

**THE PASSOVER SEDER:
RITUAL DYNAMICS, FOODWAYS,
AND FAMILY FOLKLORE**

SHARON R. SHERMAN



Food, family, and ethnic identity are at the core of the Passover ritual. Despite a lengthy and strong tradition governing the formal observance of Passover, the meaning given to each of these elements changes with each enactment, building on earlier interpretations (both "official" and family-generated ones). Such family folklore thus appears to be not merely "a creative expression of a common past" but rather the reflection of a constantly evolving process. To understand this process better and to appreciate more fully the nature of my family's celebration of Passover, I studied the behaviors of members of my own extended Gershenowitz family during two Passover Seders held in Toronto by Stan and Brenda Kates.² Many of the events described in this chapter relate to that festive occasion, but my study of changes in one family's Seder has continued to evolve, along with my own participation in that family's Seders, in subsequent years. By their levels of participation in the family Seder, participants define their relationships within the family. The meanings of those relationships arise then from the rich mix of the generations within the family, the varying intensities of their involvement in Judaism, the differing sorts of family membership, as well as their experiences with previous Seders.

One might assume that a "common past" does exist for the Gershenowitz family as for other Jews, and, indeed, most Jews see the Passover event as a symbol for the Jewish people or Jewish "family" as a whole.³ One of the rituals connected with the yearly cycle of seasons, Passover creates a sense of *communitas* with Jews throughout time—from the Exodus upon which it is based to the present. Added to this diachronic dimension, Jews sense the synchronic-simultaneous celebration of the event with all Jews at one specific time of the year throughout the world. On a more intimate level, Jews mark the celebration as one which has symbolic meanings acquired within individual families.

Since "Seder" means "order," the Haggadah, or prayer book for this holiday, has a definite structure which must be followed, giving the Seder ritual, therefore, an ingrained continuity. As the leader of a Seder once remarked to me, the Seder is oriented "to bring the tradition along, year after year after year." Certain passages of the Haggadah text, for example, are commonly read by most families, yet other sections allow for familial improvisation. Thus, the Seder integrates both continuity and change. Beatrice Weinreich, in "The Americanization of Passover," has described generalized cultural transformations in the Passover Seder resulting from external change (such as mechanization, urbanization, and cross-cultural acculturation) and internal change ("adaptations to internal historical events," such as the Holocaust and "a general trend toward secularization").¹ The changes she describes have affected the ritual for most North American Jews of East European ancestry, but Weinreich does not analyze change within a specific family, the multi-layered dynamics of prescribed and personal food symbolism, or the family inter-relationships which underlie the Seder ritual and serve to shape the event.

194

Although religious studies scholars have researched the origins of Passover to pre-Exodus rituals, these early symbols, reinterpreted in the light of the Exodus event, are generally ignored by many contemporary Jews. Indeed, when I mentioned their historical significance during a family Seder, I was met with uneasy short comments and a quick shifting of topic. These rituals were "too primitive" to consider as foundations for an event which had acquired immediate relevance to each year's current world situation.

Nevertheless, we do know that two nature festivals predate the Exodus.² In ancient times, Jews who lived as nomadic shepherds in the desert sacrificed a sheep or goat from their flocks during the spring month when the lambs and kids were born. The animal's blood was smeared on the tent posts to ward off misfortune and ensure good luck for the coming year. This festival, observed within family groups, was called "Pesach," derived from "paschal offering."

The agricultural Jews who lived in Palestine also celebrated the cutting of the grain in the spring with a Festival of Matsos or Unleavened Bread. They first removed all the fermented dough and old bread made with the leaven or "chomets" of the preceding year's crop. After this cleaning out was completed, the first new sheaf of grain, the "omer," was cut and sacrificed to God by a priest, while the entire community attended. According to other scholars, agricultural groups also baked their freshly harvested grain into unleavened cakes eaten in a special ceremony to thank God for the harvest.

These early nature rituals eventually merged and came to symbolize the exodus of the Jewish people from Egypt—an event which had occurred in the first spring month (Nisan) of the year—reinterpreting the Pesach sacrifice. When the Angel of Death slew the first-born of the Egyptians in the tenth plague sent against the Pharaoh (who refused to release the Jews from bondage), the Jews marked their doors with the blood of the sacrificed animal so the Angel would pass over their homes. The earlier meaning of the Festival of Matsos (or Matzo) came to symbolize the bread of affliction since the Jews did not have time for their bread to rise when fleeing Egypt.

Because spring was a busy season, many Jews could not travel to the faraway Temple in Jerusalem, the national center, the only place where the sacrificed lamb could be killed. Thus blood was no longer smeared on the doorposts, and Passover became, and still is, a home-centered festival. After the Romans destroyed the

Second Temple re-emerged in Passover unique paradigm on the eve of the day, which expressed a Seder bring the stories have a duty if he or she pe

In contemplation of freedom, for Russia and Poland the State of Israel they are called whom matzo is and add new acts and now member of the survived the I was in the ca come out of th faith. It's marv the Nazi occup you went out it... It seems

Ruth Grut the structural attempts to cr a means of ex of the individ being symboli like Seder, far thing which n guarantee the because a far their experien ing, a sense of

For instar Seders dating grandmother. rent Seder me remembers th Doris, whom I family and as a

We always was more C we had son

Second Temple (around 70 C.E.), the Pesach sacrifice was totally discontinued, but re-emerged in symbolic form as roasted shankbone on the Seder plate.

