources. Any or all of the commentaries and meditations below are suitable for reading aloud. We've put some in bold for easy reference. Or you may simply want to read through the supplement before your seder for possible themes to prompt the conversation. Please feel free to print out copies and/or share with family and friends.

## INTRODUCTION: *THE SEDER IS ALREADY VIRTUAL*

**I**t seems like such a tremendous loss: the seder without the extended family, the trips canceled, the faces or voices distant over the phone. But don't despair. Of all the Jewish holidays, the seder lends itself best to virtual treatment—because the seder is already virtual. It always has been. All its rituals are intended, and perfectly designed, to transport us out of our own time and place: As we taste the bitter herbs, dip greens in salt water, recline to eat a luxurious meal, and all the rest, we declare that we are not just remembering but reliving the Passover drama, as if it happened—or is happening—to us.

**The traditional Haggadah text says: “In every generation one must look upon himself as if he personally had come out of Egypt, as the Bible says: “And thou shalt tell thy son on that day, saying, it is because of that which the Eternal did for me, when I came forth out of Egypt.”—Ktav Publishing House translation, 1966.**

We travel to the past, and then to the future. We enact and imagine slavery and its privations. We might feel it when we break the Afikoman—the way a starving slave might break the matzah and put half of it away for later. (Or, depending whom you ask, it might be enough just to experience the long, boring wait for the meal.) Afterwards, we enact freedom, drinking and feasting and singing. And we open the door for Elijah, a thoroughly virtual personage none of us has ever seen—a person whose defining characteristic is that he isn't there.

None of it is the “authentic” Passover that was celebrated in biblical times. And even that “authentic” Passover was a symbolic reenactment of the events themselves. “Because the seder is so real to us, I think we forget it was a stand-in for something much more real,” said University of Virginia professor Vanessa Ochs, author of the new book, *The Passover Haggadah: A Biography*, in a recent interview.

**“Passover, from its first appearance in the Torah—the night of the actual Passover in Egypt—has been a holiday that's been virtual, if we define that as existing in the mind, in the imagination. On that very first Passover night, as the enslaved Israelites were told to use the blood of their slaughtered lambs to make a sign on their houses, they were also told to imagine that for all time to come, they would be telling the story of their liberation, which had not even happened yet. And how much more imagination was called forth when generations later, the tribes of Israel would bring lambs to the Temple to please God? And when pilgrimage and Temple sacrifice were no longer possible, it required an active imagination to imagine a symbolic service. My table is equivalent to an altar? My bitter herbs are equivalent to the bitterness of slavery?”**

**“We say, ‘The salt water is a symbol of tears,’ and, ‘The shank bone stands for the Passover offering,’ and we don't remember that once there was a real Passover offering, a real shank bone. This Greco-Roman symposium that's been translated into Jewish ritual, it feels to us like that is the authentic Passover, when it was really just a substitute, a stand-in, for the annual pilgrimage made by the ancient Israelites to bring their sacrifices to Jerusalem.”**

In her book, Ochs tries to evoke what's missing, but concludes that the real experience of the original pilgrimage is probably lost to time:

**“No Haggadah can orchestrate a family dining ritual that fully elicits the pilgrim's ‘communitas,’ the powerful group religious experience that breaks down boundaries... How could any liturgy compare with physically journeying up to Jerusalem among masses of people and the sound, smell and taste of sacrificed lambs? True enough, the imaginative replacement for Passover at the Temple forged in the crucible of rabbinic Judaism has been standing in for so long that it is no longer experienced as having once been new or compensatory. The seder has become its own real thing with its own long past.”**

This year, too, as we turn to a seder ritual that's yet one more step removed, in a year different from any other in recent memory, we hope this compendium of insights will enrich your virtual (or real) seder and make it a place where the seen and the unseen are at the table together, and the past, present and future can meet.

—Amy E. Schwartz, *Moment's* Ask the Rabbis, Books and Opinion Editor

### **KADESH: THE FIRST BLESSING OVER THE WINE**

The Kiddush can be made by even just one person, in the privacy of the home, in contrast with many other prayers that can be made only with a minyan—a group of 10 or more.

Not long ago, *Moment* asked our rabbis, “What role should virtual presence play in Jewish ritual and community?” Who knew their insights would be tested so soon and so severely?

