

GUSSMAN FAMILY SEDER







Parents 1962



Passover 1968



INTRODUCTION

My parents believed that a tree could be alone in a field, but no Jew should be alone on his holiday. And so it was our tradition to invite guests to our Passover Seder.



When I was young, I thought that all our guests shared the same last name. They were all the Rachmones. When I was older and smarter I was able to translate "Rachmones" into English. Rachmones is the Yiddish word that means compassion.

Whom did my parents have rachmones for? Anyone who had no family was a rachmones case. A family of all women, with no adult male to pravah, to lead the Seder, was another rachmones case. New immigrants to the United States, especially those who had suffered in Hitler's concentration camps, were our honored guests.

When I was in High School I met Jewish classmates who had never attended a Seder. Their families had a big dinner, but no Seder, no explanation for the festive dinner. When I told my mother about them, and how I sad I felt for them, she insisted that I must invite them to the Seder in our home. By the time Obby and I were hosting the Seder, the gates to the U.S.S.R. were opening. Each year we had some Russian immigrants at our table. None of our Russian friends or relatives had ever experienced a Seder before.

Then there were the Chad Gad Yah guests. These were friends in the neighborhood who knew that it was our family tradition to celebrate with Jewish folk dances after the Seder. They held their own Seders, but they would come to sing with us the last song in the Seder and then to dance with us!

All our guests understood that it was an honor to be invited. They all wanted to show their appreciation for the invitation. They understood that they could not bring food unless it was kosher for Passover, so most brought flowers. Some very thoughtful people brought a Seder plate. Of course Mother and I already had Seder plates, but we appreciated their thoughtfulness and the expense they had gone to. These Seder plates showed how very much they appreciated their invitation to the Seder. I was not about to hide these treasures in a kitchen cabinet, so I began hanging them on the walls of my dinning room. Soon I had so many plates that I needed a better way to display them. I bought two glass étagère cases. I filled them both and now again I have even more Seder plates hanging on my dining room walls. How many plates do I have? Well the last time I counted, I had thirty plates.

How many guests did we share our Seder with? I never counted, but I can assure you that it was many multiples of thirty.

- Bubbe Flo

PASSOVER MEMORIES

Over the years many things changed in our family. Some things never changed. For example, the Seder was a constant. Every year we sat down together to retell the story of the Exodus from Egypt and freedom from slavery. Back in the thirties, my dad sat at the head of the table and oyffired (conducted) the Seder, the reading of the Haggadah. The men read together in a fast sing-song, the sound was the same sound you would hear at a week day service. The speed was break-neck with each man trying to go faster than the next, racing breathlessly to the end of the story. Fortunately, there were a few pauses when the men would catch their breath and the rest of the us could catch up. The first pause was at the point where the youngest child asked the four questions. In those days we asked the questions first in Hebrew and then in Yiddish. As soon as the child finished the last question, the men regrouped and raced on.

I don't think any of my aunts could read at that time. In the shtetl, the boys went to school from the age of 5 until 13. The girls had only one year of schooling. In that one year they learned the Yiddish alphabet in order to follow the words in the women's Yiddish prayer book. They also learned their numbers and to do simple arithmetic. They learned addition and subtraction only. When they came to America, the women went right to work in the sweatshops and factories doing sewing. They worked long hours under debilitating conditions. When they got home, there was cooking, cleaning, and caring for their children. They did not have time or energy for school. My mother was the youngest child. Right from birth, she was determined and ambitious. She did not understand the word "No" in any language. Sonya was the only one who was a fluent reader in English, Yiddish, Russian, and Hebrew. Mother insisted on reading some portions of the Haggadah slowly, with feeling. Menashe loved and supported her. She could read all she wanted. When she finished, the men would race on.

By the time I was old enough to really understand and remember, Sonya was introducing new readings and songs to the Seder. She made sure these readings were done with real thought and could be understood in Yiddish and in English. The racing sing-song of the men was being reined in. Everyone who could read was allowed to read. There were new readings about the Revolt of the Warsaw Ghetto. We sang new songs, The Partisan Leid (Yiddish song), and Ani Maamin (Hebrew Song- I Believe, I Believe). L'Shanah Habaah (Hebrew- Next Year in Jerusalem) was sung with vigor. After W.W.II we added a new prayer for the Jews of Silence, trapped in Stalin's U.S.S.R.

