

The '30-Minute Seder' is rabbinically approved. But is it too short? Or too long?



TOM BACHTELL FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

By **Beth Teitell** | GLOBE STAFF APRIL 13, 2016

To start with the obvious: Yes, Robert Kopman, the Brooklyn-born, Arizona-residing author of the very popular “30 Minute Seder,” and the admittedly less popular “60 Minute Seder,” has considered publishing the “15 Minute Seder.”

“People joke,” he said, “but I’ve thought about it.”

“If I take anything [else] out,” Kopman said, “I think we’d lose something essential from the experience.”

The Passover seder — and its length — is something on many people’s mind this time of year, as Jewish families contemplate their holiday meals next weekend.

The seder is a service held at home on the first and second nights of Passover, which includes telling the story of the Jews’ exodus from Egypt, preceding the meal everyone is waiting for. It’s laid out in a book called a “Haggadah,” and with many different ways to approach the text — from skipping vast portions and hustling to the brisket to reading every page in Hebrew and pushing dinner late into the evening — tensions at the table may be slowly simmering (along with the chicken soup in the kitchen).

No one wants to lose anything essential, but in today’s world — in which adults have the attention span of toddlers, and iPhone-separation anxiety is a real condition — the question is this: When it comes to the observance of an important holiday such as Passover, what’s essential?

For some Jews, just sitting at an elderly relative’s table, half-heartedly absorbing the rituals — and wishing it was over so they could return to their Netflix binge — is the point.

The “enough already” attitude is captured in a sepia-toned Passover card being sold this year that shows a family observing the holiday, thought balloons hovering. “Can we maybe finish this up before I die?” the heavysset grandmother wonders to herself.

But is a longer seder necessarily better? Rabbi Suzie Jacobson of Boston’s Temple Israel, says it’s not the seder’s length that matters, it’s the meaning that that the family brings to it.

Well, up to a point. The jokey “The Two-Minute Haggadah: A Passover Service for the Impatient” that makes the rounds online this time of year is a bit too abbreviated, she said.

A sample passage includes: “Opening prayers: Thanks, God, for creating wine. (Drink wine.) Thanks for creating produce. (Eat parsley.) Overview: Once we were slaves in Egypt. Now we’re free. That’s why we’re doing this.”

And if people are just enduring a seder to assuage guilt, that’s not good either. “Judaism doesn’t last if you’re only doing it for your grandmother,” Jacobson said.

But a focused half-hour conversation about the themes and history of the Passover story — that can work. “The whole point of the seder, from its early medieval origins through today, is to be an educational moment where the whole family gets together and contemplates themes of freedom and slavery and exodus,” she said.

Kopman, the book’s author, addressed the “what’s essential?” question in two ways, first with an anecdote, then with a scholarly examination. (Needless to say, he grew up in New York, and as a child experienced long seders, conducted in Hebrew.)

First, he recalled the reaction to his book when he was at a trade show at the Javits Convention Center in New York City, wearing a button that read “30 Minute Seder.”

“The Orthodox would see it and say, ‘that’s a *shanda* [a shame, a scandal], it takes at least six hours.’

“The non-Jews who’d never heard of a Passover would say ‘a ceder — what’s that?’

“And the Reform Jews would say ‘30 minutes — where can I get it?’ ”

As for the more religious answer, Kopman emphasizes that his book is “rabbinically approved” by an ordained rabbi and says that even now — 350,000 copies later — the question about what to keep in and what to skip

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“The longest section is the “Maggid,” he said in an e-mail interview, referring to the retelling of the story of the Exodus from Egypt and the first Passover.

“If we cut that out, it would save close to 10 minutes. The Maggid, however, is the most important part of the Seder.”

Cutting out the traditional and upbeat “Dayenu” song would have also saved a few minutes, he explained. “But many would complain that it’s missing, even though it is not an essential part of the Seder from a Torah point of view. And it’s fun to shout out Dayenu!, so the kids love that part.”

Bottom line: Kopman says his Haggadah eliminates most of the “fluff.”

In Cambridge, Laura Zigman is starting to think about her own Passover. Zigman, the best-selling novelist, initially cringed when she heard about the “30 Minute Seder.”

“That long?!” she thought. “For those of us who have already abbreviated our seders to like, 15 minutes, a 30-minute version isn’t doing me any favors.”

But then she did “seder math” and revised her answer. “If you’re running the seder you should get to do a way-shorter one without shame because you’ve spent probably 90 hours preparing. But if you attend a seder you should resign yourself to sitting through a longer seder without complaint because you haven’t done anything except stop at Whole Foods to pick up the chocolate-covered matzah and then replate it so it looks like you made it yourself.”

Meanwhile, as of presstime, Hanukkah was still eight days.