

Truth be told: Even the lightest of matzah balls and a favorite *haggadah* don't guarantee a meaningful and warm seder experience for all. Some of the guests (and sometimes even we who are hosting) may be feeling ill at ease or insecure at the seder table—an internal slavery. What will it take to give our guests, and ourselves, the joy of freedom—knowing that all of us are really welcome at the table and in the family?

Taking the time to figure out what will make everyone at the seder feel truly welcomed and accepted can make all the difference at Pesach. The following six situations can serve up great lessons along with the matzah ball soup....

1 You've hosted the seder for the past twelve years and are determined to make this year no different—but you were laid off from your job last month. How can you manage the expense of feeding twenty-five people... keeping everything the same when things have changed?

The rituals, the sense of family and friendship, and the messages of the seder can become even more appreciated when we also acknowledge that some things really do change, including our personal and communal situations. Given current economic challenges, this year might well be the year for each of us, whether we're a seder host/hostess or guest, to offer to contribute food—and, perhaps, assistance in preparation and clean-up, too. This may be a good year to acknowledge that the sense of freedom and conviviality at past seders happens because of the exhausting hard work and sacrifice of a few—and make this year one in which no one feels the slightest bit enslaved by seder preparations. A frank discussion of changed economic circumstances can create opportunities for families and friends to engage in this kind of candor and caring.

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2 Everyone is silent this year while eating the matzah ball soup, painfully aware of Bubbe's absence.... Every year in the past compliments flew back and forth across the table about her delicious soup....

As hard as we try to make the soup just as Bubbe did and to go on with the festivities as best we can, there is no way to avoid the sad and complicated feelings at holiday times after the death of a loved one. Everyone mourns and misses loved ones differently; no one way of coping with the loss is right for all.

Saying what is really on everyone's mind helps. Give yourself the freedom to voice aloud how you miss your loved one and to share memories and stories. Some guests may want to reminisce, and others to avoid feeling painful memories in the presence of "company." Here it can be helpful to recognize that the seder itself is a tribute to the centrality of memory in Jewish tradition; thus, sharing the stories from our individual pasts is in keeping with the theme of the day. Moreover, the structure of the seder reminds us to commemorate the past not in isolation but in the company and comfort of close family and friends, and assures us that we can move from sorrow to joy.

Keep in mind, too, that children and teens often show their grief differently than adults. Rambunctious behavior, sullenness, or silliness may be mistaken for indifference, and here extra patience will go a long way. It is good to have "escape routes," opportunities for those who are upset to get away from the seder table for a little while.

At the same time, make use of the

seder structure to honor old traditions and memories while introducing new readings, new foods, and even some new traditions—conveying that life will continue and that the good in the past will not be lost as good-things-not-yet-tried can become the traditions of the future.

3 Your beautiful little niece who attends a nursery school for children with autism is covering her ears and rocking back and forth on her chair as the second youngest child tries to recite the Four Questions....

Difficult as it may seem, you *can* help make a child with communication, cognitive, or attentional difficulties more comfortable at the seder.

Begin by speaking with the child's parents in advance to solicit suggestions regarding special foods, seating, and/or activities likely to engage him/her in the seder ritual. At the same time, parents can prepare the child to anticipate what will occur, using CDs of Passover music, books about the holiday, and perhaps photographs of the people who will be celebrating together. When children understand unfamiliar behaviors and ways of communicating, they're less likely to be fearful or teased by others. Most importantly, conveying to the child that each person at the seder is welcome and needed contributes to the sense that this is a sacred occasion and he/she is a sacred part of it.

If space allows, also consider setting up a room in which quiet alternative activities to the seder are offered under adult supervision—a place where children of all ages and needs can retreat for a respite.

CARING COMMUNITY RESOURCES

- To help cope with loss of a job and/or the economic downturn: <http://urj.org/jfc> and <http://urj.org/communications/finance/>
- To help with bereavement: <http://urj.org/jfc/caring/chevra/>
- To make your home and congregation more welcoming to people living with disabilities: <http://urj.org/jfc/disability/>
- To help your family and congregation respond to substance abuse issues: <http://urj.org/jfc/health/mental/>
- To help families and congregations support individuals with reading, language, and communication challenges: <http://urj.org/jfc/disability/>