

Gay, Jewish and proud: Some Jews plan to infuse gay pride into Passover this year

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By Sarah N. Lynch

A new gay and lesbian Haggadah created by a California-based organization calls for a second Seder plate at Passover containing foods that are symbolic to the gay and lesbian experience. (Courtesy of JQ International)

When Robert Leshin finally decided to come out of the closet at age 20, he struggled at first to reconcile his sexuality with his spiritual upbringing.

Raised in a traditional Orthodox Jewish family in Ohio, Leshin said the anti-gay message preached in Leviticus left him feeling excluded. And during Passover, when his family recalled the exodus of the Jewish slaves from Egypt, he quietly wondered how he could celebrate the liberation of his people when part of him still felt so repressed.

“You feel like you are a living hypocrite,” said Leshin, now 24 and residing in New York City. “So especially during the Passover Seder when you’re talking about being slaves and being freed from bondage ... it’s quite ironic to be sitting there talking about these things, but also ignoring everything else that’s going on.”

When he goes back to Ohio to celebrate Passover this year, however, the experience will be different. That’s because Leshin and other Jews around the country plan to incorporate a new gay and lesbian Haggadah into their traditional Seder, or ritual feast, when Passover begins on April 19.

This Haggadah, which is the book read during the Passover Seder, parallels the story of the liberation of Jewish slaves during ancient times with the modern-day struggle of Jewish gay men and women to achieve equality. Written and designed by a membership-based organization called JQ International, the Haggadah maintains the traditional Hebrew prayers and songs. At the same time, it adds new elements, such as a second Seder plate with foods symbolic to the gay experience and a timeline of milestones in gay Jewish history, including the founding of the first gay synagogue.

Its goal is to help gay Jews remember their ancestors’ struggle for freedom and apply that theme to both the achievements and challenges that lie ahead for gays to be accepted and open about their sexuality.

“Passover has taken on a lot of meaning for the struggle of the gay and lesbian community,” said JQ International’s executive director, Asher B. Gellis, whose West Hollywood-based organization spent two years writing the Haggadah.



Jayson Littman, who is both Jewish and gay, shops for Passover supplies at the West Side Judaica in New York City. He plans to incorporate the new gay Haggadah into his Passover celebration this year. (Photo by Jake Fromm for CNS)

Traditionally at a Passover Seder, Jews read aloud the story of the exodus and partake of foods such as matzoh, which symbolizes the unleavened bread the Israelites took with them during their rushed departure from Egypt. The youngest child at the table must also ask four questions that serve to teach about Jewish traditions so they can be passed down through the generations. Those questions focus on what makes the Passover night different from other nights.

The gay and lesbian Haggadah still asks the same traditional four questions, but it includes a fifth that is specific to the gay community: “On all other Seder nights we do a traditional Seder. Why, on this night, do we have pride?” The answer is that everyone is proud to be gay and proud to add meaning to an old Jewish tradition.

The second Seder plate is filled with an orange, a coconut, flowers, fruit salad, sour pickled vegetables and sticks and stones. It is considered of equal importance to the traditional Seder plate, and each food has a different meaning. The coconut is meant to symbolize feeling isolated and closeted because it has a tough shell with a sweet inner essence. Sticks and stones serve as reminders of what it is often like for gay children growing up. The remaining foods represent themes such as homophobia, inner beauty, diversity and inclusion.

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“What this Seder does is it preserves all the traditional elements so no one can say this isn't a legitimate Haggadah and it adds on this overlay of these new symbols and questions,” said psychologist Joel Kushner, who helped research and develop the new gay Haggadah in his capacity as executive director of Hebrew Union College's Institute for Judaism & Sexual Orientation.

Gellis said he thinks the telling of gay Jewish history is particularly pertinent because most gay and lesbian Jews grow up knowing a lot about their Jewish traditions and nothing about gay history.

“Something I've learned as a gay adult is you don't have the opportunity to transfer knowledge in the gay community from one generation to the next,” Gellis said. “I'm not raised by gay parents. I didn't go to school where they teach about gay history. It's all erased. It's all invisible.”

This is certainly not the first time the Haggadah has been re-written to include another theme or viewpoint into the text. During the Cold War, for instance, some Haggadahs infused patriotic and pro-American elements into the text. Feminist Seders also became popular in the 1970s. Today, there are even Haggadahs that promote “green” living.



A new gay and lesbian Haggadah written by a California-based organization calls for two Seder plates at Passover. One is traditional; the other contains foods that are symbolic to the gay and lesbian experience. (Courtesy of JQ International)

“It's fair to say that the most published Jewish book is the Haggadah,” said David Kraemer, the Abbell Librarian at the Jewish Theological Seminary in New York, although he noted he's never seen one specific to the gay community. And those involved in its creation believe it's the first of its kind.

That's exciting news for people like Jenny Shultz, of Tucson, Ariz, a coordinator for the Jewish Federation's LGBT Jewish Inclusion Project.

For the last three years, the project has held Seders for gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered people who had nowhere else to go for Passover. But last year's Seder mostly relied on a more traditional text. This year, however, she plans to read passages from the new gay one as well as other more progressive Haggadahs.

“I think people tend to feel an invisibility factor like they don't exist within Jewish ritual,” said Shultz. “I think this is really a means for transformation.”

Meanwhile, other Jews hope to intersperse passages from the new gay Haggadah with a more traditional version this year.

That's the plan for Jayson Littman, a 30-year-old New Yorker who was raised Orthodox. This Passover, he will be hosting a Seder for gay Jews at a kosher restaurant on the Upper West Side.

In some ways, Littman said, he is still very Orthodox in his thinking. He keeps kosher and occasionally attends an Orthodox synagogue. At the same time, he's willing to try adding the new Seder plate to his table.

To infuse more fun into the Seder, he is planning to bring along goodies like rainbow-colored Passover confetti, little frog figurines and sunglasses to help tell the story of God sending 10 plagues to the Egyptians, as well as gay pride flags to wave when they read aloud the historic milestones of gay Jews.

“Because Seders are just usually so traditional, I kind of want to make it fun,” said Littman as he bought his standard Passover supplies at the West Side Judaica store in Manhattan.

The rest of the goodies, he said, he plans to purchase at a gay shop in Chelsea.