The Haggadah that we used in the thirties was the Maxwell House Coffee edition. If you bought coffee, you got a free Haggadah. It had a few pictures, but no colored illustrations. It was written in Hebrew with an archaic English translation. The English translation was not inspiring but it was certainly interesting. Despite its failings, it was beloved. The English speaking kids loved to wonder what was the sound the turtle made in the wilderness.

The year Aaron was born (1981) we bought new Haggadot with what I thought were wonderful English translations and beautiful illustrations. Ethel, Irv and I looked at dozens of books before we chose this one. We agreed that the Maxwell House Coffee edition had to go. We needed something more attractive for our grandchildren. We made sure that nothing was left out. Additions, on the other had, were welcome.

The menu for the Seder meal had hardly changed. Gefilte fish, matzo ball soup, and chicken are still with us. Green salads were introduced in the late forties. The introduction of coleslaw created a terrible storm in our Seder. I was already married and had three children when I served a plate of coleslaw made from cabbage and carrots. My father had a fit.

Chumatz! Chumatz! It is unclean, forbidden during Passover! Throw it out! he demanded. In order to stop the tirade, I removed the coleslaw. Zeide Menashe would not even discuss it. Finally, long after Passover had passed, he explained. In his father's house they had one wooden bucket used to water the wheat and the cabbages. Therefore the cabbage could not be eaten during Passover. Eyes rolled, but Zeide enforced the cabbage ban. I cannot bring myself to describe the fight over peanuts and peanut butter, which did not even exist in the old country.

In the thirties we always ended the meal with a dish of stewed fruit. Today it is more apt to be a fresh fruit bowl. The vegetables have changed. We used to eat carrots and potatoes. Today we eat asparagus and other greens.

1998





THE BIRD PASSED OVER

Florence Korostoff Gussman

[\[Watch the video\]](#)



It is true, I am a Bubbe (grandmother). But this story that I am about to tell you is no bubbemeise (old wives' tale). This really happened, exactly as I have written it. It is emis (true).

It was a few days before Passover ...

Zayde (grandfather) and I were very busy cleaning. I cleaned kitchen cabinets. I washed dishes. I scrubbed the tops and bottoms of cans. I polished all the shelves. I am modern and no longer looking for chometz (bread crumbs) with a feather and a candle. Lysol is better than feathers.

Zayde brought out all my special Passover dishes. There were three matza plates and six chrain (bitter herbs) dishes to be washed and shined. After that he washed and dried twenty-nine Seder plates.

Then he asked, "What else should I do?"

I replied, "Sweep the path to the house. Clean the porch. Wear your glasses so you can see and wipe away all the spider webs."

"Oh...and hang a Baruchim Habayim (welcome) sign on the porch. That will be the finishing touch - to make the entrance inviting for our guests."

"Inviting for our guests?" said Zayde. "The smells from your kitchen, that will be invitation enough."

I tackled the stove and Zayde went out to prepare the approach to our home.

"Flo," Zayde called after a little while. "We got trouble. There's a bird building a nest on the porch light fixture."

"Oh no! That's all we need! Bird droppings on the porch or, G-d forbid, on someone's head!"

"Not to worry," Zayde answered. "I'll turn on the light. The bulb will get hot. The heat will chase the bird away. No bird likes fried eggs. You'll see. She'll fly away."

After a few hours, Zayde reported that the feigele (little bird) was ignoring the heated bulb. In fact, she seemed to enjoy it. I guess it took the chill off the crisp spring air. On she went, building her nest.



We didn't want to hurt the bird. We just wanted her to build her nest in a beautiful budding tree. Zayde cleaned out her nest and put a small box of mothballs on the fixture. Surely the smell of mothballs would drive the little bird onto a tree branch. But it didn't! She started another nest next to the box of mothballs.