Passover signals the beginning of spring and a celebration of freedom—a unique paradigm for a historically oppressed people. The eight-day holiday, starting on the evening of the fourteenth of Nisan (calculated by the Jewish lunar calendar, which explains its variation from a fixed secular date), begins with a ritual meal called a Seder, the symbolic foods of which lead Jews to experience the past and bring the story of the Exodus into the present. Indeed, according to the Torah, parents have a duty to tell the tale to children; in every generation each Jew must tell as if he or she personally came out of Egypt.

In contemporary times, Passover has numerous connotations. The celebration of freedom, for example, brings to mind not only the Exodus, but the pogroms of Russia and Poland, the Holocaust, the Warsaw Ghetto uprising, the establishment of the State of Israel, the plight of the Ethiopian Black Jews (or “Falasha” [outsiders] as they are called by other Ethiopians), and the situation of today’s Soviet Jews (to whom matzo is smuggled for Passover). All of these events become part of the tale and add new dimension for families whose members may have lived through such acts and now relive them in memories evoked by the Seder. For example, Doris, a member of the family studied, commented upon her daughter-in-law’s parents who survived the Holocaust: “Sheri’s family—her mother was in the camps—her father was in the camps—and they had gone through so much hardship and they can come out of that experience and still believe in God, and still have so much religious faith. It’s marvelous to see.” Another family member, Tittle, who fled Poland before the Nazi occupation, remarked: “This, in essence, is the idea behind Passover—that you went out of slavery and tried to get into freedom, and what you had to pay for it. . . . It seems the more you are repressed, the stronger your roots come through.”

Ruth Gruber Fredman, in *The Passover Seder: Afikoman in Exile*, has pointed out the structural oppositions balanced by the Seder and argues that Jewish culture attempts to create order, placing it eternally in transition. Thus, the Seder becomes a means of expressing *galut*, an in-between state which illuminates “the experience of the individual Jew.” The ordering exhibited by the Seder can also be seen as being symbolic of the ordering of family. Like Seder, “family” connotes order. And, like Seder, families exhibit change. Just as the Haggadah does not explicate everything which must be done during the Seder,⁶ mere family membership does not guarantee the rules and roles demanded for family participation, particularly because a family consists of individuals who constantly combine and recombine their experiences. In participating in the dynamics of this disordering and reordering, a sense of family emerges.

For instance, most of the people at the Kates’s Seder have participated in Seders dating back to the last Seder held by Pearl Gershenowitz, my maternal grandmother. The memory of that Seder provides a point of reference for the current Seder members and a symbolic common link. But everyone who attended remembers the Seder for different reasons. For example, Pearl’s daughter-in-law, Doris, whom I interviewed, sees that Seder as an initiation into the Gershenowitz family and as an introduction to a “real” Passover Seder.

We always had Passover in our house but we never really had a Seder. . . . My father was more Canadianized, my mother was more European, so we just had Kiddush and we had someone read the four questions but we never had a full Seder, and we did-

n't start having a full Seder, I remember, until we went to your Grandmother's. Do you remember? Well, anyways, when your grandmother had the first Seder and Joel [Doris's son] was just a baby at the time and that was very, very memorable because we had the whole family together and we had a full Seder, and I didn't know what a Seder was until then.

For Brenda, however, it was the death of her grandmother that she associates with that Seder:

My grandmother had a Seder and, um, that Seder I remember for different reasons because my grandmother was very sick and then, that was the last Seder she was here for. . . . I don't associate my grandmother with Seders that much, partly because she died when I was thirteen and partly because she really didn't have many Seders. She may have had them before I was born, but I only remember one Seder at her place and that was just before she died. And I associate the Seder with the family all being together. But not as much as a Seder. . . . The Seder that my grandmother and grandfather made doesn't stand out as a Seder; it stands out for other reasons.

196

Pearl's daughter, Trudy, remembers the Seder not only because of its traumatic aspects but because she realized that the responsibility for the Seder would now shift to her generation:

The one that stands out in my mind the most is about the last Passover that I had at my mother's home before she passed on. . . . She'd been home from the hospital about a month and I was making dinner for everyone that was coming in from out of town, and for our family, when Mother said, "Next year we will have a bigger Passover and we will invite all my brothers and sisters and their offsprings." And I started to cry because I knew there wasn't going to be a next year, and she said, "Why are you crying?" and I said, "Well, it's the onions that I'm cutting." So that is the Passover that has stayed . . . been outstanding in my mind ever since.

