



About the NH Jewish-Catholic Seder

Why organize a Jewish-Catholic Seder?

In springtime both Catholics and Jews observe rituals of freedom and rebirth. The Catholic Easter Triduum and the modern Jewish Seder both have roots in the Passover traditions of biblical Israel. Both communities see themselves as experiencing the liberating power of God first manifest to the ancient Hebrews in the Exodus. "In every generation, each of us should feel as though we ourselves had gone forth from Egypt" is a principle held by both faiths. By joining in this ritual meal, Jews can share one of their central festivals with Catholics, whose own religious heritage predisposes them to appreciate the Seder's deep spiritual significance. This makes it more likely that during table conversation mutual understanding will begin to replace stereotypes or misapprehensions about each other.

How authentic is our Jewish-Catholic Seder?

The usual setting for a Seder is in the home where people are surrounded by family and close friends. It does not take place in a synagogue. We have adapted our Seder to a location outside the home. Also, we are conducting the Seder on an evening other than Passover. Otherwise, our Seder will follow the traditional order of the ritual set down by the rabbis in the 5th or 6th Century. We will engage in the ritual as well as eat the appropriate food for a Passover meal. We created our own *haggadah*: a book that tells the story of Passover through the rituals of the seder. No two *haggadot* are alike, and like all other *haggadot*, ours is a reflection of contemporary times while closely following the required order of the Seder.

Why might Catholics be interested in participating in a Seder?

There are many reasons. The Book of Exodus is part of the Christian Bible and so Christians are indebted to the spiritual heritage of ancient Israel. In addition, Jesus ate a final meal with his friends at the time of Passover. While it is not clear how Passover meals were conducted in the first century, or even whether this Last Supper was a Seder (John 13:1 and 19:31 indicate it was not), today's Catholic Mass is partially understood as a commemoration of that meal. Many Catholics can thus have a powerful experience of their shared roots in biblical Judaism by joining in a Seder meal with Jewish friends.

The significance of Passover for the Jewish people

The redemption from Egypt is the model for all the redemptions in the course of history and beyond into the Age to Come. The Seder guides participants through that passage – from the oppression of harsh taskmasters, through the terror of the plagues until they emerge singing Psalms, celebrating as free people. While the Seder overtly describes the Exodus from Egypt, it transports the participants from past to future, closing with the hopeful cry, "Next year in Jerusalem", a look forward to the ultimate redemption of all humankind. Perhaps because that passage is one traveled by each individual at the Seder, this ritual has attracted more attention than any other in the Jewish year. *Haggadot* have been lavishly illustrated, and myriads of songs have been composed for every phrase of the Seder. Some Seders can last until the wee hours of the morning – an energetic celebration of redemption.

Rabbinic Judaism and some relevant Roman Catholic Teaching

It is important for Catholics to realize that the Jewish religious heritage has evolved and developed over the centuries, just as the Christian tradition has. In the centuries after the Roman destruction of the Jerusalem Temple in the year 70, learned Jews called rabbis adapted Judaism to a world without a Temple by stressing study of the Torah, prayer, and the fulfillment of God's biblical commands (the *mitzvot*). This rabbinic tradition eventually became normative for all Jews. All the various movements in Judaism today – whether Reform, Conservative, Reconstructionist, or Orthodox – engage the traditions of the rabbis in some way. Judaism today is not biblical Judaism. Today's Seder continues but differs from biblical Passover rituals. For instance, lamb is not served.

Ever since the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965), the Catholic Church's official teachings have urged Catholics to respect and learn from rabbinic Judaism. Noting that the faith of the Jewish people did not end with the demise of the Temple, a 1985 Vatican document declared that, "It continued, especially in a numerous Diaspora which allowed Israel to carry to the whole world a witness-often heroic-of its fidelity to the one God and to 'exalt Him in the presence of all the living' (Tobit 13:4). ... We [Catholics] must remind ourselves how the permanence of Israel is accompanied by a continuous spiritual fruitfulness, in the rabbinical period, in the Middle Ages and in modern times ..."¹ This spiritual richness is the consequence of the fact that Jews are partners "in a covenant of eternal love [with God] that was never revoked,"² as Pope John Paul II has put it. That is why Christians must "strive to learn by what essential traits the Jews define themselves in the light of their own religious experience."³

