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THE
SHIRA RUSKAY
CENTER

Coping with the Empty Chair at the Seder



Otto Geismar, 1927

?? מַה נְשַׁתְּנָה ??

A Personal Journal for Memory and Contemplation

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How to use this journal

Each year, the chairs around our seder table are filled with different individuals who join together to retell, once again, the story of our enslavement and our redemption. The Passover seder is more than a history lesson, for each of us is instructed to see ourselves as if we had personally been freed from Egypt. It has to become our own story, told in the context of the generations of our family and community. We add new layers as this year's experience melds with the memories of the past.

Yet some years are painfully different. A beloved family member or friend has died during the past year. There is an empty chair at the seder table. We may find ourselves dreading the coming holiday. How can we go through the same rituals, when life has been so drastically altered? What if we begin to cry at the seder table? What if everyone is so afraid of pain that they ignore the empty chair? Are we even allowed to bring our sadness to the seder, which seems like it should be a happy occasion?

This journal for memory and contemplation offers a way for you to prepare for this holiday, especially if it is the first or second seder without your loved one. It uses the traditional structure and rituals of the seder service, as found in the Haggadah, to enable you to pay attention to your journey of grief. Each page represents one of the steps of the seder. There is a brief teaching, comment or question relating that Jewish ritual or prayer to the individual experience of memory, loss and healing.

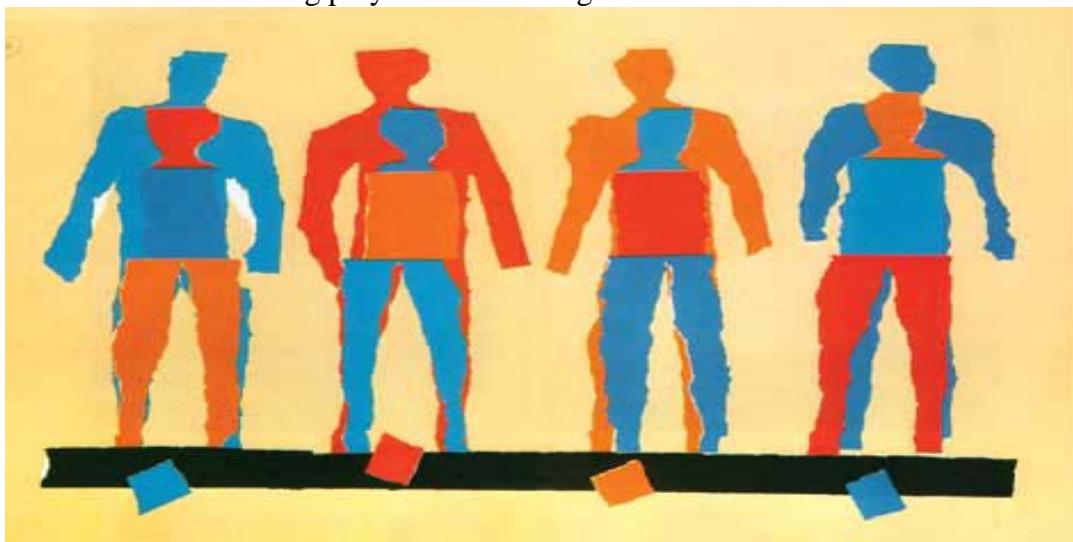
People have used this journal in many different ways and we encourage you to see how it can work for you.

- During the weeks prior to Passover, try to respond in writing to one of the comments or questions on the page. There is space to write on each page. Try to do this a few days each week, so that you can get through most of the journal.
- Write your thoughts on some of the pages, and pass it around to other family members, so that the journal becomes a part of the family story.
- Bring the journal with you to the seder and use it privately for yourself as the group precedes through the service from a Haggadah
- At some appropriate point in the seder discussion, refer to one of the pages in the journal, and share your thoughts and invite others to do so as well.