At that Seder, my sister Suzanne and I, both Pearl's grandchildren, were six and eleven years old. For us, Grandma's Seder also stood out in memory, although I am certain we did not know she was dying. Perhaps the Seder was highlighted in our memories because it became the model for subsequent Seders. Over thirty years of Seders have come and gone, but this *one* Seder is spoken of each year and has become part of Passover for all in the family who participated. Although the narrative may appear to function as a means of creating solidarity for the family, at the same time it also functions differently for each person who tells it; for those who did not attend Grandma's Seder, the telling is an introduction to the Gershenowitz family Seder.

The dynamics of a family can frequently be illuminated by its foodways, especially of the Seder. The Seder ritual has a break during which a festive and relaxed meal is served. For the Gershenowitz family, the "rules" for what may be eaten are based not only on prohibitions against *chometz* (leavened foods), but also on the family's notions of acceptability, derived from the foods served by Pearl. As is true for most Ashkenazic Jews, the foods recall Eastern European meals. Pearl, who immigrated to Canada from a small village in Poland, continued to prepare foods

common in the "o chicken, beef bris and apricots in a the family. However it should not be i and Pearl's family

The meals for (made from chop as "Jewish fish" o Eastern Europe, Available at supe usually served co ever, remembers cooked fish in a b on lettuce with a : stituted as an app

Beef brisket, way), is served origin)—intestine then roasted with an innovation, bu prior night's fea Brenda's dislike c any leftover chick

Who prepare pattern has been first night. Trudy and brisket, fills t and hardboils do: associated with E water as the first scious addition, i Lil, Pearl's sister matzo flour—a ve bring Passover ch

Brenda's resp marketing of Pass of Jews live. In fac local dairies in Te plify bottling and chicken soup, sp available in the n items and meat c soup. Brenda ord foods actually ma is served are of p:

I take for grante prepared or w preparing then where all of the

common in the "old country": chicken soup with matzo, *knadlach* (dumplings), roast chicken, beef brisket, potato *kugel* (pudding), and *tzimmes* (cooked carrots, prunes and apricots in a rich, thick, honeyed sauce). Thus, these foods are always served by the family. However, no one eats the *tzimmes* and every year someone mentions that it should not be included in next year's menu. A year later, *tzimmes* again appears and Pearl's family tradition is upheld.

The meals for the two nights vary, but some items remain the same. Gefilte fish (made from chopped whitefish and pike, formed into ovals), sometimes referred to as "Jewish fish" on Russian and Polish restaurant menus, was an economical dish in Eastern Europe, and is now traditionally served for Passover by most families. Available at supermarkets in jars packaged by Jewish food suppliers, gefilte fish is usually served cold and needs no further preparation. Pearl's daughter, Trudy, however, remembers her mother's painstaking cooking and thus boils the already cooked fish in a broth with carrots, celery, and spices, chills the fish, and serves it on lettuce with a slice of carrot as garnish. On the second night, tomato juice is substituted as an appetizer for either the fish or the chicken soup.

Beef brisket, prepared by Trudy or her daughter (trained to make it the "same" way), is served the first night, along with *kishka* (also East European in origin)—intestine stuffed with flour, fat, crumbs, and minced onion filling which is then roasted with the brisket. Brenda buys a standing rib roast for the second night, an innovation, but the roast is rarely cooked since so much food remains from the prior night's feast (except the *kishka*, which disappears immediately despite Brenda's dislike of it). The second night's menu also includes two capons to add to any leftover chicken.

Who prepares or brings certain dishes is supposedly open but nevertheless a pattern has been re-established each year. Doris brings chicken or turkey for the first night. Trudy, who stays at Brenda's home during Passover, prepares the fish and brisket, fills the silver salt and pepper shakers, cuts and arranges a pickle tray, and hardboils dozens of eggs. A fertility and springtime symbol, the egg (now often associated with Easter but whose ritual use is ancient) is served in a bowl with salt water as the first course. Salad, another appetizer and a contemporary, health-conscious addition, is always brought by someone of Brenda's generation. Great Aunt Lil, Pearl's sister-in-law, always brings a cake, usually a sponge cake made with matzo flour—a very traditional Passover dessert. Guests who do not prepare food bring Passover chocolate, small gifts, or freshly cut flowers.

Brenda's responsibility for food preparation has changed because of the vast marketing of Passover foods, especially in cities like Toronto, where large numbers of Jews live. In fact, some companies, such as Coca-Cola and Canada Dry, and many local dairies in Toronto, have their entire stock made "kosher for Passover" to simplify bottling and distribution during the holiday. Traditional foods, such as matzo, chicken soup, sponge cake mix, horseradish, and beet borsht, are packaged and available in the major supermarkets. Kosher butchers not only stock the standard items and meat cuts, but will cook chickens, *tzimmes*, potato *kugel*, *kishka*, and soup. Brenda orders all of these items already cooked; the brisket is one of the few foods actually made in the house. Nevertheless, neighborhood availability and what is served are of paramount importance to Brenda. She commented,

I take for granted the fact that I can get all of these Jewish products, whether they're prepared or whether I have to prepare them and they're just the materials for preparing them.... And it's important for me to live in the kind of neighborhood where all of these things are accessible to me.

