

So Many Different Haggadah's: So Many Different Jews
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Rabbi Francine Green Roston
Congregation Beth El, South Orange, NJ

There are as many different haggadah's on the market as there are synagogues and even Jews. There are feminist haggadah's and children's haggadah's, the 30-minute seder and the Maxwell House edition, there is a haggadah from every movement and every rebbe: the Breslov and the Vilna Gaon, the American Haggadah, the Freedom Haggadah, the Israel Haggadah, The Open Door Haggadah and the Different Night Haggadah.....Each haggadah seeks to take a particular perspective and serve a particular community. Much of the text and its questions are the same from tradition and then each haggadah seeks to make meaning and raise new questions for a new community.

Attending a Passover seder is one of the Jewish rituals that almost every Jew in America performs. The Haggadah is brilliant in its format and structure at engaging Jews, helping them to make meaning, to personalize the story of the Jewish people and connect Jews to those around the table in their home, in the neighborhood and around the world.

The Challenge in the Jewish community is how to engage Jews the 364 other days of the year. The challenge for the Jewish community and for every synagogue and Jewish organization is how to engage the up and coming generations of Jews so that Jewish tradition is continued and sustained far into the future.

A few months ago in my own surfing of the web, doing research for a class, I came across some very interesting studies of Generation Y, American youth ages 18-25, looking at their religious identities and how they express themselves. The studies were initiated by Reboot, a national network dedicated to leading a generational conversation about changes in identity, community and meaning from a Jewish perspective.

Their first study looked at Americans ages 18-25 across religious denominations: 1,385 respondents including those who were Catholic, Protestant, Jewish and Muslim. across racial and ethnic lines. The study was called "*OMG: How Generation Y is Defining Faith in the iPod era*".

Their primary findings were that this generation has very individualized worldviews, an apparent lack of interest in traditional religious institutions and they are defined by their diversity. While they might seem to be floating on the outskirts of Jewish community and, therefore, have no sense of religious identity, they do seek to express their faith in informal and expressive ways—such as joining religiously identified or spiritual book-groups or viewing films with a religious theme. While the number of people in this generation that is unwilling to align with a religious denomination is on the rise, they are still a generation that incorporates personal and informal expressions of their religion:

On a monthly basis, 68% talk about religion informally with friends, 64% pray before meals and 55% read religious books, newspapers and magazines.

This is a generation of seekers and not drifters. They are looking for religious ritual, learning, values and spirituality. Where they are willing to find it; what doors they will enter to engage: these are the questions. Is it the institutions themselves that people are rejecting or the messages and programs that institutions are offering?

Reboot pulled out the Jewish cohort and just issued a second study of 37 Jewish youth ages 18-25 titled: *Grande Soy Vanilla Latte with Cinnamon No Foam: Jewish Identity and Community in a Time of Unlimited Choices*.

As you can tell, the study uses the model of Starbucks to show that the chain's success characterizes a cultural, communal reality for a new generation.

First, the possibility to 'have it your way' rules:

“while some see this mix and match quality as negative, this is the reality we face when listening carefully to young American Jews talk about their identities in general and their religious identities in particular.”

Second, they have redefined where community is found

“Starbucks offers “a good Third Place”, a place that is neither home nor work, where an individual finds comfort and company....in other words community”

Third, they can not identify traditional Jewish organizations such as UJC, AJC and AIPAC—it is not that they reject them and their missions, they don't even know who they are or what they are about

Last, the founders of Starbucks had a Bold vision:

“Starbucks original concept was that people want more from their daily dose of coffee than a 50-cent cup from a convenience store: they want customization, community and culture....

How do we speak to the new generation—many of us share tendencies of Generation Y? How do we continue to present Judaism as relevant to people's lives—Jews of all ages-- so that they will engage and personalize and customize their own Jewish identity, make their place in the Jewish community, thereby enriching, enhancing and sustaining our community's unique religious expressions and approach to the world.

Well, first we have to **listen** like the Reboot folks did in these studies. When they listened to these young American Jews they found that although they didn't know what UJC and AJC were, they knew they were Jewish, and they were proud of their Jewish identity. And, while they did not connect with traditional, formal Jewish institutions or denominations, they do seek to express themselves in Jewish ways and with Jewish questions.

Where is this happening the most? Around Jewish cultural activities: music, art, films, books, podcasts, webcasts, websites.....according to the Reboot folks: “culture acts as a convener of like-minded people, a communicator of meaning and value, and a catalyst for

conversation....culture reinforces religious identity in Generation Y Jews and creates a common language and experience for the audience.”

