



## Commentary

## “Next year, together”: A ritual meal amidst COVID-19 magnifies the politics of place

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Arms outstretched, we raised our glasses of ceremonial wine toward the glowing screens before us and chanted familiar blessings in a language few of us truly understand. Thus, we prepared for the annual retelling of the legendary Exodus from Egypt, this year via teleconference. Twelve neatly arrayed digital boxes broadcast the dinner tables of cousins, aunts, uncles, brothers, and sisters scattered across the North American continent. We fumbled through the Four Questions, each muffled repetition of “*Why is this night different from all other nights?*” met with smiles and sighs. Jokes delayed through complex communication circuits dissolved before they reached their destinations. Our miniscule computer microphones tried valiantly to transmit the cascading voices of wine-soaked songs. Despite the distance, there were more of us “together” on this night than ever before, thirty at its peak. This scale was enabled not only by the turn to digital devices but also by our thirst for social interaction and a sense of normalcy amidst the constrained connections of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Rituals, which gain strength through repetition, are all the more significant and strange when removed from their usual terrain. For Jews in North America, and around the world, sunset on April 8, 2020 marked a Passover uprooted. The *seder* meal that begins the holiday is arguably the most culturally significant Jewish event of the year, one deeply sedimented by live performance and shared space. This year, instead of inviting family, friends, and friendly strangers to sit shoulder to shoulder, we circulated sterile video conferencing links. Instead of paging through the illustrations of the *haggadah*, a colorful booklet of recitations for the evening’s proceedings, we scrolled down a lifeless PDF.

There is much to be said about a structured meal that invites reflection on freedom, oppression, plagues, and borders in the time of a global health crisis with starkly unequal effects.

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The *seder* is an act of edible symbolism in which culinary objects are subjected to relentless inquiry and interpretation. *Matzah*, unleavened bread, serves as a reminder of the lives of refugees, their routines disrupted and displaced. Ten drops of wine, representing 10 plagues suffered by the Egyptian people, are solemnly removed from our glasses to recall that the privileges we enjoy today are not free from pain inflicted on others. A boiled egg symbolizes mourning, or rebirth, or both. Yet this year, when the emotional, historical, and moral complexities of human liberation are so palpably relevant to a world of structural violence laid bare by a virus, the mood was muted. Fatigued by the mediation of digital devices, we moved quickly through the prescribed rituals with little space to linger. Without a shared table, the dialogue was more perfunctory than penetrating.

And yet. While the placelessness of a digital dinner disappointed, the floating format also yielded a new and unusual possibility. Huddled around the strange blue light, a single, potent turn of phrase transformed. An age-old anthem remade itself right before my screen-weary eyes. The classic closing words of the ceremony rewrote themselves, deviating poignantly from a lilted loyalty to the script. Instead of “Next year in Jerusalem,” my cousins called out to one another, “Next year, together.”

The improvised edit, which may appear slight, was nothing short of extraordinary. For more than a century, the *seder* has been tinged with Zionist sentiment. The customary closing aspiration, “*Next year in Jerusalem*,” echoing the hopeful journey of Moses and his followers toward a life safe from oppression, is now often taken literally as a call to deepen commitments to Jewish statehood in contemporary Israel-Palestine. The idea that this land belongs to the Jewish people has provided a sense of security for some, while simultaneously justifying devastating wars, the displacement of more than five-and-a-half million Palestinian people, an oppressive occupation, the repeated denial of basic human rights, and daily acts of violence (Clarno, 2017; Khalidi, 2020; Lloyd, 2012; Peteet, 2017). It has made Gaza one of the most densely populated places on Earth and left its over two million residents with only 70 intensive care beds (Physicians for Human Rights, 2020; World Health Organization, 2019),<sup>11</sup> a politically produced coronavirus calamity waiting to happen. It is also the reason I retreated from the Jewish practices of my family for many years and continue to wrestle with my inherited identity. I am enraged and ashamed by the brazen blindness of so many of my kin to the cruelty and injustice in which we, as Jews and as North Americans, are complicit.

If COVID-19 were not keeping us apart, I would have hosted a *seder* among politically like-minded friends that invited self-reflection, compelling us however modestly toward greater accountability and more just action. Instead, I joined my extended family for an evening focused on sending comfort to one another. For some sharing in this virtual meal, any criticism of Israel would be intolerable. But somehow, “Jerusalem,” that most contested site of passion and pain,

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<sup>11</sup> This limited health infrastructure was exacerbated by the Trump administration’s sudden discontinuation of \$300 million in annual contributions toward the UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East beginning in 2018.

slipped away. A call for togetherness took its place. It was as if the safety, abundance, and fulfillment that a holy city represents had been subconsciously substituted with a recognition that our well-being is far more dependent on one another than on any imagined land of plenty. Concluding a meal of ritualized hope, I couldn't help but hope for a togetherness that replaces talk of territory with commitments to mutual responsibility. At least for a moment, amidst a modern plague, we reached toward our shared humanity.

Yet my family's craving for togetherness might also have come from a narrower desire to protect and preserve those closest to us. Together might not mean everyone, everywhere. By tradition, the *seder* implores us to welcome strangers into our home, an act of inclusion now nearly unthinkable as bodies are recast as biohazards. The health crisis has hardened borders and heightened acts of hate worldwide. As COVID-19 cases rise in Israel-Palestine, fragile collaborations begin to crumble (Najib & Halbfinger, 2020). This *seder*'s turn from territory toward togetherness was momentarily untethered from the politics of place. Yet omission is also avoidance. The fact that side-stepping the issue could feel like progress is itself unsettling.

A ritual meal during COVID-19 is an uneasy opening, destabilizing old ways with uncertain direction. Ceremony allows small acts to carry outsized effects. It matters how we articulate our hope.

Next year, together?

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