I can order the traditional dishes and we cook certain things ourselves. Trudy does a lot of work... helping me prepare the way, ah, I was going to say the way my grandmother used to, but that isn't true. I mean obviously we have made certain changes even in the foods. But we do try to stick to the traditional things that we remember.

Tillie recalled how much things had actually changed from what was done when the family lived in Europe:

You made all the food by yourself and... there was a limited range of food. Foods that you use now that are considered to be, oh, how should I say, kosher for Pesach, weren't considered kosher at that time. You had fish and you had meat, like, ah, geese, ducks, chickens, and, um, roasts, veal or beef... You used fish, you used matzo, you used eggs and, you know, certain fruit you were allowed, and certain staples like carrots, potatoes, onions... a limited selection because they weren't sure whether it's right or wrong. They figured, you know, it's best not to use certain things so then you know you're doing the right thing.

She underscored that matzo was made by hand and not sold in boxes:

All matzo at that time years ago was made by hand and it was round; it wasn't made on a machine, where it's put through, ah, on an assembly line way. It was made by hand. It wasn't packaged. It came, oh, you bought it by the pound and mostly it came in big wicker baskets that you bought so many pounds. Mostly it was a lot and, um, that's the way it was delivered to you. It wasn't packaged. And it wasn't square. It was round and it was all made by hand.

The situation Brenda finds herself in is radically different—and she is pleased to find herself living where Jewish stores are common. The older generation has not quite adjusted to these changes. Doris pointed out:

The only thing about Seder or Passover that upsets me is the fact that some of the shop-keepers seem to take advantage—just like Christmas, it's too commercialized. And prices go sky high and the women, when you go shopping, get a little hyper, and you want to buy your fish or chicken or whatever—it's quite an ordeal [laugh].

Stan, not dependent on memories of past Gershenowitz Seders, is free to create his own role. He assumes responsibility for the foods on the Seder plate and for setting out the wine glasses, refilling the decanter, and leading the Seder. Passing pieces of the various Seder plate foods from hand to hand down the table, rather than distributing them on a dish, he consciously chooses to act as a pivot for the meanings applied to the Seder by the participants. All of these actions and attitudes of the various generations define appropriate behavior and create a notion of *communitas*.

The newest generation sees the Passover Seder from a completely different perspective from that of their parents (Pearl's grandchildren). The children are preoccupied with learning the basics of the Passover Seder: how to ask the four questions, open the door for Elijah, and steal the Afikomen. All the adults take responsibility for educating the children, but the roles accompanying grandmother, mother, and grandchild are not generationally restricted. The grandmother, Pearl, who passed away in 1954, is ever present in the minds of her children. But, as children of each new generation are born, the mothers also become grandmothers in

their role as tran
grandmother of r
remained the chi
ing this skill. Tha
ities undertaken
asked. Until Mike
always asked th
phase was in flux
them himself witl
without assistanc
became motivate
ous year). Thus S

Areas of folk
active participat
where the Hagg
frame for certain
the importance o
uals. The followi
trates how mean
how he will arr
Passover, and ta
then are placed i
level of wine dir
out, "This cup is
was in the neighl
see, the glass wa:
door?" Brenda r
prophet." Amy's
repeats, "A friend
don't believe it,
points, "The glas
stares at the win
mentary in the H
of an ancient sto

Hiding the A
Haggadah. The e
rather states, "I
dessert matzo, r
During the dinn
steal and hide th
time: "Don't eat
go hide it togeth
underneath."...
that's all. OK, no
noticeable." "We

After the chi
"And the thing l
dren have so mu
mother.

their role as transmitters for a family tradition. Pearl's daughter, Trudy, is now the grandmother of my son Mikey. Trudy's daughter Suzanne, now in her late thirties, remained the child who asked the four questions until she assisted Mikey in learning this skill. That these generations overlap is exemplified by the joint responsibilities undertaken by both Suzanne and Mikey to insure that the four questions are asked. Until Mikey began attending Seders at the age of three, my sister Suzanne always asked the questions. The 1983 and 1984 Seders demonstrated that this phase was in flux. Mikey asked the questions with Suzanne in 1982, attempted to ask them himself with some help in 1983, and by 1984 learned not only how to ask them without assistance, but surprised the group by reciting them in Hebrew (which he became motivated to do after watching his visiting Israeli cousins do so the previous year). Thus Suzanne's role finally shifted from child to adult.