**In ancient times, if you couldn't make it to Passover rites on the 14th of First Moon because your donkey had a flat hoof, then you'd try on the 14th of Second Moon (Numbers 9:9-11). If you couldn't bring a sheep for your sin-offering, two doves would do. And if your doves flew the coop, a bag of matzah meal would do (Leviticus 5:6-11). Likewise, if you can't visit your friend in the hospital because you blew a tire, a phone call will do (Ig'ros Moshe, Yo'reh Dey'ah, Vol. 1, No. 223). So if you can't make it to shul, you can Google a shtiebel. In the words of the ancient rabbis: “The Holy Blessed One says, ‘When you pray, pray in the synagogue that is in your village. If you cannot pray in your synagogue, pray in your field. If you cannot pray in your field, pray in your house. If you cannot pray in your house, pray on your bed. If you cannot pray on your bed, think it in your heart.’” (Midrash Tehillim 4:9)**

—Rabbi Gershon Winkler, Walking Stick Foundation, Fontana, CA (Independent)

**In my 15 years of blogging at Velveteen Rabbi, I've learned firsthand that strong pastoral, emotional and spiritual connections are possible online. Today those connections might happen via Facebook Messenger or Twitter direct message, but they're every bit as “real” as pastoral encounters face-to-face in my study...Reb Zalman Schachter-Shalomi (z"l) spoke of “logging on” to the cosmic mainframe. The internet itself can be a metaphor for God, the matrix of interconnection in which all are held. At its best, the internet connects us. Sometimes this is asynchronous, as when a seeker has a spiritual question in the middle of the night. Sometimes it's synchronous, as when a virtual minyan gathers to daven. Virtual presence isn't the same as being there in person, but it can be a lifeline.**

—Rabbi Rachel Barenblat, *Bayit: Your Jewish Home*, Williamstown, MA (Renewal)

**We understand that the virtual experience is limiting. Obviously, it is better to be present. So much is sacrificed by not being in the room with the community. But for some people, that just can't happen; the virtual experience is all they have. I am so relieved that our community has the resources and vision to realize that we must make ourselves available to those unable to be present. One of the Hebrew names for a synagogue is Beit Knesset—a house of gathering. With the help of technology, a synagogue can convene community from near and far, for the strong and weak, for the hearty and the frail.**

—Rabbi Amy Wallk Katz, Temple Beth El, Springfield, MA (Conservative)

**Virtual prayer is not new. It has been around for roughly 3,000 years. King Solomon opens the inauguration of the Temple (I Kings, Chapter 8) by declaring that God dwells in the cloud: He asks God to heed the prayers of his people, as well as those of other nations who will have the Temple in mind while they pray. In exile, Jews remained connected by chanting prayers at set dates and times. Isolated and cut off from others,**

**they found comfort in knowing they were part of a larger, albeit unseen community.**

—Rabbi Haim Ovadia, Potomac, MD (Sephardic)

More recently, as synagogues closed and minyan fell prey to “social distancing,” *Moment* asked rabbis, “How are you balancing health imperatives with the spiritual needs of your community?” Here’s one response:

**We wanted to act decisively and fully cooperate with the public health imperative aimed at slowing the spread of the virus. We changed all gatherings including services, meetings and classes to an online format, and in so doing acted on the Jewish principle of *pikuach nefesh*, the “preservation of life.” This does not mean we are “closing.” On the contrary, we are exploring how to be open to each other in an even deeper way, taking seriously what it means to be in covenant with one another locally and globally. We are hoping to bring even more of our community together online to draw on Torah and our tradition as a source of faith, strength and love. Attending to the needs of our bodies and our spirits, of individuals and of communities, we recognize that those needs are not actually separate but one. May this insight, along with the exercise of compassion and social responsibility for all, last beyond the pandemic and lead us to fulfill in a new way the commandment in Deuteronomy to “choose life so that you and your children shall live...”**

—Rabbi Caryn Broitman, Martha’s Vineyard Hebrew Center, Vineyard Haven, MA (Reconstructionist)

All the major movements of Judaism have issued legal rulings that the commandment to preserve life, *pikuach nefesh*, means that convening in person for a minyan is not only not required; it’s religiously forbidden. *The Times of Israel* reported in late March that “In what may be one of the boldest rulings issued on technology in recent years, several Sephardic Orthodox rabbis in Israel have declared that families may conduct their shared Seder over videoconference. While Orthodox religious law normally bans the use of electronic devices on Shabbat and festivals, the ruling, signed by 14 rabbis, permits the use of software to connect the elderly to their families on the first night of Passover. “Just as it is permissible for a non-critical patient to receive treatment on Shabbat in order to cure him of illness, such is the case here,” the rabbis wrote, giving the okay for the retelling of the Exodus story via Zoom or other videoconference software.” Other rabbis disagreed, of course. The article noted that shortly after this announcement, “Ashkenazi Chief Rabbi David Lau ...criticized the ruling, branding it “irresponsible, beyond ridiculous.”

### **URCHATZ: A NEW BLESSING FOR WASHING OUR HANDS**

In the traditional seder, there is no blessing over this first washing of the hands. But in this new era, hand-washing is suddenly a core practice—and a spiritual discipline. Rabbi Shmuel Herzfeld of Ohev Shalom Talmud Torah in Washington, DC, offers a meditation on these changed circumstances, along with a new blessing for hand-washing—and not only for the seder!

