

In Preparing for Passover, Don't Dismiss Emotional Labor

Alanna E. Cooper | April 18, 2019

This year, the Cooper family will celebrate the first two days of Passover at my house in Cleveland. Everyone is coming in from all over the country. My brother and his family from New Jersey, my sister and her family from California, and my parents from Maryland. In total, we are 17. That's a lot of people for two seders and intermittent other meals in a not-so-big house, with a not-so-big refrigerator.

My kids have been counting down the days. I'm exhausted already.

I've read all the posts on the Jewish blog-o-sphere about how to make the holiday manageable: I should not fiddle around too much in the kitchen with fancy food and multiple courses. I should just "keep it simple," and "focus on the minimum." And I shouldn't go overboard with Passover cleaning, which is "not the same as spring cleaning!" Getting rid of *hametz* requires a good sweep of the floors, and wipe-down of the cabinets, not using a toothpick to remove crumbs from crevices of the fridge.

I'm planning to follow all this advice, and to hire help for some of the chores. But there's one aspect of Passover preparation that I can't figure out how to make simple: the emotional labor that goes into keeping my family together for the holiday.



Cooper's extended family, Washington DC, 1940

I'm not referring to making sure that I've got enough chairs and cutlery. I am speaking about the difficult negotiations involved in bringing everyone to the same table. Once it was just my brother, sister and me. We'd all come home, and my parents would make the seders. Then we started getting married, and having children. We spread across the country, and multiplied; we've got babies, toddlers, teens, and now young adults. My parents can't have us all in their house anymore. It's too noisy, too much food, too much of a mess.

Now we, the siblings, are trying to figure it out. Where to hold it? How much money to spend? Who determines the standard of kashrut? And the length, content and menu for the seder itself? At some point in the future, we'll be too many people to be able to reach group-consensus on all these matters. But in the meantime, I'm holding on.

I'm expending as much energy as I've got to keep us together. Last week our discussions reached a fevered pitch over one particular food-related issue, which took two days of non-stop phone-calls to resolve. At a certain point in one of our many conversations - when it looked like our seventeen-person seder was about to splinter off into two - my brother reflected, "None of this makes sense." He elaborated: Why is it that pressure for family to come together is most intense for the very holiday where meal preparations are most elaborate, and anxieties around punctilious religious observance are highest.

My brother is right. Given all of the demands inherent to Passover, why not down-play family for this one holiday? Treat it like Shavuot, where no one feels bad if we're not all around the same table eating cheesecake!

Alas, I see no way around it. There is no family ritual more powerful than the recitation of "*Ma Nishtana*." When the youngest asks his parents the four questions, and his parents, in turn, ask the same questions of their parents - who are all at the same table - all the heroic efforts are worth it.

This year, it looks like my family will make it. I don't know how many more years we'll manage. But for now, I will savor every moment. When debates get heated, or someone's habits get annoying, I'll remind myself that it could always be more complicated. My husband's family almost joined us. Maybe next year!

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