

SACRED SOUNDS

A Publication of the Cantors Assembly

Passover 2015

A Wonder by the Sea

By Cantor Sharon Citrin



Have you ever experienced a truly magical moment?

Last year, I had the privilege of leading a group of ten Jewish and Muslim women in a model Passover Seder. The coming together of Jewish and Muslim women eating, socializing, laughing, learning, and participating in traditional Jewish rituals is, in itself, extraordinary. What was even more amazing was the level of trust, empathy, and understanding that seemed to connect and unite us in the most marvelous ways. If ever there is a time for signs and wonders, Passover surely is it!

I came upon this honor through the Jewish-Muslim Women's Dialogue, which is an initiative of the Anti-Defamation League's Connecticut regional office. Although I wasn't officially part of the group, I wanted to be; or at least be a fly on the wall at their gatherings. When the idea for a Passover Seder came up, I knew I had my chance!

The setting, itself, was magical. It took place at the shoreline home of the co-host which sits right on the edge of the ocean—the most perfect setting for telling the story of Passover!

My responsibility was humbling. As Jews, we participate in the Passover Seder every year, generation to generation. But now, the door was being opened to people who had never experienced this before, people who had never even heard of matzah! How could I make the Seder accessible and meaningful for everyone around the table? Not only was this a first for everyone around the table, it was likely the first Jewish-Muslim women's Seder ever, anywhere!

How can I begin to describe the sentiments that were felt that night? I can only share excerpts from some of the touching emails that were sent by the women who attended:

"It was a wonderful experience, filled with love, generosity, and laughter."

"I loved how much symbolism there was within the Seder, and I think the messages of hope and strength were so powerful, especially in a time when it seems that there is a different tragedy every day."

"This is my first time in a Seder and I am amazed at how many similarities we have between our faiths."

"I was elevated to another place throughout the service from your gorgeous voice as well as the very thoughtful creative and meaningful choices you made for the Seder."

The Muslim women were eager learners, asking many questions and taking pictures of their place settings and the beautifully adorned Seder table. They delighted in similarities between the Hebrew and Arabic languages and parallels in stories from our faiths. They heard familiar intonations in the music. The readings I selected resonated with the women's values, beliefs, and personal journeys. They shared recipes and sources for kosher and halal meat.

We pondered two "oops" moments with humor and sensitivity: the *charoset* was made with wine, which Muslims don't drink, and someone had brought a noodle casserole that found its way to the Seder table. Fortunately, the Seder took place after the Passover holiday, but it provided a wonderful "teaching" moment.

After one of Muslim women found the Afikomen, we settled down to dessert, some concluding readings, and a spirited singing of "Miriam's Song" accompanied by tambourines. The Seder ended on a high note with a spontaneous middle-eastern ululation, the high-pitched women's trill that signifies great approval, joy, celebration, honor and praise. It was a thrilling end to such a marvelous night.

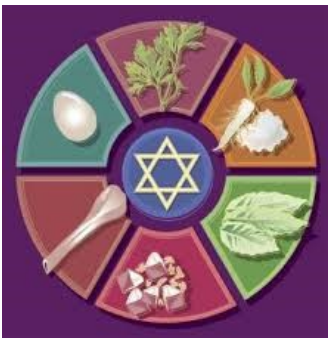
We couldn't help but feel that we were writing our own story of Passover and witnessing the miracle of peace, friendship and understanding, at least in this small circle around the Seder table. If there is any hope of changing hearts and minds in this fractured world, then perhaps this model for developing interpersonal relations is the key. The purpose of the group, said the Seder's Muslim co-host, is "Don't let your primary source be the media. There will be hope for humanity if we take the time to get to know each other."

Cantor Sharon Citrin is cantor of Beth El Synagogue in Woodbury, CT and Coordinator of the Confronting Anti-Semitism Program of the Anti-Defamation League's Connecticut regional office.

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This publication of Sacred Sounds has been made possible by a generous grant from the Harvey L. Miller Supporting Foundation.



New Ideas for an Old Tradition

By Cantor Jeffrey Myers

People spend so much time and money preparing for the Seder meals and sufficient leftovers, yet often don't devote as much attention to the service itself. While we are all most comfortable with that which is familiar to us, there is room to tweak the Seder without going overboard. Here's a short, non-exhaustive list of some things that you might consider:

Kadesh – Buy a variety of Israeli wines, so that some might drink a different wine for each of the four cups.

Karpas – You can start with the familiar curly parsley and salt water, but then embellish this step, which is essentially the hors d'oeuvres, by adding a variety of fresh vegetables and dips.