Areas of folklore which invariably function to bind the children together as active participants and the adults as an encouraging audience occur at places where the Haggadah lacks commentary, thus providing an open interpretative frame for certain portions of the Seder, such as explanations for Elijah's entry and the importance of the Afikomen. Each adult reveals his/her interpretations of the rituals. The following exchange about opening the door for Elijah the prophet illustrates how meanings for familiar themes arise. The family discusses who Elijah is, how he will arrive to announce the coming of the messiah, visit families on Passover, and take a sip of wine from a cup reserved especially for him. The children then are placed in charge of opening and closing the door and are joshed about the level of wine diminishing (someone will often jiggle the table as well). Stan points out, "This cup is for Elijah the prophet. When you opened up the door we think he was in the neighborhood and came in and had a drink. We didn't see him, but, you see, the glass was full before" Another cousin interrupts: "Did you see him at the door?" Brenda notes, "You don't have to be afraid of him because he's a good prophet." Amy's grandmother joins in, "He's a good prophet, he's a friend." Mikey repeats, "A friend." Stan says, "So we think he came in and took a sip of wine." "You don't believe it, right, Amy?" asks Brenda. "I don't know," Amy responds. Stan points, "The glass was full before we started." "I don't know," Amy repeats, as Mikey stares at the wine goblet, and the service continues. Here, despite the lack of commentary in the Haggadah, all family members share in the recitation and acting out of an ancient story which is transformed into a family tradition in its own right.

Hiding the Afikomen is another family event that is not commented on in the Haggadah. The edition used by this family makes no mention of the activity but rather states, "After the meal, the Afikomen is distributed." The Afikomen, or dessert matzo, must be eaten before the service commences following the meal. During the dinner, as courses are served and cleared, the adults urge the children to steal and hide this matzo when Stan is not looking. Several adults whisper at one time: "Don't eat it, don't eat it." . . . "Wrap it in a napkin." . . . "Go hide it somewhere, go hide it together." . . . "Under the tablecloth, in front of your seat." "Here?" "Yeah, underneath." . . . "Lift up the tablecloth." "Hurry up." . . . "Did you hide it?" . . . "OK, that's all. OK, now you can go play." "OK, put your napkin on top of it so it won't be noticeable." "We'll call you."

After the children leave the room, the adults laugh at the obvious hiding place. "And the thing I like is . . . you can't even tell it's there," Brenda laughs. "Well, children have so much faith. They don't question things, thank God," says Amy's grandmother.

This little interchange is a prime example of family participation in a food-centered ritual of their own making. Likewise, the ransoming of the Afikomen follows the family's tradition rather than any command in the Haggadah. Stan always calls everyone's attention back to the service, and then reaches ceremoniously for the Afikomen, now mysteriously missing. "Which one of you guys has got the Afikomen?" he asks. Everyone chimes in, "Oh oh; who hid something?" The children always claim that they don't have it and don't know where it is. Finally, the adults encourage them to make a deal with Stan, and ask him how much it's worth to him. Amidst much laughter and bantering, a deal is struck. This part of the Seder will often take twenty minutes, involves everyone, and is family folklore which adheres to an almost identical structure each year. (If the children have gone to sleep, an adult represents them.) Such folklore is shared, follows the childhood experiences adults recall, and, although it marks a "change" from the Seder ritual, it conforms to family expectations.

200

Because the bargaining event is not prescribed by the Haggadah, it serves as a point in the ritual where change may occur. For Stan and Brenda, the host and hostess of this Seder, it represents one example of a blend of family traditions now experienced by the group as a whole. As Brenda pointed out, "When the children steal the Afikomen at our Seder, they do get little presents for it, and I remember that as a child. . . . Stan doesn't remember getting anything for stealing it. He likes, though, combining this because he feels that this makes it nicer for the children." Here one family's tradition has been merged with another's through marriage. Just as Brenda has retained the tradition of gift-giving, Stan has brought elements of his childhood Seder to his new family's Seder. For example, instead of using parsley for the green vegetable on the Seder plate, he provides onion (acceptable since it grows green above the ground). Thus both continuity and change are promoted as one would expect with folkloric manifestations, and as the above examples demonstrate.

One might assume that the Seder plate, constituting a table of ritual foods which correspond in the text to the deliverance from Egypt, would be static. The foods on the Seder plate have acknowledged and deeply ingrained meanings. A piece of roasted lamb shank bone (although any roasted meat bone may be used) represents the Pesach sacrifice. A roasted egg, called "chagigoh," symbolizes a second animal sacrificed in Jerusalem. The first animal had to be entirely eaten before the dawn of the first day. Because the group was large, some only received a small bite, so a second animal (not sacrificed in the Temple) was used for the second night. "Charoses," a kind of fruit salad from the early Spring festival, consists of nuts, cinnamon, wine, and apples; it is often said to symbolize the mortar mixed by Jewish slaves for the Pharaoh's buildings in Egypt. It also represents the hope of freedom. Bitter herbs or "moror," usually a piece of horseradish, symbolize the bitterness of the Jews' lives in Egypt. Greens, often parsley, lettuce or watercress, dipped in salt water (representing tears) stand for the coming of spring and the hope of redemption." The table setting includes a plate with three pieces of matzo, each wrapped separately within a folded cloth. The matzo has three meanings: (1) the bread which the Jews took with them on fleeing Egypt that had not risen (including the dessert matzo or "afikomen"); (2) the bread of poverty; and (3) the bread of the simple life in the desert. A wine decanter and wine glasses for each person are also set on the table. Participants drink four glasses of wine: one for Kiddush (thanks to God for the fruit of the vine); one after the first part of the Seder ends and before the festive meal is eaten; one after grace following the meal; and one at the end of the Seder. These glasses of wine are said to match the fourfold promise of

redemption give
is set for Elijah,

As is obvious
the foods which
like all ritual ev
tary, liturgical
dramatis perso
to "texts" or co
in events have
its foods as sy
tion to one ext