Christians and Respect for the Seder

In recent years, some Christians eagerly pursuing their Jewish roots have taken a modern Jewish *haggadah* and turned it into a dramatization of the Last Supper. Such misappropriation disrespects the Jewish tradition. It is also historically inaccurate since the Seder has developed over time. For example, some elements of today's Seder arose in response to Christian oppression of Jews. Many scholars believe that the medieval Seder adapted to a Christian accusation that Jews ritually murdered a Christian child at Passover to use its blood to make unleavened matzah bread. Jews began to open the front doors of their homes during the Seder to welcome the possible arrival of the prophet Elijah, but also so Christians could see for themselves that no evil was being done.

From a Catholic perspective, the Seder is a Jewish tradition that Christians should honor and experience only when they are privileged to enjoy the hospitality of Jews at the Passover table. Catholic guests at Jewish Seders should not imagine that they are reenacting the Last Supper, which after all occurs at the Christian paschal meal, the Mass. Rather, they are blessed with a chance to experience the profound and related spirituality of the Jewish people, a graced moment that not only enriches Christian faith, but also energizes Catholics to take up the commitment of Pope John Paul II "to genuine fellowship with the People of the Covenant."⁴

What should Jews expect about Catholic guests at interfaith Seders?

Jews who invite Christians to share in a Seder can expect that the Exodus story is familiar to them. The Jewish conviction that at the Seder past events become present today is something that can resonate strongly with Catholics. The Catholic concept of *anamnesis* corresponds to the Hebrew term *zecher*. Both refer to the use of ritual to make the past a lived present reality.

Perhaps unfamiliar is the order of the meal, the symbolic meanings of the various foods and actions, and the meaning of Hebrew expressions. Christians may not be familiar with how the Exodus carries such a strong moral weight for Jews and how the memory of having been slaves demands that Jews fight against the oppression of all people today. Christians may find it difficult to appreciate the centrality of the *mitzvot* in the Jewish tradition and will benefit from seeing how they shape the Seder experience.

Catholics experiencing the Seder for the first time may be struck by the various connections with their own Easter or other observances. They may be surprised that Jews have similar ideas about God even though Jesus, who is obviously central to Christian understanding, is not part of the Jewish experience. Jews who observe this dynamic in their Christian guests may be puzzled why Jesus should be thought necessary to relate to God. It may be helpful for both Christians and Jews to observe both the differences and the similarities of their experience of the Passover ritual.

Dinner conversation

The eating of the Seder's main course offers a wonderful opportunity for Jews and Catholics to get to know each other better. That is why sitting in mixed groups is encouraged at the Jewish-Catholic Seder. Besides discussing the particulars of the Seder itself, participants might talk about some aspect of the following question:

- Think of your own memories, as either a child or an adult, of preparing for or celebrating Passover or Easter. What are some customs observed in your family that you associate with the feast? What does the celebration mean to you?

A Moment of Blessing

Jews and Christians are literally living in unprecedented times. For the first time in history it is becoming more possible for us to learn from each other without fear. Such events as the Jewish-Catholic Seder are occasions for us not to lose our respective identities through some sort of blending, but rather to deepen who we are as Jews and Christians by appreciating the distinctive though related ways in which we covenant with God.

ENJOY !

¹ Pontifical Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews, *Notes on the Correct Way to Present Jews and Judaism in Preaching and Teaching in the Roman Catholic Church* (1985), VI, 25.

² Pope John Paul II, "Address to Jewish Leaders in Miami" (Sept. 11, 1987).

³ Pontifical Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews, *Guidelines and Suggestions for Implementing the Conciliar Declaration Nostra Aetate, no. 4* (1974), Preamble.

⁴ Pope John II, "Prayer at the Western Wall," March 26, 2000.



**Jewish Federation of
Greater Manchester**



**Roman Catholic
Diocese of Manchester**