“There is so much about the coronavirus that is beyond our control. It is a very concerning time for our city, our country, and our world. But as so many of our rabbis suggest, we should try to use these frequent handwashings to go beyond basic hygiene and to also allow ourselves to soar spiritually. Just as every single person needs to practice basic hygiene, now more than ever our city also needs inspiration and spirituality.

My rebbe, Rabbi Avi Weiss, taught me that the blessing of *Al Netillat Yadayim* is commonly translated to refer to the commandment to wash our hands. In reality, the word “natal” means “to take” or “to assume responsibility” by lifting our hands in dedication to God, in the hope that we live a life of goodness, kindness, giving and giving to others, especially those in need.

Another dear friend and spiritual mentor, Rabbi Yosef Kanefsky, writes: “Every hand that we don’t shake must

become a phone call that we place. Every embrace that we avoid must become a verbal expression of warmth and concern. Every inch and every foot that we physically place between ourselves and another, must become a thought as to how we might be of help to that other, should the need arise.”

We wash our hands not only to protect ourselves but also to protect others—neighbors whom we do not even know. We wash our hands to protect each other against a common enemy that doesn’t ask us what our jobs are, or what our faith is, or what our politics are. We are equal in the face of this virus.

This is scary. But it is also a reminder to us that we are all in this together. I have heard reports of unprecedented cooperation in these days between Israelis and Palestinians. The coronavirus is a reminder that there is no us and them. There is only ‘all of us.’

Much of this is beyond our control. But a spiritual response is within our control. We should all recognize that this is a time to speak sensitively. People are concerned about the unknown. We need to be extra patient with our family, friends, and neighbors. We can also seek to use health guidelines as spiritual reminders of our responsibilities to Hashem and to others.

In that context, here is a meditation, which I worked on with Rabbi Weiss, that people can recite while washing their hands. It is a non-denominational meditation, as the virus is also non-denominational:”

**As I wash my hands, I not only cleanse them of dirt and dangerous elements, but I also pledge to lift them in holiness. I think of those affected by the coronavirus and pray for their recovery. I commit myself to dedicate my hands to doing good for the world by giving charity. I pledge to use my hands to help others in physical need. I pledge only to write words that can make a positive difference in the world. I pray that my hands not harm others, but rather be a source of blessing to the world. To paraphrase the popular song from decades ago, “The whole world is in our hands.” In the words of the psalmist: “Lift up your hands in holiness and bless the Lord”**

—Psalms 134:2

### **KARPAS: GREEN VEGETABLES AS VIRTUAL APPETIZERS**

The eating of a green vegetable, as described in this *Moment* “Talk of the Table” piece on parsley, was once an actual appetizer—something to tide people over during the long wait for the meal. Over the years, though, it’s become merely symbolic—a virtual appetizer, if you will.

**“Originally this was a normal appetizer course, and over many centuries it devolved from a real appetizer to something totally symbolic and not particularly nourishing,” says Joshua Kulp, co-founder of the Conservative Yeshiva in Jerusalem and author of *The Schechter Haggadah*. “Normal people, when they come to your house, want to eat. Originally the seder really was like that—they’d eat a normal amount of food, a real appetizer course” in order to sustain themselves for the lengthy ceremony to follow.**

—Sala Levin

And once the appetizer is virtual, the possibilities are endless:

**Like other elements of the seder, karpas is nowadays often imbued with new meaning to make it relevant to today’s culture. In many ways, it’s one of the most naturally symbolic components of the seder—the green vegetable is an apt emblem of the renewal of springtime and the importance of the environment. In the**

Haggadah for Jews & Buddhists, attendees are urged to think of karpas as a reminder to “move beyond the narrow place in our thinking and seek creative solutions to the planet’s needs in order to survive and flourish.” The GLBT Passover Haggadah says of karpas, “At this season, when Mother Earth arrays herself new, the human spirit rises, and we renew our faith in a world where freedom and justice will prevail.”

—Sala Levin

### **YACHATZ: BREAKING THE MIDDLE MATZAH FOR THE AFIKOMAN**

This strange custom is all about invisible things, hidden things, things we can’t reach out and touch. We break the middle matzah, we tuck half of it away for later, and then it disappears—we don’t find it until we search and search. Traditional commentary associates it with the incompleteness and brokenness of the world. “Part of it remains before us, and part of it is hidden and becomes the afikoman,” Rabbi Beryl Gershenfeld writes of the middle matzah on Torah.org. “The revealed matzah, because it is broken in half, represents human incompleteness—we have not yet realized our potential. The hidden part, the afikoman, symbolizes our future growth—it must be sought and found.”