For example
or religious im
specific foods
were most imp

I guess whe
lucky we a
what it is to
all these th
have a mar

Stan singl

I think mat
that not o
aware tha
the Passov
eggs and p
something
that I was
were usec
cial at tha

I was surpris
ritual foods.
replied:

Those thi
tionally s
and the e
lectual ki
bis throu
don't fee

Joel's comm
tional aspec

Well, the
fact tha
keep . . .
mean, it

redemption given by God to the Jewish people.¹⁰ Lastly, an empty wine glass or cup is set for Elijah, the prophet. It is not filled until the end of the meal.¹¹

As is obvious from this description of the background and meanings attributed to the foods which are displayed and discussed during the Seder, a Seder is multilayered like all ritual events. On the surface, it appears to be a "text," with historical commentary, liturgical readings, symbolic foods, and obligatory roles to be played by the *dramatis personae* of a family. However, scholars' assumptions about reducing events to "texts" or conceptions about common meanings for groups of individuals engaged in events have to be challenged when one examines the significance of the Seder and its foods as symbolic for the Jewish people at large and then narrows that examination to one extended family and the individuals which make up that family.

For example, in eight interviews in which I asked a question about the personal or religious importance of the ritual foods as signifiers, only two people mentioned specific foods. Doris initially said, "No," when I asked if there were symbols that were most important to her. After a brief pause, she continued:

I guess when you think of the *moror*, the bitterness and everything, you realize how lucky we are here to be living in Canada, to be in a free country. . . . We can imagine what it is to be a slave but it must have been terrible for them, and to have survived all these things and now we live in Canada, we should really appreciate it 'cause we have a marvelous life here. We really do.

Stan singled out matzo because it identified him as a Jew:

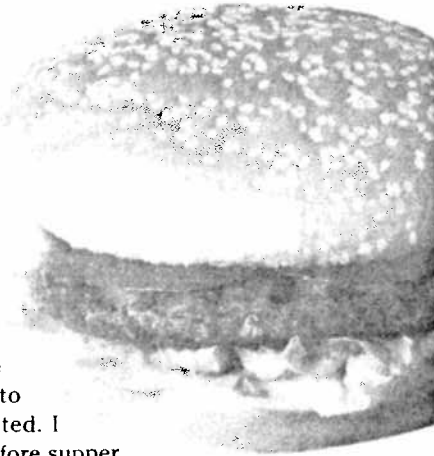
I think matzo is the most important because that's the most obvious. That's the one that not only we as Jews see but non-Jews are very much aware of it, and they're aware that there's a holiday going on. Because I remember, even at school, during the Passover period, that instead of having sandwiches, we would have hardboiled eggs and pieces of matzo with butter in them, and that was, again, very symbolic as something different was happening. So all of my non-Jewish friends would be aware that I was celebrating or partaking of something that was different from what they were used to. And they, of course, wanted to taste it, and that sort of made me special at that time.

I was surprised that Stan, as the leader of the Seder, did not remark about the other ritual foods. I asked, "Is there anything about the bitter herbs . . . ?" He quickly replied:

Those things are intellectually symbolic, I think, rather than emotionally symbolic. The matzo's very emotional. The bitter herbs and the egg and the neck of the chicken, these are all very intellectual kinds of things and I guess have been created by the rabbis through the ages and . . . they're interesting symbols, but you don't *feel* them as much as you do the matzo.

Joel's comment about the foods in general point out their functional aspects:

Well, the whole idea of the symbolism of the various objects, the fact that, you know, there's physical things there to point at, to keep . . . to draw people's attention to . . . to keep people interested. I mean, it's not particularly a very long thing, but you know it is before supper,



during and after, and you know it's at night, people can get very bored, but I think it's good because you have the various things to look at and to describe and it keeps everybody involved.

Other participants shifted the topic to concerns about the Seder as a whole. Tillie, for example, remarked that some people "eat a fancy dinner," but do not think about the underlying idea—freedom. Trudy noted that the symbols stand for "what the Jews had gone through" and "everything that is going on today."

Common themes run through these comments, but particular references do not recur. Circumscribed meanings give way to individualized and personalized "texts." Because each Seder builds on past events, overall messages and individual memories create a different "text" for each participant. Food is perhaps more important for the memories it triggers than for its ritual qualities. Although the Seder represents a major past event for all Jews, Stan's recollections emphasize how much the Seder foods bring the individual's past into the present.

