

Why is this night observed by so many Christian organizations?

Increasingly, churches in many areas of the country celebrate Passover seders

By Melinda Greenberg
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Editor's Note: In the Charlotte area, members of both Temple Beth El and Temple Israel have increasingly been invited to lead, or participate in, seder meals every spring at area churches. Last month, I co-lead, along with Walter and Elizabeth Klein and Shari Naman, a seder at Covenant Presbyterian Church attended by 190 members of that congregation. The church was grateful for our participation and extremely respectful of the Jewish tradition. They sought our guidance throughout the three-month planning process to insure that the seder would thoroughly maintain a Jewish, rather than Christian, flavor. As Christians everywhere become more aware of, and willing to recognize and honor, the Jewishness of Jesus, churches have developed a great interest in what we, as Jews, have to offer them in terms of helping them understand the roots of their own tradition. For the most part, interfaith outreach programs — such as seder-sharing — are positive experiences and lead to increased mutual understanding and respect. But we must also be mindful that seders that take place at churches, especially those churches that don't seek Jewish guidance, may have little or no impact in terms of educating, or positively impacting, Christians about Judaism in any real sense.

For years, Rabbi Seymour Essrog, spiritual leader of Beth Shalom of Carroll County, Maryland, has conducted Passover seders in Baltimore area churches. Rabbi Essrog views the seders as an effort among Christians to discover the Jewish roots of Christianity. The seders are "purely Jewish experiences," he said. "It's a nice thing to do for interfaith relations."

Pastor Richard McCullough, of the Wesley/Freedom United Methodist Church, in Eldersburg, Maryland, said he invited Rabbi Essrog to conduct a seder for his congregation this year to show respect for the "living tradition" of the Jewish community. "It is our practice to work ecumenically with others," said Pastor McCullough, who expects to fill the church's fellowship hall with 125 congregants.

While the Methodist movement encourages its churches to host Passover seders on an occasional basis, and only under the leadership

of a rabbi, churches of many other denominations are hosting seders that have been retooled with images from the life of Jesus. It is particularly common in Messianic congregations, such as Jews for Jesus, a worldwide evangelical movement that proclaims Jesus the Messiah of Israel and the savior of the world.

Jewish and non-Jewish theologians alike find the trend very disturbing. "Christian seders expropriate a holiday that doesn't belong to Christians. It is theologically suspect and ethically wrong," said Christopher Leighton, executive director of the Institute for Christian-Jewish Studies, an independent organization that forges new relationships between the two groups. "To superimpose Christological meaning on the seder removes Jews from their own story."

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In a Christian seder, for instance, the three matzot symbolize the Holy Trinity: the Father, Son and the Holy Spirit. The middle matzah or afikomen is broken to represent Christ's crucifixion, wrapped in white linen and hidden, which symbolizes burial. Afikomen, according to one Christian service, is the only Greek word in the Hebrew service and means "I have come and will come again."

In the Jewish seder, the three pieces of matzah represent the divisions of the Jewish people: Kohain, Levi and Israel. The afikomen, defined as a Greek word for "dessert" by many Jewish scholars, is eaten at the end of the seder on the first night of Passover, so the taste of matzah might linger in one's mouth all night.

Mark Powers, national director of Jews for Judaism, a full-time anti-missionary, anti-cult organization working within the Jewish community, said applying a Christian inter-

pretation to Passover symbols is "patently insulting" to Jews. He hopes to soon have a list debunking the Christian interpretations of the seder on the organization's web site, <http://www.jewsforjudaism.org>.

Christian seders are usually held by congregations eager to explore Jesus' Jewish origins and replicate the Last Supper, which is thought to have been a Passover seder. The Christian Bible teaches that during the Last Supper Jesus foretold his own death and told his disciples that the wine they drank was his blood, the unleavened bread his body. Some of the criticism of Christian seders stems from the debate over whether the Last Supper was, in fact, a Passover seder. Rabbi Michael Cook, a professor of Intertestamental and Early Christian Literature at the Hebrew Union College — Jewish Institute of Religion in Cincinnati, believes it was not. "There is no evidence that the seder existed as early as Jesus' day," wrote Rabbi Cook, who is described by the school as possibly the only rabbi in the United States with a doctorate in New Testament.

In his position paper on Christian celebrations of Passover, Rabbi Cook continues, "Since Jesus was a Jew, it is, of course, conceivable — or even probable — that he customarily himself celebrated Passover. But if so, he would have observed it as did other Jews of his day, by bringing a lamb to be sacrificed in the Temple, and then eating it, together with unleavened bread, in the environs of Jerusalem, and recalling in connection with this meal the escape of his ancestors from bondage to Pharaoh, i.e., the exodus from Egypt."

"This practice would in no way have constituted a seder. The seder itself seems to have been a response to the fall of the Temple and to the consequent cessation of the sacrificial cult decades after Jesus' death. Today's Christian haggadahs, expanding the Jewish liturgy, thus reflect on historical anachronism."

