

A Montrealer Seder

"A Montrealer Seder" appeared originally in *Strobe*, a publication of the Hillel Foundation of McGill University. Since this piece was written, however, the National Hockey League has undergone an expansion similar to those of other sports, and so the Stanley Cup Finals are no longer played during Passover. But for Canadian Jews, the former coexistence of hockey playoffs and Passover Seders was similar to the occurrence of the World Series during the High Holidays. Because of the prolonged baseball season, this conflict no longer occurs.

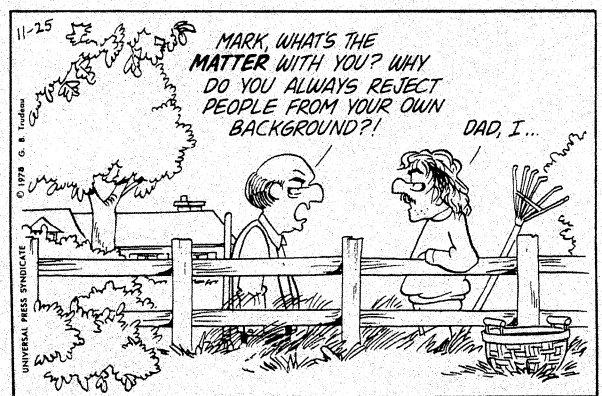
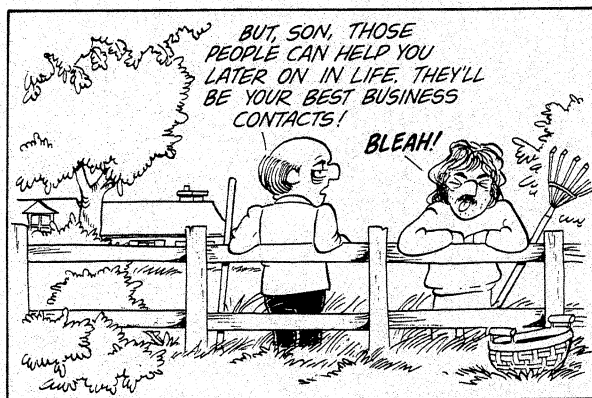
Everyone is familiar with the many colorful customs and special rituals associated with the Passover Seder. The Four Questions, Elijah's Cup, and the *afikomen* are a standard part of the traditional Passover feast for the forty million Jews in Israel today.

In addition to the usual customs of the holiday, however, many Jewish families have incorporated into the Seder the heritage of their respective Diaspora communities. Among the most colorful Seders are those held in the homes of the Montrealer Jews—those Jews whose ancestors lived for many years in a Canadian community which rose to prominence in the second half of the twentieth century.

On the eve of the Seder, the men of the household attend services just like everyone else. But midway through the evening prayers they leave the synagogue and silently say the rest of the prayers on their way home—a practice which gave rise to the idiom "to pray as fast as a Montrealer."

At home, one member of the family keeps watch at the window, anxiously awaiting the arrival of the father, the other men of the family, and the guests. When the shul-goers come into view, the mother blows a special whistle and all drop what they are doing, run to the door, and line up in single file.

As the men approach the house, their final strides become long and graceful. They walk without lifting their shoes, and they swing their arms vigorously. They enter the house one by one and consecutively shake the hands of all those who await them. The last to enter is the father. After going down the line,



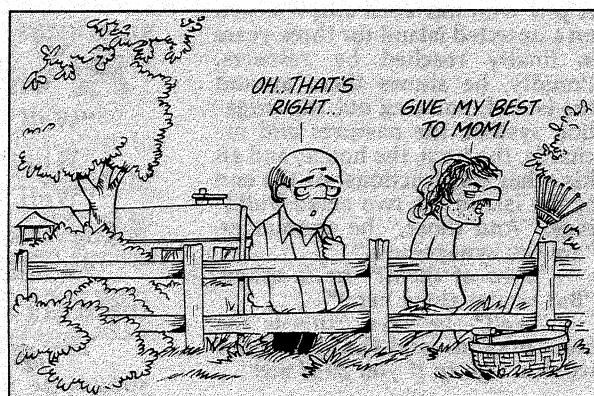
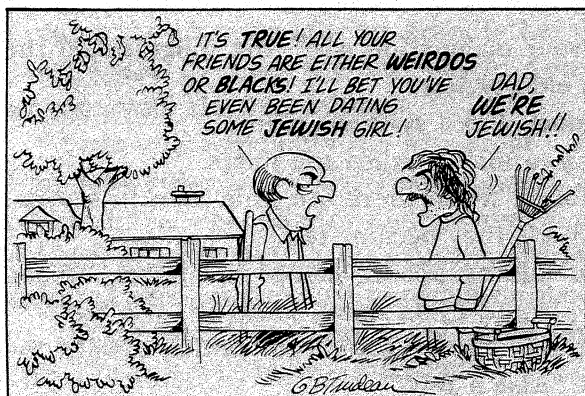
he leads the Seder party around the table three times and is then warmly surrounded by the rest of the party and is vigorously slapped on the back. The mother blows the whistle again, the party cheers, a matzoh is dropped, and the Seder is under way.