Hiding the afikoman and searching the house for it are among the most joyfully physical parts of the classic seder, and they’ll be the hardest to capture in a virtual one. But maybe that offers a chance to pay attention to the part between, the time when the matzah is missing. In *Afikoman*, a new poem recently published in *Moment*, Jean Nordhaus finds a space for reflection in the way the afikoman lurks around the edges of the seder, “reluctant as Moses to be chosen”:

I’ve written the soup, the parting of the sea,  
the savage plagues and the candles—  
how they guttered when the door  
fell open for Elijah: wind from the hall,  
where a shadow of flame  
tongued incinerator walls.  
What more can I write of ritual foods  
and repetitions, exile and return?  
However we angle it, a Rite of Spring.  
Let it mean whatever we need it to mean—  
this year, the flood of refugees  
and Pharaoh’s fear of aliens.  
Why, then, when you ask for a poem,  
am I haunted by the afikomen,  
the shy half-matzah  
wrapped in a napkin-babushka,  
then spirited away  
to be hidden in a corner cabinet,  
behind a bookcase,  
in a cushion, a crease,  
reluctant as Moses to be chosen,  
and only hours later,  
when the children are nodding  
and we’re flushed with sweet  
wine and singing, remembered

**and rescued—redeemed  
for a dollar, a pittance, a coin.**  
—Jean Nordhaus

### MAGGID: *TELLING THE PASSOVER STORY FROM A NEW PERSPECTIVE*

The seder crosses barriers of space and time.

**“The seasons of the life cycle are marked at the festivals: the early years, when the seder takes forever until the aunts bring out the food; the middle years, when suddenly the service seems too brief; and then adulthood, the aunts are far away and the uncles are dead and I am making seder myself.”**

—Nancy Datan, “Making Jews,” from *Moment*, 1976

Why is this year different from all other years?

**“Sometimes the tradition is a great gift. Every year we bring a different self to the same old words, and hearing these words will hold us together. I think it’ll be very powerful when children ask ‘*Ma Nishtanah*’—we won’t even have to say anything about the matzah and the dipping. We’ll have the negative differences—I’m not with you, I’m not making soup—but there will also be positive differences to celebrate. People also will have spent more time preparing intellectually or musically or making craft objects. We’re connecting in deep ways.**

**“With all these cool things we’re going to do with our virtual seders, probably the most important thing that happens in any seder is that parents tell the story to the children. This year, we’ll also tell stories of other seders, previous seders—when we opened the door for Elijah and Uncle Mo came in, or other moments in the family’s history. What we’ll retain from this year, since we won’t be going crazy cooking or entertaining, is that Passover is not just about the big meal.**

—Vanessa Ochs

### THE WISE CHILD, THE WICKED CHILD: *AN INTERPRETATION OF PRESENCE AND ABSENCE*

Who is at the virtual table?

The tale of the four sons (or, more recently, four children) has been interpreted as a fable of Jewish diversity, of generational change, of assimilation and much more. But one line of discussion that resonates this year is the concept, first popularized in 1957 by the Lubavitcher Rebbe but taken up by a variety of voices since, that the key child at the seder is a Fifth Son—the one who isn’t there. For the Rebbe, the fifth son was the one who’d become estranged from Judaism and needed to be lovingly brought back. For others, the fifth child is alienated or misguided. But for now, the main thing, the thing that hurts, is: He’s not here.

Over the years, *Moment* has pondered many questions of generational distance, seeking wisdom that would, like the Prophet Elijah, “turn the hearts of the parents toward the children, and the hearts of the children toward the parents.” Last year, *Moment* asked millennials, “How is your Judaism different from your parents’?”

What’s striking in the answers is how much the identity of young Jews—as much as older ones—depends on actual, not virtual, presence.

**“As an adult, being able to find a Jewish community is not something I take for granted. It’s something I’m**

**really grateful to my parents for instilling a love of tradition and the importance of moments of ritual.”**

—Dana Schwartz, 36, a correspondent for *Entertainment Weekly*

**“Going to shul on the High Holidays and having Shabbat every week with your family is very invigorating and special. It’s funny because that aspect of Jewish practice is not that different from other sects of the community, and I think it’s a big part of what ties us together.”**

—Elad Nehorai, 30, founder of Hevria, a creative Jewish community, and a leader of Torah Trumps Hate, a progressive Orthodox group

And when *Moment’s* 22-year-old Rabbi Harold S. White Fellow, Lilly Gelman, interviewed 91-year-old Dr. Ruth Westheimer about the biggest difference between the generations, and asked her, “What do you think is the biggest challenge facing millennials and those younger in their relationships?” the famed sex therapist answered this way:

**“It’s loneliness. I don’t mind when people use their phones for contacts, but the art of conversation is getting lost because everybody’s on that phone. The biggest problem is that it avoids contact. It avoids people looking at each other. And young people are going to develop a physical ailment in the back of their neck because they’re constantly looking down. I’m not saying not to use it... [but] these new on-demand services are bad for relationships because, first of all, young people are going to get fat because they’re home and at the refrigerator every minute. And it will not allow them to expand their relationships. I tell them to do anything they can in order to go to events, to go to fundraisers, to go to theaters, to go to any place where there are other young people.”**

—Dr. Ruth Westheimer

So for parents and children, take note. The child—of any gender—who isn’t at the seder, even the virtual one, needs real attention!