Zayde got really upset. This was war! Again, he climbed the ladder. Again, he took down the twigs. And this time he unscrewed the whole fixture, only leaving the bare bulb.

Well, that stubborn little bird wouldn't give up. Zayde grumbled as he climbed the ladder for the fourth time. His left knee was starting to ache, like it does if he bends it too much. He removed the bulb. Now there were only two bare wires protruding from the porch ceiling.

We both stood watching as the frustrated bird flew to a low branch on the nearest tree. There, she chirped and chirped at us. We of course don't understand bird talk and we thought it was funny.

So we laughed at the little creature. We pointed and we laughed. For a moment the little bird looked at us. And she shook her head.

She really did!

Then, with a final furious "Squawk!", she flew to the highest branch of the tree. And then even higher, till she was a speck in the sky.

Then she disappeared.

After the first night seder I told Uncle Irv this story, the same way I just told it to you. He shook his head and mumbled angrily at me, "Flo, Flo, how could you?"

"How could we what? We didn't hurt her. All we did was chase the bird away!"

"Bird? What bird? Dope! That was Momma, coming to be with us on Pesach! And you didn't even recognize her!" he growled.

"Where did she go? Maybe we can call her back..."

I had to admit our last sight of her was a speck in a big sky.

"Maybe she was returning - to Heaven?" I ventured.

Irv replied sadly, "If not higher."

Well, Zayde Obby and I learned our lesson. Since that day, we never chase birds away from our premises.



Zayde faithfully feeds the birds summer and winter.

On every tree trunk is a birdhouse or a bird feeder.

And we keep hoping.

A few years later

At last, Mama has come home! I am so excited. You, you doubt it just because so many years have passed! You say that all birds look alike. You want me to prove it is Mama. Then I shall!

In all these years since Mama flew away, birds have come and birds have gone. Theyn have nested in our birdhouses. They have nested in our trees and even in our bushes. But no bird has ever come near our front porch. That is no bird has come near our front porch until this year. And you can guess when it happened. It happened just as we were beginning our Passover preparations.

Here, I'll tell you the story exactly as it happened. You'll hear it all, and you'll see, and you'll say "Amen."

The day began like every other day. We went out shopping and then came home. It was a Wednesday, exactly one week before Passover. As usual we hopped out of the car, gathered our packages, and slammed the doors shut.

We had automatically started walking toward our front porch when suddenly a frenzied little bird flew right at us. She came like a bullet, directly toward us. Then suddenly she veered off and flew up into the neighboring tree. From her safe perch she screeched at us.

I was so frightened. I dropped my purse and my bag. Obby stood where he was, frozen, clutching his bags.

I caught my breath and dashed up onto the porch. I had seen the bird fly out of my dried flower arrangement. Now I cautiously searched in the basket of artificial flowers that graced our front porch. I could see that the bird had hollowed out of the fake soil a deep tubular hole. In that hole she had made a nest. And in the nest there were one, two, three, four, five tiny speckled eggs.

Obby and I beat a quick retreat and began to pray fervently that Mama would return to her nest and hatch those tiny eggs.

We are practical people. We pray and then we help our prayers along. We prayed that our little bird family would be safe and well. Then I rushed to the garage and looked for a large rectangular board. I painted on the board with big letters, " BIRD NESTING ON FRONT PORCH! PLEASE USE THE BACK DOOR."

Obby found a tall stool to hang the sign on. He carried the stool and I carried the sign. We put the stool and the sign on the driveway near the porch.

All that week and then all through Passover, everyone used the back door. Several times we saw Mama leave the nest, but, thanks to God, she always returned to her eggs. Zog mir Mazel Tov! (Wish me Mazel Tov). Saturday morning after Passover, I went to the curb to pick up my newspaper. On the way back to the house, I saw Mama fly out of the nest to search for her breakfast. I looked around carefully and then I dashed on to the porch to see if anything had happened. It had! In the nest I could see, one, two, three, four, five little bird heads with huge eyes and open mouths. I took one look and hurried away. God forbid that I should frighten or chase Mama. Later Obby and I went to Shabbat services and shared our good news with the congregation. Everyone shook Obby's hand and hugged me. Everyone wished us, Mama and the babies a hearty Mazel Tov!