THE 15 STEPS OF THE SEDER

All sing:

<i>Kadesh</i>	First cup and Kiddush	קִדְּשׁ וְרַחֵץ
<i>UrChatz</i>	First hand washing (without a blessing)	
<i>Karpas</i>	First dipping: vegetable and salt water	כַּרְפַּס יַחֵץ
<i>Yachatz</i>	Breaking the middle matza	
<i>Maggid</i>	Storytelling	מַגִּיד רַחֲצָה
<i>Rachtza</i>	Second hand washing (with a blessing)	
<i>Motzi</i>	First blessing over the matza	מוֹצִיא מַצָּה
<i>Matza</i>	Second blessing over the matza	
<i>Maror</i>	Second dipping: maror in charoset	מָרֹר כּוֹרֵךְ
<i>Korech</i>	Hillel sandwich	שֶׁלְחַן עוֹרֵךְ
<i>Shulchan Orech</i>	Communal meal	
<i>Tzafun</i>	Afikoman (dessert)	צָפוּ וּפָרֵךְ
<i>Barech</i>	Birkat hamazon (the blessing after eating)	
<i>Hallel</i>	Psalms of praise	הַלֵּל גְּרָצָה
<i>Nirtza</i>	Concluding prayer and folk songs	



Four Aspects in Each of Us

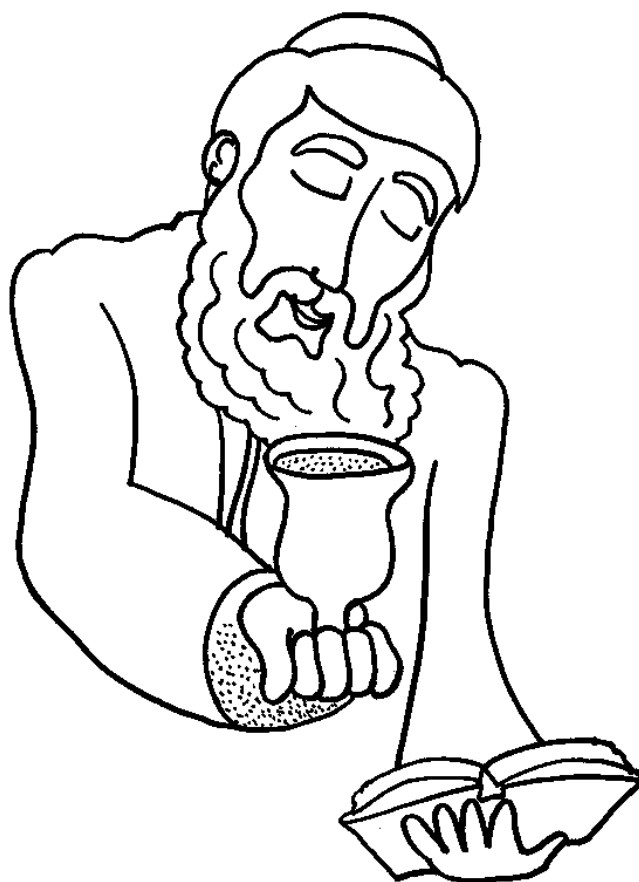
Dan Reisinger, © 1982, Rabbinical Assembly of America

Kadesh: Sanctifying Time

קִדְּשׁ

Kiddush

Time is a healer, we are always told. Your grief will get less over time. Yet, as time cycles around, it also reminds us of our losses. This is the season when... this is how we used to do it when... Sometimes we feel a cushion of comfort as we remember fondly how we spent holidays with our loved one. And sometimes the pain is just as sharp and devastating as the first day



Urchatz

וְרַחֵץ

The First Handwashing

The first hand-washing of the seder is unusual. The rabbi's point out that even a child would wonder at least two things: why do we wash without a blessing and why do we bother to wash when we will not be eating our meal for some time. They suggest that we wash our hands here in order to raise questions. Questions, both of wonder and of despair, are crucial to our growth as human beings. As Jews we have permission to ask question, even of God, when we see and experience suffering.



Karpas

כַּרְפָּס

The First Dipping Hors d'oeuvres of Spring Greens

For vegetables (like celery, parsley, or potatoes):

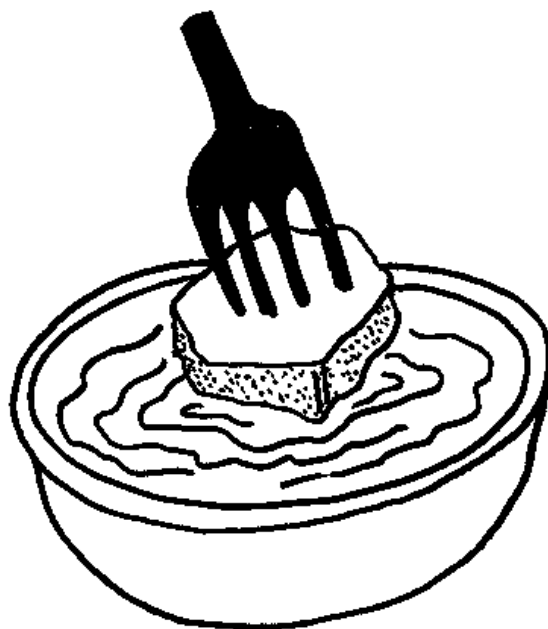
BLESSED ARE YOU, Lord,
our God, King of the Universe,
who creates the fruit of the
earth.