Yachatz – We all break the middle matza, and either hide it for the children to find or let them “steal” it and negotiate the safe return of dessert. Since the children finish the dinner part of the Seder faster than you can read this article, why not set up an indoor scavenger hunt to keep them busy while the adults eat? Creatively take them through different locations in the home until they find the Afikoman. Now they have earned a reward.

Magid – Some consider the “telling” section the driest of all the sections. Why not consider purchasing a new *Hagadah* this year? There are so many wonderful editions that meet different tastes. We start with an Aramaic invitation to dinner. “Let all who are hungry...” Do you invite someone who has no Seder to attend? Perhaps you would consider making a donation to an appropriate tzedakah that helps the hungry or homeless, and encourage your guests to do likewise, in appreciation for the roof over your heads and food on the table.

Maror and Charoset – Try purchasing a horseradish root, peeling it, and cutting it into slices. Eating that will truly give you a taste of the bitterness of slavery! In addition, there are so many recipes available for charoset. Perhaps you might consider preparing the traditional one that you always serve and make small portions with new recipes. Have a taste-testing of charoset but don't tell your guests where the charoset is from. Rather, tell them the ingredients and see if they can guess correctly.

Barech – After the *Birkat Hamazon* (the grace after meals), we open our doors to invite Elijah the prophet to join us. Sing *Eliyahu Hanavi* and pass his cup around, with each guest spilling some wine into it to be a part of the hope for a better world.

Nirtzah – At my own Seder we add a fifth cup in honor of the state of Israel, focusing on the Torah verse which tells us that God will bring us to our new land. We conclude with *Hatikvah*.

Trying out some of these suggestions is a great way to breathe new life and meaning into your Seder.

Cantor Jeff Myers serves as Hazzan of Congregation Beth Juda in Ventor, NJ.

The Miracles in Front of Us

By Cantor Marcey Wagner

Some thoughts for your Seder table discussions: **Why is this night different from all other nights?**

In so many Jewish homes, the highlight of the Seder comes when the youngest child (or adult!) rises to ask “The Four Questions.” Yet, from the very first word, things seem odd: The Four Questions begin with the Hebrew word, *mah* – “what” – rather than *lamah*, the Hebrew word for “why.”

One remarkable explanation of this strange formulation is found in the commentary *Tavlin Lamitzvah* (“Spice of the Commandment”) by Rabbi Abraham Aaron Prag, who lived in Jerusalem in the early 20th century. Rabbi Prag writes: *The meaning of mah nishtanah is “How much it is different”—that is, the speaker is amazed at how great are the changes, like [the use of mah in] “How goodly are your tents [Oh Jacob]” (Numbers 24:5).* According to this explanation, the Seder is an opportunity for appreciation and amazement and the Haggadah is a vehicle for opening up our eyes to the miraculous- to miracles great and small.

According to Rabbi Akiva, the great miracle of the Exodus is itself composed of 250 separate miracles, an insight that can only be understood through patient and attentive analysis of the Torah text. The Seder heightens our consciousness to the possibility that our lives are enmeshed in a world of the miraculous.

Of course, we and our children are links in a long and nuanced chain of tradition that does not have a monolithic view of miracles. From Maimonides' philosophic position that miracles are rare and are themselves orchestrated by God through natural means, to the words of the *Amidah*: “We thank You...for Your miracles that are with us every day,” there is no consensus on how to approach the extraordinary events that punctuate our lives. So we must stop, reflect, consider, debate, explore, and then debate some more--emerging from the process appreciative, transformed, and open to new ideas.

Consider the following aphorism attributed to Albert Einstein: *There are two ways to live your life. One is as though nothing is a miracle. The other is as though everything is a miracle.*

What are the implications of these two positions in light of the Seder? How do you live your life and why? Why do you think the Haggadah goes out of its way to suggest the abundance of miracles that took place during the Exodus from Egypt? Are you able to appreciate the subtle and sublime in your life?

As you prepare for Pesach, think of the ways you can transform some of the “whys?” into “wows!”, to view the beauty and wonder of our tradition, and to appreciate “how goodly” things can be in the big tent of Jewish life.

Cantor Marcey Wagner currently serves as Principal, Lower School, Schechter School of Long Island.



The Special Music of Passover

By Cantor Jack Chomsky

One of the most remarkable and not-well-known-enough melodies of our tradition is the nusach for the introductory prayers for Tal (Dew -- recited on the First Day of Pesach) and Geshem (Rain -- recited on Sh'mini Atzeret -- the Eighth Day special observance following the seven days of Sukkot).

