

Zoom seders: iPads, iPhones and laptops on holiday tables as Passover adapts to COVID-19 pandemic

“Try to enjoy the blessings of the holiday ... just like the Israelites in the wilderness, we don’t know how long this will last,” said Rabbi Michael Weinberg of Temple Beth Israel in Skokie.

By Lynn Sweet | Apr 7, 2020, 9:35pm CDT



Anshe Emet Senior Rabbi Michael Siegel and the congregation’s cantor, Alberto Mizrahi on Monday, April 6, taped a seder. Passover starts Wednesday night | Photo courtesy Anshe Emet

Around the globe on Wednesday evening, Jews at Passover seders will ask the traditional question, “Why is this night different from all other nights?” The answer on this coronavirus pandemic Passover, with everyone on lockdown, is that Jews are marking the exodus of the children of Israel from Egypt in new ways.

“Try to enjoy the blessings of the holiday, despite the difficult circumstances, being aware that just like the Israelites in the wilderness, we don’t know how long this will last,” said Rabbi Michael Weinberg of Temple Beth Israel in Skokie.

The seder is a Jewish holiday celebrated at home rather than in a synagogue. The retelling of the story about Jews fleeing the Pharaoh who enslaved them is done according to a certain order – that’s what the word seder means – with a book called a Haggadah leading people through the ritual dinner. Many people observe Passover with a seder on two nights.

The stay-at-home edict hit just as I was wrapping up covering the March 17 Illinois primary here, so I never made it back to Washington. Right now, the Sun-Times Washington Bureau is the dining room table in the home of my sister, Neesa, in Highland Park, where I am staying put for now as this COVID-19 disaster unfolds.

We’re doing Zoom seders this year. We’ve been invited to a few: my pals in Washington; my sister’s friends in Highland Park, and, of course, we will drop by the family seder hosted by cousins Myron and Carol Taxman in Boynton Beach, Florida. We are likely to Zoom into several, with iPads, iPhones and laptops set on the table along with the traditional seder plate.

While there are many Jews using Zoom seders to be connected on Passover, the way technology will be deployed at seders depends in part on your religious beliefs and guidance from the Jewish denomination you are a part of.

Some Jews observe prohibitions on using electricity on Shabbat and the holidays, with allowances this year because of the drastic situation.

The conservative Anshe Emet Synagogue in Lake View was one of the first institutions to be impacted by the COVID-19 outbreak, closing down its Bernard Zell school in early March.

On Monday, Anshe Emet Senior Rabbi Michael Siegel and the congregation’s cantor, Hazzan Alberto Mizrahi, taped a complete seder to post online for their congregants to use to guide them through their own seders on Wednesday and Thursday.

They sat apart from each other at the traditionally set seder table and wore blue plastic gloves.

Rather than using Zoom, the thought behind posting the online seder was in line with the conservative movement’s instruction to engage “in the least amount of disruption to

Jewish law and the sanctity of the holiday,” Siegel said.

“The reality that we’re faced with is that people cannot gather. It’s not as if they’re choosing one over the other. They simply can’t gather.”

Siegel noted that in figuring out how to adjust, “the rabbis have always allowed the law to evolve in a way that accommodates the reality of the moment. So in this particular year (where) people are feeling isolated, we need to find ways to bring them together, whether in a streaming video or in real time, through Zoom video.

“That’s how I think that’s how we can be true to the spirit of the holiday,” Siegel said.

Rabbi Zev Eleff, the provost and chief academic officer at the Hebrew Theological College in Skokie, said the Orthodox movement is taking into account the coronavirus pandemic circumstances this year in permitting some very limited use of technology during a seder for the elderly or anyone at risk to keep Zoom on for periodic checks-in so others can make sure they are ok.

For those people, Eleff said, “the Orthodox community has paid special attention” in making exceptions for the “psychological and social welfare of people, particularly if they are alone.”

Temple Beth Israel – my synagogue growing up – is a Reform congregation and, as have many houses of worship been live streaming services for the past weeks.

Weinberg told me he will preside over a virtual second night seder, probably using a shared screen showing the text of the Hagaddah.

“I’ll lead the (congregational) seder pretty much the way I usually do,” Weinberg said, with at one point opening it up so people can exchange greetings.

“We will have each other, and we can talk to each other, and that’s what holds us up in this crisis.”

Marc Slutsky, president of the Aitz Hayim Center for Jewish Living in Glencoe, is doing a congregational seder on Zoom. The seder meal comes in the middle of the seder, but to accommodate people in different time zones, “We will do the whole seder where people will eat the symbolic meal, and then they can separate,” he said.

Slutsky also plans to use Zoom's ability as a visual medium. "We will show different parts of the Haggadah on the screen and have people speak to those different parts," he said. "That way, they can relate the Haggadah content to our current circumstances."

He added, "We also plan to use videos," such as the late Leonard Cohen singing "Hallelujah," which ties in with a traditional part of the seder about praising God, as well as a performance from an African American and Jewish concert about hope.

"We'll use different elements to illustrate different parts of the seder," Slutsky said.

PASSOVER 2020: ZOOM SEDERS LET PEOPLE BE APART AND TOGETHER

I checked in with some of my friends about what they were planning.

Sharon Sutker McGowan said with her husband Jim, Skokie residents, they typically host about 32 people over two nights for Passover seders, all family members who live in the area.

"This year, my immediate family of six people will attend in person both nights, and other family members will join us via Zoom. We plan to set up a laptop at one end of the table. We've scanned our Haggadah, and will email it to our guests so people can take turns reading.

"This will be our grandson's first seder. Since he is only 10 months old, Charlie will not remember why this seder is different from all other seders. I'm still making homemade gefilte fish — but only about half as much as I usually do. My sister, niece and a good friend usually help; this year I'm on my own."

Miriam Eisenberg, who lives in Highland Park, told me, "the more usual years, my brother and sister-in-law and I would take turns doing first and second seders. We would host anywhere from 25 to 35 people, and that would include usually about a dozen children.

"And this year, obviously is quite different. We're going to be doing a remote seder.

"... We're going to be using a simplified Haggadah that will probably take about 15 or 20 minutes before we have our meal. Via Zoom, we will be connected with family from

Highland Park, Deerfield, Northbrook and Morton Grove, as well Milwaukee, Little Rock, Arkansas, Lake Worth, Florida, and Orange County, California.”





As Rabbi Eleff said, “We’ll make do. We’ll make the most of it.”







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