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Passover: Welcoming Gentiles for Seder a Strong Tradition

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Passover-Seder Gentiles

In this Wed., March 25, 2015 photo provided by Matthew Christopher, participants attend Freedom Seder Revisited at the National Museum of American Jewish History in Philadelphia. The event embraces gentiles for an evening of storytelling, music and a... [View Full Caption](#) The Associated Press
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When it comes to Passover, Seder is hardly just for Jews at Lee Nelson's house.

In fact, Jews are usually outnumbered.

Her daughter brought along a Muslim she was seeing last year, and Nelson loves it when two particular non-Jewish friends round out her dozen or so guests. They're the ones who are bringing the brisket this year, and they've become expert at making charoset, symbolizing the mud the Israelites used for bricks when they were enslaved in Egypt.

Nelson, a social media manager in Wyndmoor, Pennsylvania, is a non-affiliated Jew who follows some Buddhist teachings. In her house and many other Jewish homes, gentiles are more than welcome at Seder to munch matzo, sip the traditional four glasses of wine and open the door for the prophet Elijah.

"It's about freedom and it's about freedom for everybody," Nelson said. "And you define that freedom however you want to define it."

In the swanky beach town of East Hampton, the Rev. Msgr. Donald M. Hanson's Roman Catholic congregation swells to about 1,700 families during the summer months, but he works regularly on interfaith projects for his year-round parishioners of Hispanics, middle-class residents and retirees.

Last year, he asked Rabbi Sheldon Zimmerman to organize a traditional Seder at his Most Holy Trinity Parish so his flock could experience Passover for themselves. About 250 people, Jews and Christians, attended. The evening's music included a cantor and the traditional Passover song "Dayenu."

"We got a kosher caterer and we paired it up so that the tables would be evenly Christian and Jewish," Hanson said. "I wanted my people to understand the Jewish character of it, but in understanding the Jewish character of it, they have the foundation now to better understand the Christian take on it."

Welcoming gentiles for Seder isn't new to Zimmerman, whose ranks at his Jewish Center of the Hamptons also rise with affluent weekend and summer residents. He and his wife have been welcoming gentiles for Seder for 53 years.

"We would have more Christians this year but the Seders are on Easter weekend. All of the Christians are busy with their own families," said the 73-year-old rabbi of Passover's start the night of April 3.

"There was a time 70 years ago, 80 years ago, when you didn't invite Christians to your Seder. There wasn't that openness in America, but people want to know and want to learn now. It's a way to understand the Jewishness of Jesus," Zimmerman said.

Or to embrace other struggles against oppression.

Gwen Ragsdale, co-founder and curator of exhibits at the Lest We Forget Black Holocaust Museum of Slavery in Philadelphia, was a college student during the black civil rights era of the 1960s. Until recently, she was unaware of the story of the Freedom Seder, held April 4, 1969, in the basement of a black church in Washington, D.C., on the third night of Passover, which fell that year on the anniversary of the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr.

About 800 people, half of them Jews and the rest black and white Christians, attended the event organized by community leaders and clergy. Three years ago, the National Museum of American Jewish History in Philadelphia revived Freedom Seder, dubbing the event Freedom Seder Revisited. Ragsdale was among the museum's 250 guests for this year's meal March 25.

"It's an evening of stories and performances punctuated by these little ritual Passover moments," said Emily August, director of public programs for the museum. "The Exodus narrative is replaced by these stories, these personal journeys."

One of the evening's storytellers was a woman who journeyed to the U.S. from India.

"She was here as an (undocumented) immigrant in her 20s as a college student, and she told this story for the first time publicly of her deportation hearing. It was incredibly powerful," August said.

Jewish Passover rituals were explained as the night progressed. Bitter herbs, horseradish, charoset and matzo were used. "There was wine but not four cups," August laughed.

Ragsdale was moved. She recalled a black woman who spoke of her realization in her corporate job that "she was hired only because she was black and filled a criteria when in fact she really wasn't qualified to give them what they were expecting of her."

Ragsdale's husband, Joe, has been collecting slave artifacts for 50 years. They have a touring exhibit they roll out regularly, including at predominantly white schools, as a way to bring slavery alive emotionally "in much the same way Jewish communities want people to understand their oppression and how their oppression is very much a part of their being, who they are and why we are the way we are."

In addition to black gentiles like Ragsdale, Freedom Seder Revisited drew guests from a variety of faiths: Islam, Catholic and Protestant among them.

Reform Rabbi David Gelfand of Temple Israel in Manhattan grew up in Scranton, Pennsylvania, "in a synagogue where every year black and white, Christian and Jew were all welcomed into the Seder."

"The concept of welcoming strangers is inherently part of the Seder," he said, recalling the Tibetan monk he once invited for his family Seder years ago.

"I asked him to talk about what freedom meant to him and needless to say every one of us was in tears as he talked about the displacement of his people in Tibet," Gelfand said. "Passover captures the imagination of children, it uses every sensory perception, it has super-heroes, as it were. It has a great story, whether you're born Jewish or come as a guest to a Seder table."