### **THE PLAGUES: *THIS YEAR THEY ARE ALL TOO REAL***

As we understand this year more than in other years, the plagues are all too real.

Here are two meditations for the list of 10 plagues:

The traditional meaning of the word “plague” is a disease or pestilence. In the ten plagues listed in the Haggadah, several have to do with health: boils, cattle disease, and of course the death of the firstborn. Our “suffering” from these plagues is the most minimal and symbolic imaginable: We dip a pinky in the wine and spill it, so as not to enjoy the pleasure of a full cup (a cup of wine being the traditional symbol of happiness).

1. For something closer to reality, the public health site, MPH Online, offers this list of history’s ten worst pandemics:

**Asian Flu Pandemic (1956-1958)**

**Spanish Flu Pandemic (1918)**

**Sixth Cholera Pandemic (1910-1911)**

**Flu Pandemic (1889-1890)**

**Third Cholera Pandemic (1852-1860)**

**The Black Death (1346-1353)**

**Plague of Justinian (541-542)—Death Toll: 25 million**



**Antonine Plague (165 AD)—Death Toll: 5 million**

**HIV/AIDS Pandemic at its peak, (2005-2012)—Death Toll: 36 million**

**Flu Pandemic, (1968)—Death Toll: 1 million**

2. HIAS, the Jewish refugee organization, suggests that after dipping for the traditional ten plagues, we consider this list of “10 plagues faced by refugees in the U.S. and worldwide:”

**Violence**

**Dangerous journeys**

**Poverty**

**Food insecurity**

**Lack of access to education**

**Xenophobia**

**Anti-refugee legislation**

**Language barriers**

**Workforce discrimination**

**Loss of family**

### ***RACHTZAH: A PUBLIC HEALTH MESSAGE FROM THE JEWISH PAST***

Wash your hands—again!

### ***MOTZI MATZAH: BLESSING THE MATZAH, INTERRUPTED***

A liberation can be a real interruption.

Leaving before the bread can rise means just walking away—leaving everything unfinished.

The image of leaving before your bread can rise is a powerful metaphor for the need to drop everything, right now, rather than waiting to finish whatever you’re doing: If you wait to finish, you’ll never leave at all. This is a traditional commentary, but it speaks especially to this year, when so many work projects and school years had to be suddenly dropped in mid-swing.

What have you had to leave unfinished?

Marge Piercy’s poem “Maggid” speaks to this rush to leave, as well as the agony of refugees in our own time:

**The courage to let go of the door, the handle.**

**The courage to shed the familiar walls whose very  
stains and leaks are comfortable as the little moles  
of the upper arm; stains that recall a feast,  
a child’s naughtiness, a loud blattering storm  
that slapped the roof hard, pouring through.**

**The courage to abandon the graves dug into the hill,  
the small bones of children and the brittle bones  
of the old whose marrow hunger had stolen;**

the courage to desert the tree planted and only  
begun to bear; the riverside where promises were  
shaped; the street where their empty pots were broken.

The courage to leave the place whose language you learned  
as early as your own, whose customs however dan-  
gerous or demeaning, bind you like a halter  
you have learned to pull inside, to move your load;  
the land fertile with the blood spilled on it;  
the roads mapped and annotated for survival.

The courage to walk out of the pain that is known  
into the pain that cannot be imagined,  
mapless, walking into the wilderness, going  
barefoot with a canteen into the desert;  
stuffed in the stinking hold of a rotting ship  
sailing off the map into dragons' mouths,

Cathay, India, Siberia, goldenh medina  
leaving bodies by the way like abandoned treasure.  
So they walked out of Egypt. So they bribed their way  
out of Russia under loads of straw; so they steamed  
out of the bloody smoking charnelhouse of Europe  
on overloaded freighters forbidden all ports—

out of pain into death or freedom or a different  
painful dignity, into squalor and politics.  
We Jews are all born of wanderers, with shoes  
under our pillows and a memory of blood that is ours  
raining down. We honor only those Jews who changed  
tonight, those who chose the desert over bondage,

who walked into the strange and became strangers  
and gave birth to children who could look down  
on them standing on their shoulders for having  
been slaves. We honor those who let go of every-  
thing but freedom, who ran, who revolted, who fought,  
who became other by saving themselves.