Melinda Greenberg is the Lifestyles Editor for the Baltimore Jewish Times. ✪



Point of View

Each issue of the CJN features an article written by one of the rabbis active in the Charlotte Community.

This Month:
Rabbi Robert S. Kasman
Temple Israel

What defines an "enemy"?

When you find your enemy's ox or his donkey wandering, return it. Return it to him! (Exodus 23:4)

Does this text imply that if you find your friend's ox or donkey straying you can keep it?

Manners are for your enemies more than they are for your friends. The fact that you do not like people does not justify treating them poorly.

"Enemy" is the term we use for the people making war on our country. It is also the word we use for the competition. It is even the word we use for people within our own community with whom we disagree.

During World War II, studies of human psychology were used to develop tools to dehumanize the enemy. Soldiers did not shoot at "people," they destroyed "targets." Their behavior was not only criminal; it was barbarism, which needed to be erased. The war machine of the free world needed to move to end some true horrors. The killing machine of the other side needed to move people to perpetrate real horrors. Dehumanization was key to the successful body count on both sides.

We should not dehumanize the non-military enemies. Remember when politicians said, "I can't talk about my worthy opponent, but I can speak to the issue"? Advertisements referred to "Brand X." Ball players were sportsmen, not athletes. We are better off when competi-

tors remember that they are not Yitzhak Rabin and Yasser Arafat. They can shake hands without thinking about blood.

A house in which there is dissension will be destroyed in the end. (Derekh Eretz Zuta 9)

I am a product of the divided Jewish Theological Seminary. The school was split on the issue of ordination of women. We had two separate minyanim under one roof. One service was egalitarian, encouraging full participation by women. The other was traditional, with separate seating and prayer led by men.

Feelings about the issue were hot, but everyone tried to be polite. We were encouraged to remember that both sides of the issue were the side of heaven. At one meeting, Saul Leiberman (z"l) stood up and said, "I oppose the ordination of women, but if I were in favor, I could think of the following text, that would be an excellent support for that position."

"Enemies" used in a community sense should not be the same as "enemies" in a military sense. An ability to remember that the person with whom I disagree is not a target but a Jew is the core of a healthy Shalom Park.

R. Eliezer ben Jacob said, "When an admirable and refined man allows a vulgar word to issue from his mouth, he is like a banker's hall with a tanner's drainpipe running through its middle." (*Derekh Eretz Rabbah 3*) ✪

"On Jews and Christians" - A weekend of Christian-Jewish Dialogue

(Continued from page 1)

Friday, May 8, 10:00 AM - 12:00 noon: Interfaith Clergy Institute (for area clergy members only): Dr. Cook will present "The Disputation Between the Church and Synagogue in Medieval and Renaissance Art: Implications for Christian and Jewish Theology Today." The lecture, to be held in the JCC's Gorelick Hall, will be followed by lunch at Temple Beth El. This program is sponsored in cooperation with the Jewish Chautauqua Society and the Blumenthal Foundation. RSVP to Temple Beth El, 366-1948.

Friday, May 8, following Friday evening Shabbat services, 8:00 PM, Temple Beth El: "Symbols of Judaism in Famous Christian Painting: Why They're There and What They Mean." Dr. Cook will present visuals of Jewish motifs embedded in scenes of the Annunciation, the Nativity, and Adorations by the Magi, exploring what they convey about the relationship between

Christianity and Judaism. The evening's talk is open to the public; no reservations are required.

Saturday, May 9, 8:30 AM breakfast, 9:00 - 11:00 AM seminar, Myers Park Baptist Church, 1931 Selwyn Avenue: "Ancient Rabbinic Texts on Jesus: Their Abiding Impact on Christian-Jewish Dialogue Today." Please RSVP to Myers Park Baptist Church, 334-7232.

Sunday, May 10, 9:45 AM - Myers Park Baptist Church: During the church's "Adult Forum," Dr. Cook will discuss "Jewish Approaches to the New Testament: A Critique and Defense." Attendance at the Adult Forum is open to the public. No reservations are required.

Sunday, May 10, 11:00 AM - Myers Park Baptist Church Sanctuary: Dr. Cook will deliver a sermon during worship, entitled "Putting Food Where the Lambs Can Get It." Dr. Cook's sermon is open to the community. Reservations are not necessary.

Rabbi Michael Cook is the Sol and Arlene Bronstein Professor of Judaeo-Christian Studies at Hebrew Union College - Jewish Institute of Religion in Cincinnati, Ohio. Dr. Cook travels widely, addressing Jewish and Christian audiences, including academicians and clergy, throughout North America. His numerous publications cover a broad range of topics related to Jewish-Christian relations. He is currently at work on a major book entitled *Removing the Veil: Modern Jews and the New Testament*.

All programs presented by Dr. Cook, except the Interfaith Clergy Institute, are free and open to the public. For details on any of the weekend's events, please contact either Temple Beth El, 366-1948, or Myers Park Baptist Church, 334-7232.

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Phone

(voice mail after office hours)

Office 366-5007 ext 268

FAX 704-365-4507

e-mail: scannon@vnet.net

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