

Pesach during the Coronavirus crisis

By Rabbi Jonathan Wittenberg

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Introduction

We are approaching Pesach, *zeman cheiruteinu*, the festival of our freedom, at an exceptionally difficult period for all people across the world. May the corona virus soon pass away and the world become safe for everyone. May the strict limitations on our own freedom of movement, imposed to protect the health of the entire country, soon be eased and may the legacy of this challenging time be a deeper appreciation of the life, liberty and interdependence of all humankind.

The following pages are a guide to keeping Pesach at this difficult time. They are based on the principles of upholding the commandments not to eat or own chametz and to celebrate the Seder and the festival, while emphasising the supreme importance of the protection of life and health, the ban against needless waste, the importance of family and community connection, and the mitzvah to reach out and support all who are hungry and distressed.

The nights ahead will indeed be different from all other nights. The practices, beliefs and values they embody may as a result enter our hearts even more deeply.

Pesach Cleaning

The Torah requires us not to own or eat chametz. The removal of chametz from our homes should be carried out as usual, except that at this time when many are in need and when future supplies may be uncertain, no food which can last should be thrown away. We should always be scrupulous about *bal tashchit*, the prohibition against needless waste, and especially so at this time. Food containing chametz should be given to a foodbank if appropriate and safe, or placed in a cupboard which is locked before midday on Erev Pesach and the contents of which are formally sold (see The Sale of Chametz below). Dishes should be changed over and

our homes and kitchens koshered for Pesach, as in all other years.

Many of us will have less family support, less help and greater concern to maintain our own physical strength than in previous seasons. In such circumstances, we should try to make at least a modest area of our kitchen kosher for Pesach. All other cupboards can simply be sealed for the duration.

The Sale of Chametz

Since the Torah requires us not to possess chametz on Pesach, the practice is to sell what we cannot, or, in present circumstances, should not, dispose of. To do so, please follow the link below, providing the necessary details and authorising Masorti Judaism to act on your behalf:

<https://forms.gle/zMhACcRqiWVw9xJTA>

Food and Shopping

Shopping has become challenging for everybody. Many of us in complete isolation are dependent on others to shop for us. In this situation ‘*venishmartem me’od lenafshoteichem* – you must take the utmost care of your health’ and the health of everyone around you – is the primary concern. Some kosher outlets are offering online shopping with delivery, or with collection from outside their premises at a specified time.

We must not put ourselves or others at risk and should keep our Pesach needs as simple as possible. At a time when many people are worried about their livelihood, we should keep our requirements simple; especially at this time there is no need, nor is it right, for Pesach to be a very major expense. The rabbis of the Talmud taught that the Torah shows merciful concern for people’s income; we should do likewise at this difficult juncture and do our best to help others.

Regarding exactly which foods require a special hechsher for Pesach, we recommend the detailed guidelines published by the Rabbinical Assembly ([here](#)). We also draw attention to this local list published by the Kashrut Division of the London Bet Din ([here](#)). Unopened packets of products in our cupboards which contain no chametz or mixture of chametz may be used. Where really necessary, even open packets of such products may be used on Pesach so long as we are confident no chametz has entered them.

Kitniyot (legumes) may be eaten, even by those who in normal times follow the strict Ashkenazi custom of avoiding them. The ban on kitniyot has long been a matter of contention. It has been considered by its opponents as divisive and as risking leading people to forget what chametz actually is: any product made of or containing one of the five kinds of grain, wheat, barley, rye, oats and spelt (except Matzah itself, which is prepared under special strictures to avoid any possibility of leavening).

It is a commandment to eat Matzah at the Seder itself. Where it is hard to obtain Matzah in quantity, it should be remembered that there is no requirement to eat it on the other days of Pesach.

Seder Night

At no other time in the year do Jewish families and communities come together as much as at the Seder. This year, that will be impossible for the great majority of people. There is no gainsaying the sadness this will cause us all.

We therefore recommend the following:

Families and friends should make the most of all electronic means of communication available during the preparations for Pesach, sharing memories and engaging in learning together. Over the coming days we will do the utmost as a movement, alongside other Jewish communities, to offer classes, materials and practical suggestions for the Seder for all ages and interests.

On Seder night itself, we encourage everyone, including those who have not led a Seder before, to feel empowered to do so.

We recognise that this year an overriding priority for all of us will be togetherness and inclusion and, above all, the mitigation of loneliness at a time when being with those we love and cherish is of the greatest significance. It is of the utmost importance to include everyone, especially family who are vulnerable and those alone in isolation.

Therefore, our recommendation is that most of the Seder should be conducted early, before Yom Tov comes in. This includes the entire story of the Exodus, with the four questions, the four children, the narrative, discussion and even the songs. The Yom Tov candles must be lit when Yom Tov begins; this marks the dividing point before which electronic means should be switched off. Only the Kiddush, the drinking of the four cups, and the eating of Matzah and the other Pesach foods must be done after dark.

However, if this is really not possible, the use of Zoom and other such means may be permitted if this is the only way to enable the inclusion of those who would otherwise be alone and isolated. Equipment should be set up before Yom Tov, so that it is simply left on until it switches itself off.

The same leniency may be applied on the second night, after the first day of Yom Tov has ended, when some communities may regard key members or leaders as having a responsibility to include those who would otherwise be entirely alone and isolated for three consecutive days (since Shabbat follows immediately after Yom Tov). Mental and emotional health in these extreme times may be regarded as part of *pikuach nefesh*, the saving, or potential saving, of life. In these very exceptional circumstances only, we would condone the use of electronic communications with every effort made to set them up in advance. This is not to be regarded as a precedent for future better times, may they come soon.

When Pharaoh, relenting briefly, offered Moses that the men alone could leave Egypt to worship God, he refused. 'We will go with our young and our old, with our sons and our daughters', he insisted. On Seder night we strive to leave no one out.

Ma'ot Chittin – Funds for those in need

Literally 'wheat flour', *ma'ot chittin* is the traditional name for the fund to ensure that even the poorest have the necessities for the Seder. In these straightened times we ask everyone to be as generous as possible to those struggling in our own communities, across the Jewish world and in, and at the fringes of, our wider societies.

We should prioritise the Tzedakah appeals of our own communities, local foodbanks and shelters for the homeless, and organisations such as Leket Yisrael and World Jewish Relief which provide for some of the poorest in Israel, Eastern Europe and around the Jewish world.

The Exodus from Egypt is the central, essential story of Judaism. Its core teachings are simple: because we have experienced injustice, we must value and pursue justice; because we have suffered cruelty, we must act with loving kindness; because we remember how it feels to be deprived of dignity, we must work to uphold the dignity of every human being.

Haggadot and Learning Materials

All our communities are currently working to provide the fullest online pre-Pesach programming and guidance we can. Materials will be available on synagogue websites, Facebook pages, and on the Masorti site <http://masortijudaism.social> as well as widely across the Jewish virtual world.

Chag Sameach

We wish everyone a good, worthwhile, safe and healthy Pesach.

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