The rest of the Seder is conducted in the traditional manner, except for certain customs which are unique to "Minhag Montreal." In most Jewish homes, for example, the Seder is conducted at a leisurely, relaxed pace, often not ending before midnight. Montrealers, however, take seriously the idea of *chipazon* (haste) traditionally associated with the Exodus, "because they were thrust out of Egypt and could not tarry." They therefore begin the Seder almost two hours earlier than their neighbors and conduct it at a greatly accelerated pace, often omitting passages from the Haggadah and progressively quickening the tempo of the Seder songs.

But in spite of this apparent haste, no major ceremonies are omitted. In fact, the Montrealers have elaborated on several traditional practices. Just before the youngest child asks the Four Questions, the head of the household asks the mother's brother (or if he is not present, another male member of the household) what time it is. The answer is always given with relation to eight o'clock. If the time is six-thirty, for example, the answer will be: "It is ninety minutes to eight."

At this point the father says, "Then let us proceed," and signals to the youngest child to begin. If it is already past eight o'clock, however, a special selection is read. These verses are found nowhere else in Jewish liturgy, although some scholars are reminded of the Yom Kippur passage which describes how blood was sprinkled on the outer altar of the Temple. The inserted passage begins: "What is the count? One and nil. One and one. Two and one. Three and one."

This section is followed by an even more obscure passage;



contemporary scholars believe it refers to the plagues and was inserted at a time when the Jewish community was threatened by harsh economic conditions. The "plague theorists" believe that the passage calls upon the Lord to smite the enemies of Israel just as He had done in Egypt. They cite the frequently recurring yet cryptic word "haki," which they claim to be a popular corruption of the Hebrew *hakeh*, which means to smite.

Another unique Montrealer custom concerns the *afkomen*. The father sends the youngest child to search for it, and upon finding it, the child runs back to the table and whispers in his father's ear. The father then jumps to his feet, raises his hands skyward, and shouts "Agol, Agol!" The rest of the males then rise with their arms raised and respond, "Hahlo Hahbs, Ahwei-Ahwei."

A highlight of the second half of the Seder has to do with Elijah's Cup. This is a large bowl with the names of the participants of past Seders engraved around the base. All through the Seder the cup has been standing in the center of the table filled to the brim with wine. Montrealer tradition is the only one which allows every member of the family to partake of the wine with Elijah. When the time comes for Elijah to "enter," all the men pull off their jerseys, while the head of the household lifts the cup above his head and deliberately allows some of the wine to spill. He drinks from the cup and passes it around the table, where each of the men spills some of the wine over the head of the man next to him. The Seder is then rapidly brought to a conclusion. The final songs are sung with the participants standing, and as they end, all the men rush from the room and leave the women to clean up.

The rest of the evening is spent in animated conversation, which usually lasts well into the night.

A Jew who has been shipwrecked on a deserted island for three years is finally reached by rescuers. Proudly, he shows them around the island, pointing out the irrigation system, the pastures and orchards, the barn, the house, and all his other constructions. At the end of the island are two small buildings. "And those," he announces, "are the synagogues."

"Two of them?" he is asked. "But you're alone here!" "Well," he says, "this is the one I pray in—and the other one I wouldn't go in if you paid me!"

"AND what is your occupation, sir?" the judge asked the witness, an elderly Jew.

"Well, Your Honor, I'm a *minyán* man."

"What's a *minyán* man?" asked the judge.

"Well, Your Honor, when there are nine men in a synagogue, and I join them, they become ten."

"What are you talking about?" asked the judge. "When there are nine people and I join them, there are also ten!"

The Jew broke into a wide grin, and leaning toward the judge, he inquired, "Also a Jew?"