We watched the little family from a distance. A hundred times a day we peeked out the window on our front door. A hundred times a day we peered through our binoculars at the nest. We kvelled (took pride) when we heard constant chirping from the nest. But one day there was no chirping. There was only silence. We rushed out to see what had happened. The birds were all gone.

What is that that you asked? Were we disappointed? Of course not. Birds are suppose to fly free. Besides Mama was with them. She would love and protect them just as she had once loved and protected us.















סדר
הקערה
THE SERVICE OF
THE PASSOVER

קדש
sanctification

קניין
dishes
receptacles

הלל
the Hallel

ידדק
wash the hands

ביצה
egg

זרד
herb roasted

קדר
spiced after

כרפס
the parsley

מסין
small Matzot

יחזק
small cake

סרפס
parsley

מרדד
bitter herb

מסין
the Matzot

פירדד
parsley

חזרת
cucumber

חרוסת
cherries

עליל
small Matzot

עליל
small Matzot

מסין
the Matzot

מסין
the Matzot

מסין
supper
after

מסין
the Matzot

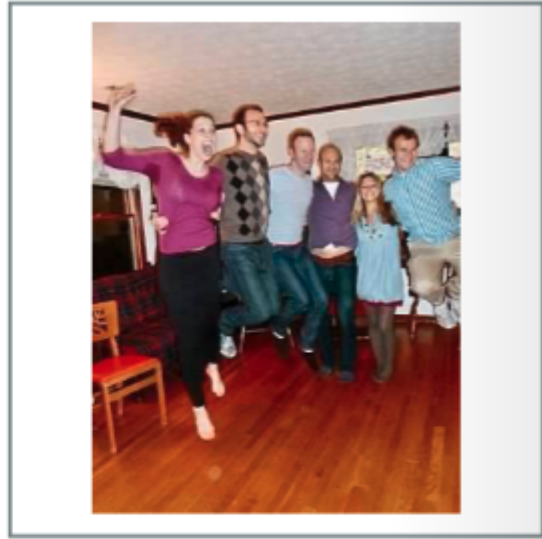


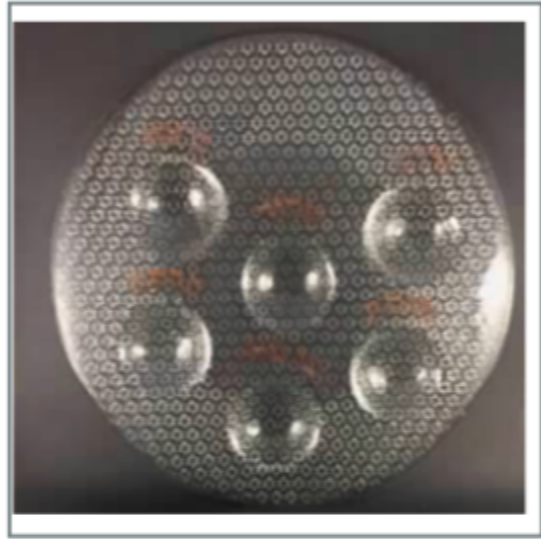




















History of Mom's Seder Plate Collection

Mom has collected Seder plates for as long as I can remember. She displayed them in curio cabinets in the dining room. She lovingly took them out and dusted them for Passover every year. There would be a weeklong discussion of which ones would be used for the Seder that year.

