

Lyrics: The Haggadah. Music: Rap

By Tamar Rotem

Miserable children, harassed women in the kitchen and growling stomachs while a grandfather rules the seder and the embarrassed adults, singing Hassidic tunes no one knows and mumbling endless texts late into the night. My family's seder always ended with my father, grandfather and uncle dancing clumsily and singing "next year in Jerusalem" as if they were in the Diaspora. The only small comfort came in the morning, when I won the well-known Bnei Brak competition "Whose seder was the longest?"

My memories of seder night may be extreme, but dozens of others attended five simultaneous sessions last Sunday night exploring the question: What is it about the jewel in the crown of Jewish holidays that causes such great discomfort and how can reading the Haggadah become relevant for adults and children alike? The discussions initiated by the Jewish leadership program Tehuda of Kolot, took place in Jerusalem, Tel Aviv, Yerucham, Mazkeret Batya and Moshav Ram On in northern Israel.

The conference quickly became a festival of exchanging ideas, sharing ethnic customs, suggestions for dramatizations and finally rap versions of Passover songs. The light mood, despite occasional slips into serious discussions of poverty and slavery, made obvious the thirst for a different Judaism among both secular and religious Israelis: A freer, more up-to-date Judaism open to personal interpretation.

Tehuda is a study framework of the religious and secular operating in Jerusalem, which aims to tie Jewish sources into societal improvement. Orli Dabosh, once a Tel Aviv district prosecutor who left the profession to study with Tehuda, facilitated a south Tel Aviv meeting attended by more than 100. "We didn't expect so many to come," Dabosh says. "Many people feel that since the older generation has passed away, there is a void that must be filled and that there is a need to make a seder that has meaning for the next generations. They were perplexed to suddenly find themselves running the evening instead of the grandfather. People actually took out notebooks and wrote down tips. It seemed like they were looking for how to give the evening more meaning."

In Jerusalem the group was divided: There were those who expressed their reservations of Passover evening with a smile. They remember that this was the time for all those embittered by the hunger that overshadows the first half of the seder. Others recounted their wonderful memories of holiday traditions in Ethiopia. Tehuda student Tamir Nir feels that the seder as it is celebrated in many homes entirely misses the point and is unnecessarily long. He doesn't take lightly the hunger that interferes with concentration.

Nir points out that the point is not to suffer - quite the contrary - and suggests reading just choice portions of the Haggadah and finding meaning in them. Nir, with a particular affinity for the Persian feast version of seder night (lying on pillows or sofas), suggests distributing snacks throughout the reading of the Passover story. Nir's fellow facilitator, a religious woman of Ethiopian descent, Ziva Mekonan-Dago, suggested reading the entire Haggadah, but taking breaks for children to perform selections such as the ten plagues, during which it is possible to eat.

Mekonan-Dago told of seder night in Ethiopia when the children went from door to door collecting wheat grains and chick peas to burn in a campfire in the village square. By moonlight, the elders recounted the story of the exodus from memory.

"Seder changed for us in Israel," says Mekonan-Dago who immigrated to Israel in 1984. Now, she recounts, seder is an opportunity to retell the story of the immigration to Israel. "The trip through Sudan in Operation Moshe is our own exodus from Egypt and we tell it to the children on seder night."

"Especially because we are religious and it is clear to us what to do, we wanted to come here and hear what can be rejuvenated," says Menachem Grossman of the Modi'in area community of Talmon. "Every year you think maybe you will do it a new way. But every year you tell the haggadah like you did the year before." Grossman thinks it's a great idea to do the seder in a nature setting, to the light of the moon. He'll try it next year.