



## When is a 'seder' a Seder?

Peter Woodward

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### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Inspired by the first Shap Conference at the Shap Wells Hotel in the spring of 1969, Peter Woodward has served the Shap Working Party in every possible variety of role ever since. Now retired and living contentedly in Menorca, he is currently editing the Shap Calendar of Festivals.

### ABSTRACT

The author defines the key elements of the Seder, and in describing six different versions he has observed in practice, wonders if all 'seder' would necessarily be recognised as such by the entire Jewish community.

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Passover, an eight day, springtime, Jewish festival, is usually celebrated in the home. It is commonly known by its Hebrew term: Pesaḥ. Orthodox families hold a symbolic meal, known as a Seder, on the evenings of the first two days of the festival. Progressive communities, Liberal and Reform, usually hold only one Seder, on the evening of the first day.

Key elements of the Seder involve:

- gathering the family together, whether nuclear, extended, or in some cases communal;
- arranging a leader for the Seder, inviting guests, and, of course, planning a special meal;
- ensuring that a Seder booklet containing the 'order' for the meal is available for everybody present, normally in Hebrew, though often with a translation for those whose Hebrew is limited;
- preparing the essential ingredients for the symbolic part of the Seder (unleavened bread, bitter herbs (often lettuce), greenery dipped in salt water, haroset, roasted egg, roasted lamb shankbone); for the eagerly anticipated meal, often of three courses, with red wine sufficient for four glasses each, that follows; and for the rituals such as opening the door to allow Elijah to enter, and the singing of traditional Seder songs, which remind Jews of their place and role in history.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> For fuller detail, see Goldin, Barbara D., *The Passover Journey: A Seder Companion*, 1994, Viking, 1997, Penguin, or any English version of the Passover Haggadah



- encouraging those attending to remember the symbolism of the festival, with its messages of divine deliverance throughout their past, the gift of freedom for all to enjoy, and forgiveness for enemies and persecutors.

Naturally most Seder celebrations share in all of the above characteristics. But it is interesting to examine variations in the six I was privileged to attend over a period of some fifteen years and to ask whether the differences I have noted are sufficient to raise questions about the validity of any one occasion. Is it possible for a festival to share in the elements of the 'seder' without it being necessarily recognised as such by some parts of the Jewish community?

### **Authorised version**

One year, I was invited in the course of a research study into a Midlands Jewish community to attend the Seder at the home of the elderly rabbi of an Orthodox urban Jewish synagogue. This was the evening of the second day of Pesah (Passover). The rabbi, like his community, was more than moderately 'frum'<sup>2</sup> (observant) and, as one would expect, all the components listed above were fully evident. The four questions were asked by the 'rebbitzin', the rabbi's wife, since she was the youngest of those present apart from myself. The half dozen other guests were all members of his congregation who had no family where they could celebrate and were delighted and flattered to be invited by the rabbi to fulfil the role of invited guest, which is a basic feature of Passover ritual. Halfway through the ceremony the door is opened and left open for Elijah to call, but it is open for others too as a regular feature of Jewish festival (and Sabbath) hospitality. As one would expect, this was a fully kosher celebration in every way, all the ritual elements were joyfully observed, and it was full of meaning for all those present, many of whom had experience of the fear of losing their freedom.

### **Revised version**

The previous evening, the first day of Passover, I had been invited to attend a Seder ceremony in the home of a member of the local Progressive community. The father in this family had an Orthodox background, but had courted and married a Christian, who was studying to convert to Judaism under the guidance of the local Liberal rabbi. His Orthodox mother, his wife and children made up a small but joyful family gathering, and they all welcomed me warmly. This family was not usually particularly observant of kashrut and the stricter Sabbath regulations, but had made an effort to be so on this occasion since it involved the visit of the husband's mother. The only visible difference from the Orthodox Seder was that there was no lamb bone present to symbolise the source of the blood daubed on the doorposts, as the family was vegetarian, and so the very enjoyable meal avoided meat in any form. In intention and content this was a normal Seder, ritually and symbolically, and full of interest and meaning, especially for the lively children. It would, however, be relevant to ask how an ultra Orthodox community might react to what they would see as signs of slackness in the observance of kashrut, and in the vegetarian nature of the occasion. However, many Jews, both Orthodox and Progressive, would argue that it is appropriate for any religious community to determine its own authenticity. This was a lively and delightful Seder that Orthodox and Progressive shared together.