*Ba-ruch ata Adonai, Elo-hei-
nu me-teen ha-olam, bo-tei
pree ha-ada-ma.*

בָּרוּךְ אַתָּה יְיָ, אֱלֹהֵינוּ
מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם, בּוֹרֵא
פְּרֵי הָאָדָמָה.

Salt water represents our tears as slaves in Egypt. In my bereavement, as time goes by, what are still the sources of my tears? What still makes me cry? Is there anything that still enslaves me to my tears?

The karpas, spring vegetable, represents renewal that comes in the spring-time. As I move from grief and mourning back into a full and renewed life what is yet growing in me and what comes alive in me again?

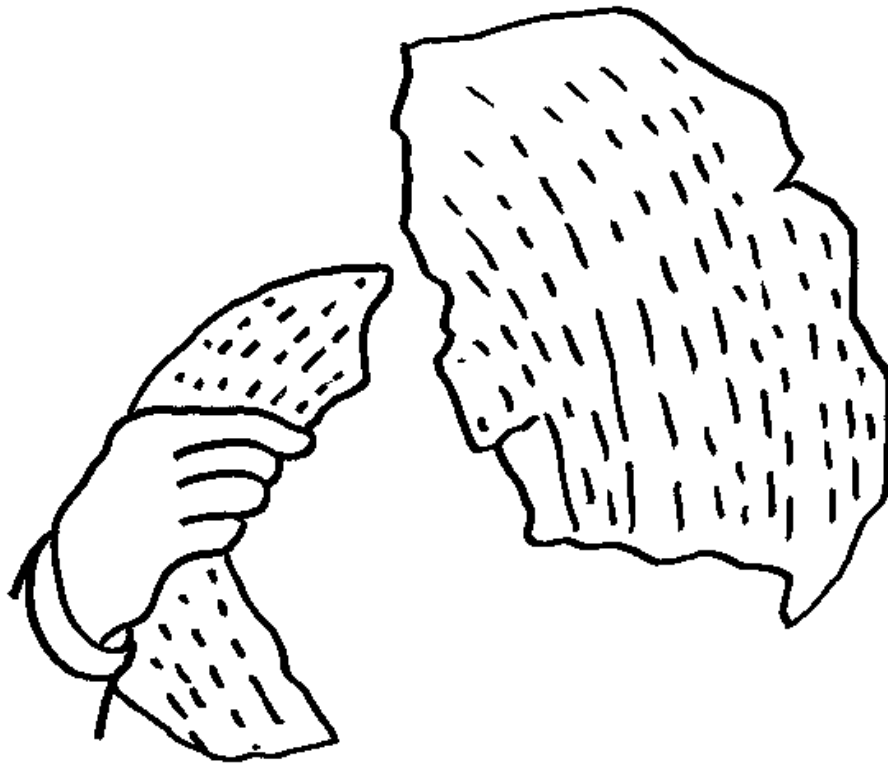


Yachatz

יִחַץ

Breaking the Matza

The matza represents brokenness. As the matza is broken in half, the broken piece is set aside for the afikomen, which when found toward the end of the seder, symbolizes renewed wholeness and redemption. In my broken-heartedness, have there been paths of healing for me? In my brokenness, have I found places of greater strength within me? Am I moving back towards a new kind of wholeness?



Maggid

מגיד

Telling the Story

One of the central mitzvot of Pesach is telling the story of oppression and the journey to liberation. It is interesting to note that the Haggadah offers us at least four versions of the Passover story. There is telling through symbols, historical recounting, moral expositions, and facts with expanded interpretations. What are some of the different ways in which you tell the stories of your loved one and the journey you took together.



Avadim Hayinu

A - va - dim ha - yi - nu, — ha - yi - nu. A - tah b - nai cho - rin, — b' -
nai cho - rin. A - va - dim — ha - yi - nu. A -
tah, a - tah b' - nai cho - rin. — A - va - dim —
ha - yi - nu a - tah, a - tah, b' - nai cho - rin, b' - nai cho - rin.

