

Introducing A Secular Seder: The Haggadah for Cultural Jews, Their Families and Friends

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Source: Herbert J. Levine

More than the Jewish people have kept Passover, Passover has kept the Jewish people. More than any other Jewish ritual, the Seder continues to be observed. There is something profound about what we do when we participate in a Seder, which both expresses and shapes who we are. This applies both to Jews and to non-Jewish family members and friends who celebrate Passover.

Most Jews who say 'I am Jewish, but not religious' mean that they identify with the values and customs of Judaism, the culture, but not the theology. If you define yourself in this way, this Haggadah is for you. Studies show that even many who belong to synagogues and pray do not believe in the God to whom they pray. A Secular Seder begins with the premise that the Jewish people needs a Passover Haggadah in keeping with who we are -- a this-worldly people with a persistent identity, driven by a unique cultural DNA. We gave to the world the idea of "loving your neighbor as yourself" and "loving the stranger," based on our experience as strangers in Egypt. The celebration of Passover over the centuries has shaped our appreciation of our own freedom and our commitment to the freedom of others. Our pursuit of freedom and justice for all is how we express our love for our fellow human beings and our responsibility toward others.

A second premise of A Secular Seder is that the ritual elements of the Seder are as important as the story we tell. All groups need rituals to pass on their identities and values; the Seder is the most important ritual that cultural Jews participate in. Yet previous tellings that sought to be cultural or secular have largely ignored the rituals within the Seder. The idea of acknowledging a supernatural God as the originator of the Jewish people and controller of its destiny makes little sense to many who have embraced the modern, secular world. So how can cultural Jews adapt the practice of blessing, the central ritual feature of the Seder we have inherited from our ancestors?

A Secular Seder formulates blessings in a new way. The blessings affirm that this world, not a supernatural presence, is the source of our gifts--natural gifts, such as food and wine, and cultural gifts that come through Judaism, such as our celebration of freedom through the ceremonies of Passover. The blessings we make should allow us to express our gratitude for the ever-evolving world, our awe at the unique nature of the world we inhabit and our hope that we can responsibly embody the best values of the Jewish people. They can help hone our intention to prioritize the health of the planet and to bring all who live on it ever closer to freedom and wholeness.

These new blessings are presented in both Hebrew and English so that the Seder can evolve in the primary languages that Jews around the world speak. The Hebrew is transliterated, so that all can participate. You should know that the 'ch' in Hebrew is always pronounced as the 'ch' in the name of the composer, Bach.

The text of this Haggadah can be read straight through or households can stop for discussion at any of the indented questions. Two or three such discussions are probably enough for most Seders. Of course, Seder participants should feel free to bring in contemporary issues that make the message of the Seder relevant and urgent each year. How much time your Seder takes depends upon the leader and upon each of you.

May this Secular Seder fulfill a need that has gone for too long unfulfilled in our Jewish lives. Happy Passover! Chag sameach! May it be truly liberating for you who have assembled with family and friends to celebrate this ancient and contemporary festival of freedom.