### **Model version**

Several years prior to these visits I had accepted an invitation to 'a Model Seder', held at a London synagogue to inform people from non-Jewish backgrounds about the meaning and rituals associated with Passover. This was held on a March weeknight evening a couple of weeks before Passover itself. Explanations were given about the cleansing of the home from all traces of yeast, and about the candlelight search made for any scraps or crumbs which had been overlooked; also about the stocking of special foods, 'kosher for Pesah', and the use of special crockery and cutlery each year for these eight days only. The ritual of the Seder was outlined and discussed in a dramatised format, and some of the songs were sung, helped by a

<sup>2</sup> See Woodward, Peter (1993) 'On Being Frum' in *Religion Today*, Vol. 8, No. 3.



few volunteers from the local synagogue community. The only missing element was the actual meal, though the four glasses of red wine were meaningfully consumed! Other basic elements of the Seder were present, but no attempt was made to suggest that we were involved in celebrating a Seder as such. Everybody understood that this was a simulation and not a celebration – though through it we learnt much about the nature of such a celebration.

### **School-based version**

On another occasion, I was invited by the head of a local Jewish primary school, where I had served as the school's Inspector, to attend a Friday afternoon event in the week before the spring break. At the end of each week an assembly was held preparing the children for Shabbat, or some other event or celebration that was relevant to the time of year. On this occasion three rabbis who lived and worked nearby, the school governors and other members of the local community were invited to help the children prepare for their Seder celebration. We were all grouped around tables of eight children and one adult and we followed the Order (Seder) as prescribed by the haggadah, with each table having the essential elements set out in front of the group. Most of the children and teachers were from a Jewish background, but by no means all, and the non-observant Jewish children and the Muslim and Christian children present were able to discover for themselves what takes place in the festival. Food and songs were part of the occasion, although not the full meal. The emphasis on deliverance, freedom and forgiveness was explained, especially when the ten drops of 'wine' were spilt in remembrance of the ten plagues in Egypt, with the prayer that these would never happen again. For some Jewish children this would be their only *seder* that year, while for others it was so close to the real thing that they would regard it as a genuine Seder. Can it be a Seder when it is held at the 'wrong' date and time?

### **Israeli version**

A few years before, I had been visiting Israel with a party of teachers who were exploring this country which is so vitally important to worshippers from a number of faiths. As Passover approached, we were due to stay for two nights at a kibbutz in the north of the country, not far from the Lebanese border. The community who lived and farmed there was, in the main, a secular community, but the community still celebrated important festivals and had arranged for a number of our party to attend the communal Seder and to join with various groups as they ate their meal. This was the liveliest of occasions, and the emphasis on deliverance and freedom was paramount, not least because of recent and subsequent shelling of a nearby Jewish town that was very much in peoples' thoughts. The date and time for the first day of the festival were accurate, the component elements of the Seder were all followed in due order, and the rather basic meal was eaten – and drunk – with gusto. In particular, the singing of the Passover songs was the liveliest possible and it was followed by Israeli group dancing of a passionate nature. The kibbutz naturally contained a large number of families, and for them this was their permanent home, even though the celebration was on a much larger scale than any nuclear family could envisage. The size of the assembly and the secular nature of the community gave it a distinctive flavour. For many of them it was truly a Seder; for others it was a celebration of a communal, but not necessarily a religious, nature. Would the presence of visitors, mostly Christian in background, and of secular or atheistic Israelis raise questions as to the authentic nature of what was taking place? Is such a festival necessarily restricted to the religious?