Dayeinu

Voice

I - lu ho-tzi, ho-tzi - a - nu, ho-tzi - a - nu mi-mitz-ra-yim, ho-tzi - a - nu mi-mitz-ra-yim
 da - yei - nu. Da, da - yei-nu, da, da - yei-nu - da, da - yei-nu, da -
 yei - nu da - yei - nu da - yei - nu Da, da - yei - nu, da, da - yei - nu,
 da, da - yei - nu, da - yei - nu, da - yei - nu da - yei - nu!

If He had brought us out from Egypt ,	<i>Ilu hotzianu mimitzrayim,</i>	אֱלוֹ הוֹצִיאָנוּ מִמִּצְרַיִם
and had not carried out judgments against them	<i>v'lo asah vahem sh'fatim,</i>	וְלֹא עָשָׂה בָּהֶם שְׁפָטִים
— Dayenu, it would have sufficed!	<i>dayeinu!</i>	דַּיֵּינוּ
If He had carried out judgments against them,	<i>Ilu asah vahem sh'fatim</i>	אֱלוֹ עָשָׂה בָּהֶם שְׁפָטִים
and not against their idols	<i>v'lo asah be'eloheihem,</i>	וְלֹא עָשָׂה בְּאֱלֹהֵיהֶם
— Dayenu, it would have sufficed!	<i>dayeinu!</i>	דַּיֵּינוּ
If He had destroyed their idols,	<i>Ilu asah be'eloheihem,</i>	אֱלוֹ עָשָׂה בְּאֱלֹהֵיהֶם
and had not smitten their first-born	<i>v'lo harag et b'choreihem,</i>	וְלֹא הָרַג אֶת בְּכוֹרֵיהֶם
— Dayenu, it would have sufficed!	<i>dayeinu!</i>	דַּיֵּינוּ

Rachtza

רְחִיצָה

Washing Before Eating Matza

When we have been to a cemetery, it is customary to wash our hands before entering a building. It is a remnant of the Biblical idea that contact with the dead puts an individual in to a different state. Purification by water is necessary prior to reentering the community. What rituals have been helpful to you in making the transition from focusing completely on your loved one, and being able to be more fully a part of your own, albeit changed, life.



Motzi Matza

מוציא מצה

Eating the Matza

The seder ritual seems to have it backward: One would think that we should eat the marror first, just as the bitter slavery preceded the liberation. But in truth, our chronology is not so simple. We need to have tasted freedom to really understand oppression. Maybe the lingering aftertaste of the matza can help see us through suffering and oppression. So it is, that the love we shared with our loved ones sustains us through the bitterness of their passing.



Marror

מָרֹר

A Meditation on Marror

PERSONALLY, I cannot imagine Passover without horseradish. Its combination of intense pleasure and pain makes a good analog for the bittersweet nature of our memories at Passover: We remember good times with family and friends, often with those who are no longer with us or are far away. We give our brief lives added dimension by linking them to the pain and triumph of Jewish history.

As the Irish fiddler Seamus Connolly once said in the name of his mother, "We're **never so happy as** when we're crying." **We never enjoy the horseradish so much as when it brings tears to our eyes** (*Ira Steingroot*).



Korech

כּוֹרֵךְ

Hillel's Sandwich at the Temple

Take the third, bottom matza, and prepare a sandwich of matza, maror and charoset. Eat it while reclining to the left.

While we may understand that maturity means accepting that life is the integration of the bitter and the sweet, the sandwich also reminds us that we live our lives "in-between". We hang in the balance, alive, but not immortal, sandwiched between a fragile, limited, animal self and our eternal Divine image.



Shulchan Orech

שֻׁלְחַן עוֹרֵךְ

The Pesach Family Meal

Food is associated with life. When the mourners return from the cemetery, they are served a meal with specific foods. By feeding the mourners and insisting that they make a commitment to life even in the face of loss, the community expresses its concern and caring for the mourners. Like the foods of the seder, the foods which make up the mourner's meal are deeply symbolic. The lentils represent the closed mouth, the prayers that were shut off; bagels and rolls represent the round cycle of life and bread, the most basic element of a meal, is called the staff of life. The hard-boiled egg, common to both the seder and the meal of comfort is the symbol of new life, and of survival and strength, even in difficult circumstances.



Eating the Hidden Afikomen צפון

Seeking

In hiding and seeking the Afikomen, we reunite the two parts separated at the beginning of the Seder. At this moment, we have the opportunity to discover lost parts of ourselves, to become reconciled with relatives, who have become distant and to find wholeness in aspects of Judaism which may not have been part of our lives. Finding that which is hidden is a powerful message when we feel loss and lost. Within our loss, we find ways of healing the broken part of our lives.