202

I think Passover is probably the most symbolic of all the holidays... we celebrate as Jews. It's the one that... I remember as being the happiest when I was a child. We would have... Seders at my Grandparent's home or my Grandmother's home and... as a child I remember running around and... taking... bits and pieces of the special foods and it was a holiday that had the smell of cooking, it was a holiday that... had a lot of people around, and it wasn't focused on the synagogue, it was focused on the home more than anything else. And I think that was nice, and I remember meeting my cousins, and meeting my uncles and my aunts, and... having all sorts of good times. So to me it's one that... is filled with a lot of very pleasant early childhood memories, and those memories go back to, you know, when I was four or five years old. I remember crawling underneath the table as the Seder was being conducted and that... has nice memories for me. I remember playing with my cousins, and I remember the taste of various foods. I remember the taste of matzo, and I remember the taste of the *charoses* and as a kid we were allowed to have wine, and that was fun. Very nice and warm and very symbolic kind of holiday.

Like the foods, family relationships mark changes and make every Seder a different "text." But, under the surface, the changes are not merely a signal for the ever-shifting dynamic of folklore ritual. One's knowledge of how to effect changes within unstated family rules can function to define roles within the family. For blood relatives, incorporation in the family is automatic. Growing up within its confines and rituals, family members learn to fit in. Those who marry into the family must actively seek entry. Their success or failure may be determined by how well they understand and help shape family folklore.

Michael, who is Suzanne's husband, is younger than she by two months, but is not asked to assist in the four questions. His lack of participation is revealed in a traditional family interchange: Stan tells Mikey, "You can say it with Suzanne because she's young too." Suzanne replies (as she does every year), "I'm older than Michael" (referring to her husband). Brenda responds (also every year), "You say that all the time." Suzanne is a blood relative of the inner family circle. Michael has married in. He was often criticized because he attended only the first Seder night until his daughter was born. "For me, one night is enough, and I don't consider myself to be a hypocrite, and to me it was hypocritical to come two nights and spend that much time with something I'm not really that fond of and don't believe in that much." Yet

Michael also said for the Seder itself. He has ambivalence, not clearly delineated.

Amy, the child, asks the questions although she is three years older than the others, fully belonging. A comfortable with her identity.

Alan, about the Seder in the midst of the 1984 Seder. Despite his special prayer for the oppressed Jews, Ethiopian Jews and Haggadahs to insert, not recite such a prayer that has been said at the Seder and brought the Ghetto uprising. For family members to

Stan considers his experiences are seen to twenty-first century family... and when he seemed to adopt a new identity was able to effect a blending of many of these. When the generations meet at Seders, Stan was young ages, demonstrating their budding knowledge as a guest and one child.

However, the Seder is modified if not slightly for one's generation. It is an event, but one's social participation, and all motivations within a mix of family members as focusing on the differences in their perhaps larger, social ways (i.e., participation as important as the Seder). Moreover, in this the "guests" really

Michael also said that Passover was his "favorite holiday because of the Seder—not for the Seder itself, but because the entire family gets together. . . ." Michael's aloofness from this family's Seder is due to his positive experiences with his own family. He has ambivalent feelings about his role in this Seder since his responsibilities are not clearly delineated, as they were in his "blood" family.

Amy, the child of a Jewish father and a non-Jewish mother, does not want to ask the questions although she has attended the Seders since she was a baby and is three years older than Mikey. Amy's reluctance may be due to her own sense of not fully belonging. Although family members encourage her and attempt to make her comfortable with the Seder ritual, they also are concerned about her lack of Jewish identity.

Alan, about to marry a cousin in the family, broke the "rules" by arriving in the midst of the 1984 Seder. He explained that he had to participate in his own family's Seder. Despite his somewhat intrusive behavior, he added to the Seder by bringing in a special prayer. In many families it is now customary to say an extra prayer for oppressed Jews. Often the prayer is for Soviet Jewry, although prayers for the Ethiopian Jews are recent additions. Seder leaders will pencil in a note in their Haggadahs to insert the prayer at a certain point. Stan commented that his father did not recite such a prayer, but he does: "That's my personal choice. It's not something that has been said 'do this.'" Alan instinctively knew that he could add a prayer to the Seder and brought one commemorating the forty-year anniversary of the Warsaw Ghetto uprising. Not yet particularly close to Alan at this point in their relationship, family members treated him with new respect for his attempt to fit into their ritual.

Stan considers himself part of this intensely matriarchal family. Again, past experiences are significant in shaping such behavior. "I guess from about age eighteen to twenty-five, I had a very poor relationship with my own personal family . . . and when Brenda and I got married, the Hertz and Gershenowitz family seemed to adopt me, and . . . they became very much my first family." One way Stan was able to effect this shift was by taking over the host and Seder leader role, and blending many of his own family's traditions with his new one in an acceptable way. When the generation preceding his was ready to give over the role of leading the Seders, Stan was ready and willing to take on the task. Amy and Mikey, even at their young ages, demonstrate the importance of one's acceptance of generational roles. Their budding knowledge of family lore and levels of participation make one child a guest and one child a central figure in the family.

However, the idyllic picture of a cohesive family, all sharing the same folklore, is modified if not shattered when we consider individual differences. Not only does one's generational and host/guest role color one's perception of and role in the event, but one's sense of responsibility for continuity of the tradition, one's level of participation, and one's personal experiences with Judaism and previous Seders are all motivations which decide the particulars of traditional involvement. Even the mix of family members on a given night can significantly influence the event. As well as focusing on the similarities in the content, as folklorists usually do, we must look at differences in the behaviors and performances of individuals as well as other, perhaps larger, social changes in the form of the event. In this particular setting, foodways (i.e., participation in the preparation and consumption of Seder meals) can be as important as the underlying ritual itself in the determination of *communitas*. Moreover, in this family, folkloric behavior actually defines who is in control, who the "guests" really are, and, ultimately, who is and isn't "family."

