

Celebrating Passover, a holiday which asks us to welcome the stranger into our midst, is fast becoming a religious event for Christians. How should the Jewish community respond?

Christianizing the Passover Seder

Debra Nussbaum Cohen

There may be no Jewish ritual more accessible to both Jews and gentiles than the Passover seder. It's a uniquely flexible yearly rite. The central Exodus story is re-told, with specific symbolic foods, but around that there is plenty of room — which we Jews have long filled — for a multiplicity of interpretations.

On the market are hundreds of different *haggadot*, each bringing to the Exodus story a different perspective — from Chasidism to vegetarianism, from remembering the Holocaust to celebrating feminism.

The Exodus story of slavery and redemption, of doubt and faith, of servitude and hope, resonates for people of many faiths and historical experiences. Many liberal Jews, in particular, use the seder as an opportunity to invite non-Jewish friends to the table. For more than two centuries blacks have sung songs about slavery and the hope of eschatological — if not real — freedom using the Exodus narrative.

Christians of every ethnicity hold the holiday dear because, for them, it is an annual reenactment of their lord's last supper. In the last decade, as scholarship and curiosity among Christians as to the Jewish roots of their faith has grown, so has their interest in seders

as they try to relate to it as a pivotal religious experience of their own.

The results, from the Jewish perspective, have been mixed.

The Catholic Church has been working to maintain the integrity of the seder as a Jewish ritual while trying at the same time to feel its Messiah's experience. In 1988, the National Conference of Catholic Bishops issued guidelines on the presentation of Jews and Judaism, focusing on Holy Week and Good Friday, which for centuries was the day that mobs of Catholics would set out from church to pillage, rape and murder

Jews in retribution for killing their Messiah.

But an unfortunate phenomenon has begun to take root in many Protestant churches. They have begun holding seders emptied of their Jewish content, and that content has been replaced with Christological interpretations of the traditional seder symbols. Some churches are careful to respect the Jewish integrity of the seder. Those least likely to expropriate the story generally invite a local rabbi to supervise the proceedings, and, in the process, learn more about their own Jewish roots.

But some Christian groups, specifically the so-

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called Messianic Jews (who may have been born Jewish but have adopted Christianity's belief that Jesus was the Messiah), wrapping it in a costume of Jewish symbols and diluted terminology, have made a minor career out of bringing expropriated seders to many mainstream churches.

The Messianic ministries spread their characterizations of the Jewish holiday into an eager, if misinformed, mainstream. Jews for Jesus's Southern California district leader, Tuvia Zaretsky, brings his interpretation of a seder to about 35 churches a year, as do each of the other seven missionaries on his staff.

Messianic Jews hijack the seder by applying a syncretistic layer of fundamentalist Christian interpretation to nearly every aspect of the ritual. In their view, the three *matzahs* represent the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit rather than the Cohanim, Levites and Israelites. The *afikomen*, which is broken, hidden and dramatically returned at the seder's conclusion, is re-cast to represent the Messiah Jesus, according to a brochure distributed by Jews for Jesus. The *matzah's* holes represent the puncture wounds suffered by Jesus on the cross, and of course

the wine is transfigured into his blood. The salt water, which at a Jewish seder represents the Hebrew slaves' tears, is re-interpreted to be the tears Jews will shed when they realize they've killed their own Messiah.

The Jewish community would be smart to encourage church leaders to invite a responsible Jewish religious leader to supervise a more appropriate model seder.

Better still, is the model offered by Brooklyn's Midwood Jewish Center. For the last three years the Conservative synagogue has joined with the neighborhood Catholic church to bring together both communities — which in this case resulted in guests reciting the Four Questions in English, Hebrew, Spanish and Creole and, more importantly, in neighbors who are Jews, Latinos, and immigrants from the Caribbean getting to know one another for the first time.

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Christians Celebrating the Passover Seder

Robert S. Somerville

Judaism does not need Christianity to explain its existence but Christianity needs Judaism both to explain its existence and what it teaches.

As a congregational pastor and one who widely lectures on Torah and New Testament comparative studies, I have observed an increasing interest on the part of Christians in the Jewish origins of their faith. For many years, I have conducted a Passover seder at various local churches and public facilities with the objective of demonstrating that the sacrament of Christian Communion originates in the Hebrew Passover seder. In the New Testament, Luke (Chapter 22) provides the narrative. At a first century seder, Jesus used the unleavened bread and the third cup of wine (cup of redemption/blessing - 1 Corinthians 10:16) to institute what has become known as the

Lord's Supper or Holy Eucharist.

Approximately 300 people attend our seder banquet where a kosher meal is served. Clergy from numerous traditions such as Episcopal, Presbyterian, Catholic and Assembly of God participate. The sounding of a *shofar* opens the festivities. As participants examine and sample elements of the seder plate displayed at each table, the *haggadah* and the symbols of the seder are explained in the light of history, Jesus, and the gospels. Liturgical dances, special presentations, and singing of the 118th Psalm by the entire group are part of the festivities. The evening concludes with a brief explanation of the traditional proclamation "Next year in Jerusalem" and the Priestly Blessing.

When I lead a seder, the emphasis is always on deliverance, a principle which lies at the very heart of the Passover celebration. As God delivered the