Bubbe Sonya gave Mom her first Seder plate just after she married my dad. She remembers being thrilled to have the family Seder plate. She asked Bubbe to tell her the history of the plate that traveled from the shtetl to their new home in America. Bubbe was amazed at the generational misunderstanding. She explained that people with 13 children who live in a wood house with a dirt floor and a straw roof do not own fancy ritual items. Hanukah menorahs are made from potatoes. Only the rich had candlesticks. There was no fine china to serve to the table. Newly carved wooden dishes were prepared for Passover, a set for meat and a set for dairy. When Pesach was over, they became the everyday dishes until the next Pesach when a new set was carved. There were no ritual Seder plates. You had all the items needed for the Seder placed on your new wooden fleishig plate. On the kids' plates, the shank bone was a delicious chicken leg. The family Seder plate in America came when you ordered an annual subscription to the Yiddish newspaper like the Forward or Der Tog. You could choose either a pretty glass Seder plate or a metal one made by Jews in Palestine. Bubbe choose the copper one. It was sturdy and it was from the Holy Land.

Family and friends gave Mom most of the Seder plates. People brought her Seder plates as kitchen gifts. Her students presented her with Seder plates as thank-yous. We scoured stores, and later the Internet, looking for unique ones she might like. Some of the Seder plates came from estate sales and some from thrift stores. We were all taught to rescue Judaica, lest it be lost. As her collection grew, she would laugh and wish that she told people that she collected diamonds or silver.

Mom always loved Passover. It was her favorite holiday. When she retired and moved to Virginia to be near her grandchildren, she built an addition onto the small retirement ranch house that would allow a Seder table that seated 40. Her kids fought with her that it was too much and not necessary. She was unmovable and she was right. For the next three decades the Seder was held in her home even when she could no longer muster the strength needed to run the show.

She loved everything about the holiday - the gathering of the family from near and far, the friends who were like family, the serious annual discussion of the menu, and even choosing the tablecloths. Each one of the tablecloths had a story. She wouldn't let us replace the one with the burn marks we made playing with the candles in 1964. She felt it was part of the tradition to remind us of how badly we behaved so we would be patient when our kids and grandkids also behaved badly at the Seder.

When Mom was young our Zayde (her father Manasha) and his brothers all sat "avanun" at the head of the table and raced through the Haggadah in a singsong slur of Hebrew and Yiddish. The women and children were completely left out. In the shtetl, most women never learned to read. The kids were bored and entertained themselves setting playing "I'm-not-touching-you" and setting tablecloths on fire. Over time, the aunts, a formidable crew of tough women and their American born daughters, shifted the Seder away from the old men and it became more inclusive.

Like most immigrant American families, we started with the Maxwell House Haggadah. It was free at the grocery store. Since Bubbe and Zayde ran a small grocery store (think corner bodaga), it wasn't long before they acquired enough Maxwell House haggadot for everyone at the table to have a copy. We loved the art deco era paintings. We loved the typos like "voice of the turtle". My science-minded siblings had a long discussion every year about what sounds turtles make. (It is the "voice of the turtledove" in non-typo versions of the Haggadah). We looked for the stained ones from the previous years. "Here is the one Uncle Benny used as a wine coaster. Boy was Bubbe annoyed." Another one was torn in a reckless tug of war and fixed with duck tape. Our family tradition was to read the story in a round table manner in either English or Hebrew. Zayde kvelled when we struggled along in Hebrew, sounding out words in our best Temple Shalom Hebrew School accents.

As Mom and Aunt Ethel took over the show, there were ongoing changes to make the Seder more kid-friendly. There were hand puppets and toys representing the plagues. The Haggadah changed to Ben Shahn. It was the height of 1960 sophistication. It didn't have any interesting typos and the art was too abstract for us linear-brained kids. In addition to the Four Questions, we were given questions to prepare as part of the Seder. There was a wonderful answer one year about the "right to bear arms" that became a discussion of what clothes were appropriate to wear to school and bare arms were staunchly defended. Despite the kid's general dislike for the Ben Shahn Haggadot, the Passover Generals (Mom and Aunt Ethel) decreed that they were going to be used. No negotiation. They were expensive. Actually, I doubt they were really expensive, but they were not free like the Maxwell House ones. There had been a yearlong exploration of options following a decade long discussion about finding a new family Haggadah. Too much time and psychic energy was invested in the Ben Shahn to allow for reconsideration. Half were kept in Aunt Ethel's home and half were stored at Mom's. When Mom and Dad retired and moved to Virginia, a huge conflict over who should keep the Haggadot set erupted. They acted out the heartbreak of splitting the Seder over the division of the books. It was a wrenching time.