It is clear from the incredibly ornate, passionate motif that something important is happening. Why is the melody so complex and compelling? And why is it so rarely heard by many American Jews?

I'll answer the second question first: It's rarely heard because those are days that too few people find their way to our synagogues! The First Day of Pesach? That's after the Four Cups of Wine, and so much else from our First Night Passover Seder. It takes some determination to make it to synagogue the next morning. Similarly, after all the time that people have spent in their congregations on the High Holidays, many don't return for the wonderful Festival of Sukkot that follows four days after Yom Kippur. And even if they DO make it to shul for the beginning of Sukkot, they may be "done" by the 8th day (though it's a separate festival) -- or be holding back to attend for the "9th day" -- Simchat Torah. (In Israel, Shemini Atzeret and Simchat Torah are one day. But in the rest of the world (the "diaspora" or galut), they are celebrated over the course of two days. That's the stuff of ANOTHER explanation.)

But why this incredibly intense melody? Simply because, more than anything else in the Jewish calendar, Tal and Geshem are life-and-death matters for our community -- or at least they used to be. Without the dew in the land of Israel in the spring, and without the rain in its time, our people would starve. Today, if there's a drought, most of us can acquire the fruits and vegetables we need at the same grocery stores where we usually shop -- and we may be totally unaware that they have come from a different part of the world. Perhaps the price fluctuates -- but the likelihood of famine and starvation are really unknown to today's Jewish communities around the world.

Hearing these melodies in the spring and in the fall remind us both of the history of our people and of the delicate balance faced by millions of people in the world today. Of course, with global warming having already started to affect agricultural cycles, we may yet again face challenges like our ancestors did.

The musical moral of the story: Celebrate our Festivals by taking the time to be in synagogue. Making the Three Festivals--Pesach and Shavuot and Sukkot--part of the fabric of your life will tie the whole year together in ways you couldn't have imagined.

Cantor Jack Chomsky is a past president of the Cantors Assembly, and has served Tifereth Israel in Columbus, OH, since 1982.

Keeping the Seder Fresh

By Cantor Ralph Goren

When I lead a Seder, I want people to enjoy the experience and to spend the time learning, singing, and participating. There are so many ways this can be accomplished.

I find a modern Haggadah that has fresh explanations, modern art, new songs, and an attractive design is very engaging. It's important for the leader to pick out the parts that will keep everyone's interest, while including all the basic essentials. For instance, while it is traditional to have the youngest recite the four questions, there's nothing traditionally incorrect to have the entire group or a select few sing the questions.

Why not include some elements found entirely outside of the Haggadah? Depending on the crowd, some humorous parody songs can be a great way to infuse some appropriate levity into the evening. Another possibility is to introduce some Passover trivia--see who among the participants is a real expert.

I also like to change up some of the songs found at the end of the Haggadah. A favorite version of *Echad Mi Yodeah* is the English version called *Who Knows One?*-- a fun version with a host of hand motions that all ages seem to enjoy.

The trick is to have the learning experience to be fun and engaging. What lasts a fair amount of time feels a whole lot shorter when everyone is having a good time. Wishing everyone a Chag Sameach v'Kasher

Cantor Ralph Goren serves Beth El Synagogue in Margate City, NJ.



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Ask a Cantor ... Anything!

Q: Cantor, do you have one favorite prayer in the entire Siddur?

A: Absolutely! Do you think you can guess what it is? I'm guessing that if you had to try, you'd come up with these possible answers:

Shema; Ashrei; Aleinu; Barchu

These are all great guesses and indeed, are important *tefillot* in the service. But my personal favorite is one short, often overlooked line. In fact, I bet you've never even noticed it on the page, appearing before each and every instance of the *Amidah*. It reads:

Adonai, s'fatai tiftach ufee yagid t'hilatecha.

God, open up my lips so that my mouth may speak words of praise.

Wow--what a powerful line! In just six short Hebrew words, we sum up the collective experience of countless generations of worshippers. There are always times when people question their faith, feel disconnected from the service and the Jewish community, or even just aren't "in the mood" for prayer. This line acknowledges the reality of those feelings, and asks for the ability to get past those emotions and be able to participate with a full heart.

In other words, we pray to feel able to pray. Before asking for anything from God or reciting expressions of praise, our most important prayer is for the gift of prayer itself.

If you have a question you've always wanted to ask your cantor, email it to cantor@cbisp.org, and we'll send it out to our crack team of cantorial experts!

Ever have a question you were dying to ask your cantor but didn't have the courage to really do it?

Here's your chance!

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