—Marge Piercy, from *The Art of Blessing the Day*, 1999

### **MAROR/KORECH: THE BITTER HERB OF ANTI-SEMITISM, WITH AND WITHOUT MATZAH**

There are many ways to taste bitterness. Some are real, like the bitter herb in the mouth. Others are internal and invisible.

And while the world is filled with evil—later, we'll call down anathema on our enemies—it may be the unseen internal damage that's hardest to manage. A few months ago, we asked the rabbis who participate in our "Ask the Rabbis" section: "What is anti-Semitism?"

**“Centuries of anti-Jewish hate foster instinctive Jewish reactions—that hate is endemic, that safety is fleeting, that some unspoken ‘they’ forever are out to get ‘us, that to live Jewishly is to resist hatred aimed at targets on our backs. But we lose the real fight against anti-Semitism—and we lose ourselves—when we respond with self-protective fear, intolerance or counter-xenophobia. These soul impacts drive insularity, spiritual constriction and disconnection when we most need multicultural outreach, allyship and spiritual expansiveness. That’s why anti-Semitism scholar Deborah Lipstadt has written that her top concern isn’t what anti-Semites do to Jews, but what we Jews do to ourselves in the shadow of hate. The timeless secret of Jewish resilience is the expansiveness of genuine Jewish joy. This is the transformative soul journey of Psalm 118: “From constriction I called to You, and You answered me with expansiveness.” Our best response to hate is joy.”**

—Rabbi David Evan Markus, Temple Beth El of City Island, NY. (Renewal)

### **SHULCHAN ORECH: A FESTIVAL MEAL THAT CANNOT BE SHARED**

Of all the differences this year, not eating together may be the absence that hurts most. At a virtual seder, through a screen, you can’t taste the festival meal.

And yet even in this apparent centerpiece of every Jewish holiday—the meal—the taste is never just the taste. Food is never just food. Like everything else at the seder, it’s a symbol—a stand-in for weightier matters, and, as so often throughout Jewish history, a visible place-holder for much that has vanished.

A Jewish community’s food may be a symbol of lost cultural identity or even abandonment of the kosher laws, as Claudia Roden, the author of *The Book of Jewish Food*, argued in an interview in a 2013 *Moment* symposium on the question, “Is there a secret ingredient in the Jewish relationship with food?”

**“All Jews in Europe kept kosher until the 19th century, when they were emancipated and moved to the big cities—and many stopped keeping kosher. But most Jews in communities in the Muslim world went on abiding by kosher rules until the 1950s, when they started to leave their Muslim homelands. For the Jews of the diaspora, food has always been important, because observance of the dietary laws created a spiritual atmosphere around it. And when they stopped keeping kosher, the “Jewish foods” from their old homelands became even more important, because they were part of their identity. For Jews who weren’t very religious, who had lost their old languages—like Yiddish, Ladino or Judeo-Arabic—food became one of the things that they held onto to remind themselves of who they were, of their past and their ancestry. Sometimes they have been labeled gastronomic Jews. In the last few years I’ve been traveling a lot—to Australia, New Zealand, South Africa, Berlin, Vienna, Amsterdam—and I could see that some of the Jews there who were no longer keeping kosher were very concerned with keeping up their Jewish food traditions on the Sabbath and on festive occasions. Even some people from Russia, for instance, who didn’t eat traditional Jewish food at all through the communist years, are looking for recipes. All Ashkenazi Jews had a similar culture and similar dishes even though they came from many countries in Eastern, Central and Western Europe; theirs was almost a fixed menu, from challah and chicken soup to gefilte fish, chopped herring and chopped liver. Jews who are not Ashkenazi, who are now all referred to as Sephardi, have different dishes. Although the communities differed from one country to another and sometimes from one city to another, some similar dishes could be found all over the Sephardi world. Among these are meat stews with fruit—lamb with apricots, prunes or cherries—which they picked up in Baghdad, and their Passover almond cakes and almond cookies that they adopted in Spain. Jewish dishes are kept because of what they evoke and represent, because they are a part of Jewish cultural identity. I don’t expect they’ll disappear completely.”**

—Claudia Roden

At the seder, of course, it's the foods that aren't there—the leavened foods forbidden at Passover—that most dramatically shape what's on the table, as the late rabbi Gil Marks, author of *Encyclopedia of Jewish Food*, suggested in an interview for the same symposium:

**“What is the very first act that the Israelites in Egypt are commanded to do? It's to have a communal meal—roast lamb and herbs, some nice shwarma. And with that, the beginning of the Jewish people is through a meal. The famous joke—“They tried to kill us, we won, now let's eat”—is not really that far from the truth. Within the Jewish legal framework is an understanding that various rituals are accompanied by a seudat mitzvah, or celebratory meal, whether a bris or a baby naming or a bar mitzvah or a wedding. Any sort of life cycle event is accompanied by a seudat mitzvah. Some foods are almost sanctified by their use in these meals or holidays and rituals. So food that may have not been Jewish at one point can become Jewish. Chicken soup, for example, became very popular after a meat shortage after the Black Death, leading Europe to become a chicken-raising culture. Simultaneously, Italian Jews introduced noodles to the Franco-German Jews, and chicken soup with frimzel, or egg noodles, became standard. But then what do you do on Pesach when you can't have egg noodles—the matzoh ball or knaidel emerges. You can see the continuing adaptation that created the cultural Jewish gastronomy.”**

—Gil Marks

### ***TZAFUN: EAT THE AFIKOMAN, TOGETHER AND ALONE***

The Afikoman is back again, the secrets revealed, the hidden things restored. And yet not entirely, since the custom of eating this scrap of crumbled matzah as “dessert” is peculiar, and even the meaning of the Greek word remains up for debate.

“Some rabbis who didn't know Greek translated the word Afikoman as a dessert, but there is also a Mishna that says that ‘One may not conclude the Pesach meal with an afikoman,’ (Pesachim 10:8), which suggests that rather than an ‘after-food’ they're talking about some kind of ‘after-party,’” says Rabbi Charles Feinberg, in Washington, D.C. “In other words, don't finish the seder and then go out carousing—it's not that kind of a simcha. And what could be more appropriate to a time of social distancing?”

### ***BARECH: THE GRACE AFTER MEALS TRANSCENDS TIME AND PLACE***

Gratitude is another value that transcends time, space and enforced separation.

Dinner is over. You've found and eaten the Afikoman. It's time to sing the Grace After Meals and the Hallel. Before you conclude the seder, with song and gladness and two more cups of wine, things that don't lend themselves to being experienced over a screen, there are two activities that are both mysterious and decidedly non-corporeal. We call down the curses of God upon our enemies, and we welcome Elijah the Prophet. They both are connected to a physical action: opening the door.

### ***Pour Out Thy Wrath...***

For those who still observe this custom, opening the door for Elijah includes pronouncing a brief anathema on

the enemies of the Jews, “for they have destroyed Jacob and laid waste to his habitation.” It’s another nod to the unseen—traditionally, to the wily anti-Semite, who could be lurking with malicious ideas about the seder—and it makes many people uncomfortable, if they include it at all. Should we be calling down revenge this year, when unseen forces of destruction already stalk the empty streets?

We once asked *Moment’s* “Ask the Rabbis” participants: Should Jews at the seder call on God to smite our enemies? At least one of our rabbis thinks the vengeance, too, should be seen as virtual:

**Our contemporary civil discourse is uncomfortable talking about death, bloodshed or revenge. Behaviorally, our era may be just as bloodthirsty as the past, but in language and cultural mores it is embarrassed by violence. This is why some people would like to remove pleas that God smite our enemies from the seder ritual. Since the seder existed before our time and we hope will last beyond our civilization, I would urge that the text not be censored. Instead, think of the pleas to God to destroy our enemies as the cries of a powerless people, in exile, lacking sovereignty or civil rights. Unable to defend themselves from persecution and pogroms, the Jews lashed out verbally, calling on God to avenge them.**

**“We live in a time when Jewry, like all of humanity, is developing greater abilities to repair the world, end oppression and engage in self-defense. By God’s invitation, humans have become more active and responsible partners in tikkun olam. Now, when we call upon God to smite our enemies, we do so knowing that we are not asking for magical defeat of our foes. Rather, we are setting out our goals and human responsibilities to defeat evil and uphold life in this world.**

—Rabbi Yitz Greenberg, Riverdale, NY (Modern Orthodox)

Who is Elijah?

It’s much more satisfying to think we’re opening the door to greet Elijah, who will come to herald the messianic age, reconcile family estrangements, and (in the traditional teaching) solve all outstanding Jewish legal questions, such as whether there should be four cups of wine at the seder or five. (That, apparently, is how we got started pouring him the fifth cup.) But when is Elijah coming? Have you seen him? Just as the seder took us to the far past, where we relived the Exodus, it now delivers us to an unimaginable future. What can we learn from the man who isn’t there?