Birkat Hamazon - Barech

בִּרְכָה

The Blessing after the Meal

They who sow in tears, shall reap with joy.

You have shed many tears since the death of your loved one. What are the blessings you received from your loved one which continue to nourish you? What are the blessings that have come into your life since your loss.



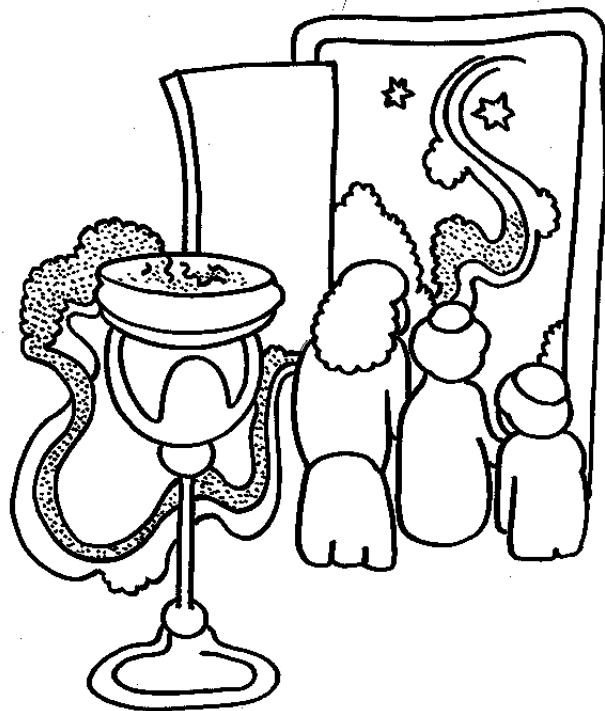
Cup of Elijah

כוס של אליהו

Death and loss often lead to a sense of isolation

The doors to the heart and the doors to community and love seem to be closed.

What are the beliefs and the hopes you have which can help you to open the door again.



ELIJAH the prophet

Elijah the Tishbee,

Elijah the Giladee!

May he soon come to us

Along with the Messiah, son of David.

Eliyahu ha-navee

Eliyahu ha-Tish-bee

Eliyahu ha-Giladee

beem-hei-ra b'ya-rnei-nu

yavo ei-leinu eem ma-shee-adi ben David

אֱלִיָּהוּ הַנָּבִיא

אֱלִיָּהוּ הַתִּשְׁבִּי,

אֱלִיָּהוּ הַגִּלְעָדִי

בְּמַהֲרָה יָבוֹא אֵלֵינוּ

עִם מְשִׁיחַ בֶּן דָּוִד.

Pour Out Your Wrath

שִׁפּוֹךְ תַּמָּתְךָ

Anger is very much a part of grieving. What are some of the things which have happened around the death of your loved one, and in the time since which have made you feel angry?

Anger results from our inability to admit the disparity between what we want and what is. It is a consequence of the impossibility of perfection in the created world in which the idea of perfection nevertheless exists... Following the example of the prophets, each of us has a mandate to assuage the destructive energy of anger in our selves, in other people and in God. We also have a mandate to accept the life-giving energy that emerges from the anger that is constructively channeled, whether it comes from God or from people.

~Rabbi Ira Stone

The Fourth Cup and the Festival Hallel כּוּס רְבִיעִי וְהַלֵּל

GIVE THANKS TO THE LORD,
for God is good, God's kindness is
forever.
Let Israel declare, "God's kindness is
eternal."
Let the house of Aaron declare,
"God's kindness is forever,"
Let those who fear the Lord declare,
"God's kindness is forever."

הוֹדוּ לַיהוָה כִּי טוֹב, כִּי לְעוֹלָם חַסְדּוֹ.
יֹאמְרוּ בְּאִשְׁרָאֵל, כִּי לְעוֹלָם חַסְדּוֹ.
יֹאמְרוּ בְּבַיִת אַהֲרֹן, כִּי לְעוֹלָם חַסְדּוֹ.
יֹאמְרוּ בְּאֵי יִרְאֵי יְיָ, כִּי לְעוֹלָם חַסְדּוֹ.

Hesed is often translated as loving-kindness. There are times when we are aware of God's loving kindness towards us. Hesed is also a gift we receive from other human beings, and which we can give to others. Recall some of the acts of Hesed that you experienced, and in which you have engaged, since the death of your loved one.

