

# Next year, may we be together

[Ruth Marcus](#)



A rabbi breaks a piece of unleavened bread at an interfaith Passover Seder last year in Rockville. (Jahi Chikwendiu/The Washington Post)

Other Jewish holidays are holier, but none is more communal. We Jews are, by definition, not social distancers; it takes 10 to make a minyan, the quorum required for public prayer. And a Passover Seder is the ultimate antithesis of social distancing. We are commanded to come together to retell the Passover story, to share it with our children, even those too young to comprehend.

[Full coverage of the coronavirus pandemic](#)

There is nothing sadder than a sparse Seder table, nothing more Jewish than generations and siblings and cousins, friends and friends of friends, invited to join. "Let all who are hungry come and eat," we say, holding aloft the matzoh. As the meal concludes, the children open the door for Elijah the prophet.

This is a holiday of hospitality and open doors, not a ritual to be experienced six feet apart or enacted in cyberspace. And yet, distance we must, and discover alternate ways of fulfilling the commandment, "You shall tell your child on that very day: It is because of this that God did for me when I went out from Egypt."

I am lucky in this regard: My children were not supposed to be home for the Seder; now they have returned, and they and their boyfriends have quarantined enough that the six of us can limp through a mini-Seder on Wednesday night, one where the specified practices assume new resonance. Ordinarily, we dispense with the ritual hand-washing; this year I imagine we will count the full 20 seconds, both times. Ordinarily, we break off and pass around bits of the afikoman, the piece of matzoh set aside to serve as a symbolic dessert; this year we will come up with an alternative.

If I can find a chicken in the grocery store, if I can snag a delivery spot, there will be matzoh ball soup, even if it is not safe for Grandma to come and make the matzoh balls with my daughters, as she usually does. But can Grandma — my 85-year-old mother, who has been sewing face masks at her nearby retirement community as soon as the material arrives — safely join us? Can my brothers and their family? Can we put all the leaves in the table and sit Grandma apart, at the very end?

In my head, I know the right answer is no. Grandma has Zoom on her iPad; she can follow along. In my heart, this is killing me. There has never been a Passover — not the terrible year my father was in the hospital recovering from open heart surgery; not the even worse one that he was in a nursing home, trying without success to recover from his broken hip — that we have been apart.

One measure of the Passover imperative to gather came in Israel, where a group of Orthodox rabbis [authorized videoconferencing](#) for Seders as long as the link was launched before the holiday began — this despite the fact that Orthodox Jews would ordinarily not be permitted to use electricity, as on the sabbath.

The exception, the rabbis wrote, was justified “to remove sadness from adults and the elderly, to give them motivation to continue fighting for their lives.” Israel’s chief rabbinate [overruled](#) the rabbis, but even the willingness to consider relaxing the rules makes the point.

It is a bitter irony of the pandemic that this is a holiday about plagues, visited by God on the Egyptians in order to persuade Pharaoh to let the Jewish slaves go. Passover, of course, refers to the sign, marked in lamb’s blood on the doors of Jewish households, to instruct the Angel of Death to pass over their houses as God unleashed his 10th and most terrible plague, the slaying of the first-born.

At the Seder, we dip our fingers into a glass of wine and recite the names of the plagues in order: Dam (blood). Tz’fardea (frogs). Kinnim (vermin). The spilled wine recognizes, we are told, the suffering of the Egyptian people, even as we rejoice in our own liberation.

This year, needless to say, there is an 11th plague and little rejoicing. If

the first 10 had a godly purpose, to release the Jewish people from bondage, I recoil from discerning a divine hand in this one. The virus unleashed itself on us, and we failed to prepare for or respond adequately to its menace. This time, no sacrificial lamb can ensure that the Angel of Death will pass us by.

The Seder ends with the invocation "L'Shana Haba'ah B'Yerushalayim." Next year in Jerusalem. It is a statement not simply of geography but of yearning for a better world. This year, that yearning is made manifest. L'Shana Haba'ah. Next year may we be together. Next year may we be healthy. Next year, God willing, back to normal.

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