### **Samaritan version**

Another visit to Israel led to an opportunity to visit the Samaritan community which assembles on the upper slopes of Mount Gerizim, near the Islamic township of Nablus in the centre of the country<sup>3</sup>. We arrived on the evening of the first day of *Pesah*, which the Samaritans celebrated

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<sup>3</sup> For a more detailed description of Samaritans and their ritual, see Woodward, Peter (2007) 'The Nature of Distinctiveness – On Being a Samaritan' in *Shap Journal, World Religions in Education, Diversity and Distinctiveness*.



on the same day as the Jews. Here, too, a large number of families assembled together, amounting to over three hundred people in total, and spent several hours lighting huge fires in great pits dug in the ground. Lambs were ceremonially slaughtered, spitted and placed in the pits to be baked for several hours. Prayers in Hebrew were read by the High Priest of the community, using copies of the triangular Samaritan script which is unique to their Torah and other religious writings. Later the cooked animals would be taken out and each family, at some time during the course of the next day, would eat a Seder meal in the tents or temporary homes they occupied on the mountainside for the duration of the festival. These colourful ceremonies differ in a number of ways from the authorised (and other) versions described above, but in many respects, such as dates, family togetherness, the leadership of the ceremony, the use of Hebrew, the prearranged meal, the joyous celebrations and the symbolism of deliverance and freedom, they come very close to the heart of the Seder. If the view that each community can determine its own authenticity is acceptable, then this was a spectacular and symbolic Seder of a striking nature.

### **Key elements of similarity and difference in the above 'Seders'**

#### **Dates:**

The Model Seder and the School based version had elements of celebration about them, but could not, perhaps, be regarded as a Seder proper since they were held on previous dates and at different times. The Samaritan version started on the first day of Pesah but the actual meal was eaten on this occasion on the second day of the festival.

#### **Family/groups:**

Two 'versions' only of the six described above were situated in the home, where the Seder is normally sited. The kibbutz was home for the kibbutzniks in a real sense, though many individual families had their own houses. Many Samaritans have second homes on the mountain, and see Gerizim as their spiritual home. Does any of this affect the legitimacy of the festival?

#### **Leadership and roles:**

Ideally an elder figure in the family leads the Seder and appoints the roles of others, whose performances he supervises, e.g. in asking the four questions or hiding the 'afikomen', the broken piece of matzah for which the children hunt with gusto, hoping to receive the finder's prize. It is usually self-evident who should be expected to fulfil this leadership role.<sup>4</sup>

#### **Ritual elements:**

The ritual of the prescribed 'Seder' is fairly standard and was followed in five of the Seders I attended. I was unable to attend the Samaritan meal since it was held on the following day, so I cannot comment on how closely this celebration followed the pattern of the others.

#### **Hebrew and vernacular:**

All the Seders used Hebrew for much of the ceremonial, though each of them also used the vernacular at some time to help those with limited Hebrew, especially so in the case of the model seder and the school-based version. The kibbutz and the Samaritan versions used very little English. The two home-based ones and the model and school-based versions distributed booklets with the text in Hebrew and English. The Hebrew of the Samaritan version was, of course, different in many ways from standard Hebrew, particularly in respect of the shape of the letters; but the text of these prayers and the quotations from their Torah are very similar to those of standard Biblical Hebrew.

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<sup>4</sup> For a helpful and detailed account of the role of Seder Leader, see Laufer, Rabbi Nathan, *Leading The Passover Journey : The Seder's Meaning Revealed, The Haggadah's Story Retold*.



**Self determination:**

Progressive Jews and Samaritans are both affected by the fact that some of their customs differ in important ways from those of the Orthodox, especially the ultra Orthodox, or very 'frum'. Inevitably there will be different viewpoints as to whether they are to be seen as Jewish and their Seders as celebration. Once one accepts their right to determine for themselves how their Jewishness should be interpreted, there is no problem here.

**Symbolism:**

The Seder is full of far more symbolic truth than the three points mentioned above in the last of the key elements listed at the start of this article, on which all six versions are naturally in agreement. The forgiveness of enemies, whether historical or contemporary, was a particularly sensitive issue in the case of the kibbutz where Lebanese shells were currently falling, and in that of the Samaritans, who felt ostracized by Israeli Judaism and never secure in their homes in Nablus, where Jewish/Muslim antagonism imperilled their security.

**Conclusions**

The excitement of being Jewish is nowhere more evident than in the unity and diversity of the celebration of such festivals. When a pattern of celebration is so rich and so charged with symbolism, it would be churlish to quibble over issues of what constitutes a festival and who is Jewish. The differing emphases listed above show the richness of variety in just one celebration. How rich must be a tradition that enjoys such diversity in over a dozen similar festivals.

**Editors' note**

Readers might find Chaim Raphael's *A Feast of History* (Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1972) a useful follow-up.