On the second night of Pesach only:

Counting the Omer

1. *On the second night* of Pesach we begin counting the 50 days from the Exodus to Sinai, from Pesach, the harvest of barley until Shavuot, the harvest of wheat. Traditionally the Rabbi's interpret the counting as reflecting Israel's eager anticipation of the giving of the Torah at Sinai on Shavuot.

Teach us to number our Days

The number seven, which has so many associations in the Bible and Rabbinic tradition, is primarily associated with the Creation of the world. It is a number of both generativity and of completion - the week being the basic unit of our lives, culminating in the "perfect rest" of Shabbat. Multiples of Seven, similarly, are related to life, as the Psalmist says: "The span of our life is seventy years." We may experience in the Omer's 7x7 a symbolic movement through life, from our launching at birth to our ultimate arrival at death. Counting our days is a lot like counting our blessings: to get from our Start to our Finish, we ought to try to make each day "count", and to appreciate moments along the way.

~Rabbi Simkha Weintraub

Conclusion – Nirtza

נִרְצָה

One chapter in my life has concluded, but my life journey continues. What do I look forward to in the coming year ...

- ... for myself
- ... for family and friends
- ... for my community
- ... for my world



לְשָׁנָה הַבָּאָה בִּירוּשָׁלַיִם

La-Shana Ha-ba-a Bee-Yeru-sha-layeem!

NEXT YEAR IN JERUSALEM

CHAD GADYA

Folk Tune

Moderately $\text{♩} = 80$

One little goat, one little goat:	<i>Chad gadya, chad gadya,</i>	חַד גְּדִיָּא, חַד גְּדִיָּא
Which my father bought for two zuzim .	<i>dizabin abah bitrei zuzei.</i>	דִּזְבִּין אָבִא בִּתְרֵי זֻזֵי
One little goat, one little goat:	<i>Chad gadya, chad gadya,</i>	חַד גְּדִיָּא, חַד גְּדִיָּא
The cat came, and ate the goat,	<i>ve-ata shunra ve-akhlah le-gadya</i>	וְאָתָא שׁוּנְרָא, וְאָכְלָה לְגְּדִיָּא
Which my father bought for two zuzim .	<i>dizabin abba bitrei zuzei.</i>	דִּזְבִּין אָבִא בִּתְרֵי זֻזֵי
One little goat, one little goat:	<i>Chad gadya, chad gadya,</i>	חַד גְּדִיָּא, חַד גְּדִיָּא
The dog came, and bit the cat, that ate the goat,	<i>ve-ata kalba ve-nashakh le-shunra, de-akhlah le-gadya</i>	וְאָתָא כְּלָבָא, וְנָשַׁךְ לְשׁוּנְרָא, דְּאָכְלָה לְגְּדִיָּא
Which my father bought for two zuzim .	<i>dizabin abba bitrei zuzei.</i>	דִּזְבִּין אָבִא בִּתְרֵי זֻזֵי
One little goat, one little goat:	<i>Chad gadya, chad gadya,</i>	חַד גְּדִיָּא, חַד גְּדִיָּא

Memorials/Bereavement at/through the Passover Seder *Some Possibilities*

Using recipes that were used by; or enjoyed by; the relative who died

Using ritual objects (kiddush cup, kippah, etc.) that were cherished/used by the one who died

Using a pillow of the one who died for reclining at the seder

Telling stories about the one who died -- e.g., how he/she was at previous year's *s'darim*

Recalling comments/interpretations of the Pesach story/themes by the one who died

Associating certain lines/images from the Haggadah with the memory of the one who died

Incorporating written work by the one who died into the seder

Integrating songs, poetry, and prose that was important to the one who died into the seder

Using artwork by the one who died as a centerpiece at the seder

Building a memorial into the "Elijah's Cup/Opening the Door" portion of the seder -- silent, spoken, and/or sung

Some people leave an empty chair at their seder table

Before Pesach begins, giving to a *tz'daleab-czuse* that is meaningful in memory of the one who died, perhaps related to Pesach themes

Similar to the preceding, underwriting the participation of a needy Jew in a communal seder in memory of the one who died

The comments and thoughts found in this Passover Journal were adapted from various sources including:

A Different Night Passover Haggadah, by Noam Zion and David Dishon
The Feast of Freedom Passover Haggadah, by The Rabbinical Assembly

Passover editions of "The Outstretched Arm", the journal of the National Center for Jewish Healing

And writings by:

Rabbi Simkha Y Weintraub, LCSW
Dr. Tamara M. Green
Rabbi Ira Stone
Rabbi Charles P. Rabinowitz
Rabbi Stephanie Dickstein, LMSW
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