Like the 10 Commandments, the Passover menu seemed carved in stone. But it wasn't. As I look back over the years. I see the menu evolved over the generations. The first was Bubbe's Old Country Meal. There were beets on the table. There was helzel, a repulsive sausage-like hot dish of chicken neck stuffed with matza meal, chopped heart, gizzard, and liver, and then drowned in shmaltz. If you survived it, you proceeded to matza balls in chicken soup. Then there was chicken and brisket with sides of green beans cooked until they were gray. And finally potato kugel, also gray. Our family had a very special chicken dish. It was called Sahara Chicken. The chicken was baked to the point of complete desiccation. The meat was beyond parched. It was completely dehydrated and withered. Bubbe lived in fear it would not be done in time for the festive meal in the middle of the Seder, so she started cooking it way too soon, like the day before. Reading the Haggadah always took longer than expected so the chicken always cooked much longer than expected. A similar approach was used for the famous family recipe called Sahara Brisket. I loved the cooking ritual. Bubbe turned the oven on to 350°F, with the meat inside at 3 PM. Mom would turn it off at 4 PM. Bubbe would turn it back on at 5 PM. Mom would turn it off at 6 PM when the Seder started and Bubbe would turn it back on.

When Flo and Ethel took over there were big changes. Beets departed replaced by olives and pickles. Gefilte fish appeared. Both cans and jars were joyfully accepted in place of helzel. Salad appeared. Zayde had a hard time with salads. "Only a behema eats grass!" Canned vegetables disappeared. New vegetables appeared. Asparagus was an exotic addition. No one in my family knew you were supposed to remove the woody part or the little triangular scales on

the stem. One year leeks were served. No one knew how to clean them properly, so we got an actual taste of wandering in the desert.

When Tory took over the Seder, the menu migrated to its next iteration. Soup disappeared from the menu. Gefilte fish was joined by mock chopped liver. Chicken migrated from the oven to crock pots. Chicken thighs were placed in a sweet and sour sauce. Despite being braised on low they managed to come out dry. It is a family gift. Salmon from the smoker arrived. Brisket sometimes appeared, now cooked in the smoker rather than the oven. Dessert options proliferated and stewed fruits disappeared.

Mom always decorated the house for Jewish holidays. She went a little overboard at Passover. She used to paint a cardboard Red Sea that you walked through on your way in the door. You had to keep to the path where the sea was parted or you stepped on the shells decorating the blue painted water. One year she used glitter to make the paint sparkle. Only once did she use glitter. Lesson learned. The walls had posters hung up on clothes lines mostly honoring the women of the Passover story. I made her a strip quilt with the plagues that she left up year-round.

Who came to the seders? It was always a great cast in addition to the regulars from the family. There was the Kinehora families who had no place else to go. There were the new immigrants. There were the in-laws and often their extended machatunim. There were local students who lived too far to go home. There were boyfriends and girlfriends being tested in the family crucible to see if they cracked under intense pressure. There were assorted assimilated Jews and the occasional goyim who wanted to see what it was all about. Some years it was just too big and I felt lost in the crowd.

My Jewish rite of passage to adulthood was not my Bat Mitzvah. My passage came when I was allowed to help clean up in the kitchen. There was no dishwasher so clean up was done in an assembly line. There was no disposable plastic or paper plates. Men never dreamed of participating in the cooking or the cleanup. They sat smoking cigars at the table. In the cloister of the kitchen, women shared their joys, their tsouris, their pride in their children, and their struggles. There was laughter. There was serious discussion. There was bonding. Relatives were dissed. If you weren't at the Seder, you were sure to be a topic of discussion. The women had wicked sense of humor. They saw everything. And nothing was sacred. I also learned that dry Passover cake soaked in the wine dregs is delicious.

The wheel turns. The next generation is ready to take over the seder. I am curious what changes will come.

Deb
February, 2023