One modern reading on the coming of the Messiah is that his not being here is the whole point. We asked the rabbis, “Are Jews still expecting a messiah?” Here are a few answers:

**“Only in Israel could a smash 1985 pop song about a recession be titled “Waiting for the Messiah.” For fans of Israeli culture, Shalom Chanoch’s text is now a touchstone: ““The stock exchange collapsed, people chose to leap off the roof; Messiah jumped too, and they reported he died’... mashiach lo ba [he’s not coming], mashiach gam lo m’talpen [he won’t even call].” Chanoch’s sarcastic refrain warns of misplaced faith, whether in free markets or in messiahs. Yes, the best Jewish teachings discourage searching for wonder-workers. But to deny all messianic possibility is defeatist. Moderate messianism leads us to enlightened activism. Like many progressive Jews, I hold out for a messianic era, a distant vision that inspires and sustains today’s necessary work.”**

—Rabbi Fred Scherlinder Dobb, Adat Shalom Reconstructionist Congregation, Bethesda, MD

**“Who is Elijah? We all are Elijah. As Jews, we are each God’s partner in the creation and the ongoing perfection of the world. God calls upon each of us to heed the prophets’ call to heal the sick, feed the hungry, fight injustice and bring about a time of peace, prosperity and wholeness. This work gives us hope and looks ahead to the messianic time. An individual Messiah cannot and will not do that for us. We are all part of the messianic process.”**

—Rabbi Laura Novak Winer, Fresno, CA (Reform)

### **HALLEL: TIMELESS SONGS, PRAISES, AND THE FOURTH CUP OF WINE**

A scientific study not long ago found evidence that when people sing together in large groups, their heart rates synchronize. Singing together is another pleasure that's much reduced, and much missed, when it's not done in person—though some of the most impressive shows of togetherness lately have been the music-making reported by people forced to keep their distance, from virtual orchestra performances to Italians on balconies.

But the singing of Hallel at this point in the seder is actually supposed to evoke something unseeable, untouchable and yet quite specific: the World to Come, a future era of pure freedom. Besides liberating us from slavery, however defined, the seder also frees us from the tyranny of time: Having journeyed to the past, we now enjoy the future. We actually sang the first half of the Hallel back in Maggid, before dinner; now, we finish it off with extravagant praises and flights of metaphor.

The poet Jacqueline Osherow's "Space Psalm" offers a fanciful reworking of Psalm 115 that lets us float free into a shared realm of timeless, boundless appreciation for Creation:

**Let stars reverse their courses—hallelujah—  
Let planets flaunt their necklaces of ice—  
Let suns confound eclipses—hallelujah—  
Let moons' scavenged radiance rejoice...**

**Let comets jump their orbits—hallelujah—  
To jangle inadvertent atmospheres  
With rumors of the distance—hallelujah—  
Anecdotes—songs—suspicions—prayers  
—Jacqueline Osherow, *Dead Men's Praise*, 1999**

### **NIRTZAH: CONCLUSION OF THE VIRTUAL SEDER**

This is your victory lap. Vanessa Ochs says, "I love Nirtzah—it's the adult getting to be a kid again: "We did it! We did it!"

***NEXT YEAR IN JERUSALEM. NEXT YEAR IN PERSON!***

## SELECTED LINKS

To hear Vanessa Ochs in conversation with Robert Siegel about Haggadahs and Seders past and present:  
<https://momentmag.com/the-haggadah-a-book-of-beloved-imperfections/>

Talk of the Table: Parsley  
<https://momentmag.com/talk-table-parsley-celery/>

“Ask the Rabbis” on “What Is Anti-Semitism?”  
<https://momentmag.com/ask-the-rabbis-what-is-anti-semitism/>

“Ask the Rabbis” on “Are Jews Still Expecting a Messiah?”  
<https://momentmag.com/ask-the-rabbis-are-jews-still-expecting-a-messiah/>

Symposium: Is There a Special Ingredient in the Jewish Relationship to Food?  
<https://momentmag.com/is-there-a-secret-ingredient-in-the-jewish-relationship-with-food/>

“Ask the Rabbis” on “Should Jews at the Seder Ask God to Smite Our Enemies?”  
<https://momentmag.com/ask-the-rabbis-should-jews-at-the-seder-ask-god-to-smite-our-enemies/>

“Ask the Rabbis” on “What Role Should Virtual Presence Play in Jewish Ritual and Community?”  
<https://momentmag.com/what-role-should-virtual-presence-play-in-jewish-ritual-and-community/>

## ABOUT MOMENT

*Moment* is known for its award-winning journalism, first-rate cultural and literary criticism and signature “big questions”—all from an independent Jewish perspective. Founded by Leonard Fein and Elie Wiesel in 1975, it has been led by Nadine Epstein since 2004. *Moment* is home to projects such as the Daniel Pearl Investigative Journalism Initiative, the Moment Magazine-Karma Foundation Short Fiction Contest and the MomentBooks imprint. To learn more about *Moment* and its work visit [momentmag.com](https://momentmag.com).

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