Let's look back at the seder. Almost every Jew has memories from Passover seders. Singing, eating, questioning. The Haggadah gives us a common language of enslavement and oppression, of liberation and freedom. The seder rituals give us common experiences: tasting the salt water tears, the uncomfortable bitter herbs and bittersweet charoset...And, what we can not forget is the questioning. There are the four questions that open up the story section and there are the four questions of the four children.

This year when you read the four children, I want you to look at the text very carefully. First, the introduction:

Baruch haMakom. Baruch Hu. Baruch she-natan Torah l'amo yisrael. Baruch hu. K'neged arba'ah vanim dibrah Torah. Echad chacham, echad rasha, echad tam, v'echad she'aino yodea lishol.

Blessed be the Omnipresent. Blessed be God. Blessed be the One who gave the Torah to the People Israel. Blessed be God. The Torah alludes to four children: One wise, one wicked, one simple and one who does not know how to ask.

And then at the questions of the wise and the wicked:

- * The wise son says: What mean the decrees, laws and rules that the Lord our God has enjoined upon you?
- * The wicked son says: What does this service mean to you?

Who gets chastised. The wicked son. The response to him is: What does this service mean to you? To you and not to “him”. Since he excludes himself from the community and rejects a major principle of faith, you should set his teeth on edge and say to him: 'it is because of what the Lord did for me when I went free from Egypt’. Me and not him. Had he been there he would not have been redeemed.

What is the reply to the wise son: You shall say: It is the Passover sacrifice to the Lord, because He passed over the houses of the Israelites in Egypt when He smote the Egyptians, but saved our houses.

No chastisement, no rebuke. The wise one say “to you,” yet he is understood to somehow keep himself in the community. Somehow the wicked child asked the wrong question and the wise child asked the right question. Hence the title given to each and hence the tone of each response.

What we must not forget, and what David Arnow points out in his thought-provoking book “*Creative Lively Passover Seders: A Sourcebook of Engaging Tales, Texts and Activities*”, is that we began the section with praise of God and with a recognition of the diversity of Israel. Not only a recognition, but a blessing.

Baruch she-natan Torah l'amo yisrael. Baruch hu.

Blessed be the One who gave the Torah to the People Israel. Blessed be God.

Blessed be God who gave the Torah to ALL of Israel. Although the Haggadah in its answers alienates and condemns...the Torah welcomes and acknowledges the questions. The Torah expects that children will ask questions. The Torah wants us to question. This is how we learn. This is how we personalize. This is how we make the Jewish story and the Jewish tradition our own.

Arnold reads the Torah and this section of the Haggadah to be making a “plea that we sit at the same table with the people in our community—in our own families—with whom we differ most painfully. Whatever the 'wicked children' may or may not believe, they deserve a seat at the table. And our answers to their questions had better not cause them to leave.”

When we look at the people who don't come to synagogue, who don't support UJC, who question the State of Israel, we often label them as wicked. And our answers to them are more distancing and judgmental than respectful and engaging.

What we can learn from the seder and from these surveys of generation Y is that we cannot make assumptions about people's Jewish identity and commitment to the Jewish People based on their institutional or religious affiliation. If we sit and talk and listen and debate...if we engage in conversations, we will see that there are more seekers out in the pews and around our seder tables, more than we realize.

It is up to us to find creative ways to engage people where they are. It involves creativity and experimentation, the willingness to try new programs and new approaches. And, again, what we learn from the modern haggadah and modern seder is what we learned from these studies by Reboot: culture acts as a convener of like-minded people, a communicator of meaning and value, and a catalyst for conversation.

Whether it is art or music, stories or biographies, podcasts or webcasts: there are many ways that modern society offers us to engage each other in healthy discussions and debates about Jewish identity, Jewish life and teachings, Jewish community and the Jewish state.

I hope that you all engage in meaningful conversations around your seder tables this year and that we all continue our communal conversation about Jewish education and life-long learning, the Jewish people and our expression of Jewish ritual and the ways we can express our sense of peoplehood and connection with a global Jewish people.

Let us loose the bonds that have enslaved us: judgement, harsh answers, and other barriers to intimidation.

Let us seek ways to redeem the Jewish people from these limitations so that we can all stand on the banks of the sea, on free land and sing songs of praise to God, gratitude for our lives and our freedom....songs that express our joy, passions and creativity.

Hag Sameah. Shabbat Shalom!

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