NOTES

This article is an expanded version of a paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Folklore Society in San Diego, October 1984.

1. Steven J. Zeitlin, Amy J. Kotkin, and Holly Cutting Baker. *A Celebration of American Family Folklore* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1982): 2.
2. The results of that fieldwork project appear on videotape as *Passover: A Celebration* (B & W, 28 min.), 1983, distributed by the Folklore and Ethnic Studies Program, University of Oregon, Eugene, Oregon. For details of the fieldwork and videotaping processes and the problems inherent in studying one's own family, see Sharon R. Sherman, "That's How the Seder Looks: A Fieldwork Account of Videotaping Family Folklore," *Journal of Folklore Research* 23 (1986): 53-70.
3. The Passover Seder commemorates the deliverance of the Jewish people from bondage in the land of Egypt, their exodus into the desert, and the journey to the Promised Land—an event which occurred over three thousand years ago. Each year, Passover is celebrated by Jews with varying levels of religious observance and, more than any other holiday, is enjoyed by both religious and secular Jews.
4. Beatrice S. Weinreich, "The Americanization of Passover," in *Studies in Biblical and Jewish Folklore*, ed. Raphael Patai, Francis Lee Utley, and Dov Noy (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, Indiana University Folklore Series No. 13:1960): 342.
5. See Hayyim Schauss, *The Jewish Festivals: History and Observance* (New York: Schocken Books, 1962 [originally published in 1938]): 38-85, for a detailed description of Passover's origins as well as different observances in various places through time.
6. The Torah specifies a seven-day observance (Exodus 12:15; 13:6). An exiled people, the Jews added an extra day to ensure correct observance for many holidays since people were notified by bonfires lit on mountains and the possibility for error was great. Because a reliable calendar exists, Reform Jews and all Jews in Israel celebrate for seven days. Conservative and Orthodox families, having followed an eight-day holiday for centuries, continue the ancient practice. Thus, they have two Seder nights, whereas Reform Jews and those in Israel have one.
7. Ruth Gruber Fredman, *The Passover Seder: Atikoman in Exile* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1981): 34. In analyzing the metaphoric and symbolic characteristics of the Seder, Fredman also presents the Seder plate as one that summarizes oppositions to achieve balance or ordering.
8. One would assume that, at the least, continuity would be exhibited by the Haggadah, since it is written text. All participants at a Seder read from individual Haggadahs placed before them. Haggadah means "telling" and the booklet contains directions for how to organize the Seder plate, and is a blend of legends, prayers, commentary, questions, and songs set in an order for following the ritual. Parts are from the Mishnah and parts from the Talmud. Although Haggadahs vary in translation and tone, the order is constant. Thus, even if as many as five different versions are used at one table, readers will be able to recognize the similarity between the portion of the text being read aloud by another participant and the portion in their own Haggadahs. As the evening progresses through four glasses of wine, variations in the texts may lead to questions and laughter about the differences. Scholars assume the Haggadah and the Seder were instituted after the destruction of the Second Temple, with the Haggadah added to the prayer book, but much of it was recited as early as the days of the Second Temple. In the thirteenth century the Haggadah appeared as a separate volume and new editions continue to appear every year, reflecting changing times and interpretations.
9. Greens were commonly dipped once in a tart sauce at regular meals and after washing one's hands at banquets (which, like Passover, also began with wine).
10. "I will bring you out; I will deliver you; I will redeem you; I will take you to me for a people." The number "four" is a constant throughout the Seder: four glasses of wine, four questions, four sons, four patriarchs of Israel, four promises, and four Pesach symbols.
11. Several explanations have been offered for the existence of the cup of Elijah or "fifth" cup. Elijah is said to have gone, living, to Heaven in a chariot of fire. Many tales are told about his magical feats while on earth. Popular belief is that Elijah will return and announce the coming of the Messiah and lead the Jewish people to a new deliverance as Moses did in ancient days. At a point late in the Seder the door is opened for Elijah to enter. Opening the door was once done at the beginning of the Seder so any traveling or hungry Jew could join the ritual, but as Jews began living in areas with non-Jews (often hostile ones), opening the door was shifted to the conclusion of the Seder. Another explanation is that a fifth cup of wine was disputed by the Talmudists. "Let Elijah decide" was the solution offered and the fifth glass became his. In the family studied, any extra chair or place set by accident is always referred to as Elijah's in-jokes throughout the year.

In the past tv disease in the among wome are drawn lar and largely ac the historica observers ag with anorexi patients seek tings across t

These ch social histori the current s chopathology thinks about mine an ansv cussion of eti

First, in are expresse particular cu ing biology, p as interactive 1988; Garner, ever, we follo