

A Montrealer Seder: Parallel Edition

ORIGINAL: The Editors (B. Elan Dresher, Norbert Hornstein, J. Lipa Roth, *et al.*). 1971. A Montrealer seder. *Strobe* 4(2): 40–41. Montréal, Québec: McGill Hillel Students Society.

BBOJH VERSION: Elan Dresher, Norbert Hornstein, and J. Lipa Roth. 1981. A Montrealer seder. In William Novak and Moshe Waldoks (eds.), *The Big Book of Jewish Humor*, 114–116. New York, NY: Harper & Row. 25th anniversary edition, New York, NY: HarperCollins, 2006.

Tel Aviv.—Everyone is familiar with the many colourful customs and special rituals associated with the Passover Seder. The Arbah Kushiot, Kos Eliyahu the Aphikoman and the special plate are part and parcel of the traditional Passover feast for the forty million Jews in Israel today. However, many Jewish families have in addition to the usual Minhagim, many special practices and ceremonies reflecting the heritage of their respective Galut communities. Among the most colourful Seders are those held in the homes of the Montréalers Jews. That is, those Jews whose ancestors lived for many years in that great diaspora center of Jewish learning and culture which rose to prominence in the latter half of the twentieth century.

On the eve of the Seder, the men of the household attend shul just like everyone else. However, right after the Shema Yisroel of Maariv they leave the synagogue and silently say the rest of the prayer on their way home (this practice gave rise to the idiom “to pray as fast as a Montréaler”). At home one member of the family keeps watch at the window anxiously awaiting the arrival of the father, the other male members 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

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

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 swing their arms vigorously. They enter the house one by one and consecutively shake the hands of all those who await them. The last man 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 underway.

The seder itself is conducted in the traditional manner except for certain customs which are unique to the “Minhag Montréal.” In most Jewish homes the seder is conducted at a leisurely, relaxed pace at times stretching past midnight. Montréalers however, take to heart the idea of *Hipazon*, that is, haste, traditionally associated with Pesach.—“because they were thrust out of Egypt and could not tarry.” Therefore they start the Seder almost two hours earlier than most and conduct it at a greatly accelerated pace often omitting selected passages from the *hagada* and progressively quickening the tempo of the seder songs. In spite of the apparent haste of the seder, no major ceremonies are omitted. In fact, the Montréalers have elaborated on several traditional practices. Just before the youngest child asks the *Arbah Kushiot* 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 time is always given with relation to eight o’clock. That means to say if it is 6:30 the answer will be, “It is ninety minutes to eight.” At this point the father says “then let us proceed” (*Havah Nelekh*) and signals to the youngest child to hurry with the *kashes*. If it is already past eight o’clock a special selection is read. These verses are found nowhere else in the Jewish liturgy although it has some affinity to the Yom Kippur passage which describes how blood was sprinkled on the outer temple altar. The inserted passage begins—“What is the

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

count? (Heshbon)” One and nil. One and one. Two and one. Three and one.” This is followed by several verses of what is believed to be twentieth century Montreal English. This section is a mystery to scholars although a current theory is that it relates to the plagues and was inserted at a time when the Jewish community was threatened by harsh socio-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” - to smite. Other scholars, however, believe that the passage is a local variation of Yiddish and that “Haki” derives from Yiddish “tzuhaken” thought to mean “to beat.” However, the majority of scholars vigorously refute such theories as being farfetched and unfounded. They would prefer to reserve judgement until more research has been done on Montreal Jewish history.

Another unique Montréal custom concerns the Aphikoman. The father sends the youngest child out to search for the Aphikoman. Upon finding it, the child runs back to the table and whispers into his father’s ear. The father then jumps to his feet, raises his hands skyward and simultaneously shouts “Agol, Agol.” The rest of the males then rise with their arms raised and respond “Hahllo Hahbs, Ahwei-Ahwei.” While still on their feet they begin Birkat Hamazon at a breakneck speed which continues on into the second half of the seder. (In some of the more traditional Montréal homes, like those in the old Montréal colony on the snowy slopes of Mt Hermon, the rest of the seder is omitted completely).

A highlight of the second half is the ceremony connected with the Kos Eliyahu, the Elijah 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 centre of the table filled to the brim with wine. Montréal tradition is the only one which allows every member of the family to partake of

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 *afikomen*. 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, “Hahllo 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

the wine with Elijah. When the time comes for Eliyahu to “enter” all the men pull off their jerseys, the head of the household lifts the cup above his head and deliberately allows some wine to fall over his head. He drinks from the cup and passes it around the table. The seder is then rapidly completed. Had Gadya is sung partially standing and as it ends all the men rush from the room leaving the women to clean up.

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

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.