

LONG ISLAND / RELIGION

NYC group updating Passover plagues to address rising antisemitism



An NYC group is modernizing the reciting of ancient plagues at Passover to recognize a rise of antisemitism and the need of the faithful to speak out against it more forcefully. Credit: AP / Stace Maude

By **Bart Jones**

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Passover traditionally involves a recitation of 10 plagues the faithful believe God inflicted on Egypt amid the Exodus more than 3,000 years ago: Rivers turning to blood and swarms of frogs and locusts tormenting people among them.

With this year's holiday starting at sundown Wednesday and continuing through April 13, a Manhattan-based group is trying to modernize the Passover ritual by focusing on what they call an

alarming growth in antisemitism. Wednesday night is the first of two consecutive nighttime dinners called seders.

It is the most popular and celebrated holiday of the Jewish year.

[JewBelong](#), a website co-founded by Manhattan resident Archie Gottesman, is adjusting the recitation to include more relevant themes.

One new plague, for instance, is silence when faced with bigotry.

"From tucking your Star of David necklace into your T-shirt, to letting an antisemitic slur slide, to not using your platform for good," reads one of the updated recitations, "if we assimilate out of fear and abandon our Jewishness, the bigots win."

Adopting the new approach includes adding black coffee to the traditional foods used in the seder as a way to symbolically get people to "wake up" to antisemitism that "is growing like crazy in this country," Gottesman said.

The coffee, she added, is meant to show "that antisemitism is normalized in a way that it never was before."

Antisemitic incidents rose 36% nationwide in 2022, with 3,697 instances of assault, harassment or vandalism, according to the Anti-Defamation League. That's the highest number since the group began tracking incidents of antisemitism annually in 1979.

Passover is a remembrance of the ancient Hebrews' historic Exodus and escape from slavery in Egypt 3,300 years ago. The weeklong celebration carries with it a message of faith, freedom, defiance and hope.

On Wednesday and Thursday, many Jews will mark the start of the holiday with festive seders, which generally take place the first and second nights of Passover. Children ask four questions about the Passover ritual, and their parents respond by retelling the Exodus story.

Alysia Reiner, a volunteer firefighter in Saltaire on Fire Island, said she will be using the JewBelong program at her seder dinners this year.

'I think we are at a moment where we need deeper awareness and however we need to do that is crucially important,' she said. "Sometimes we need to change tradition to wake us up."

She added, "I love the idea of coffee."

Gottesman said she expects many people on Long Island and in New York City to adopt her group's approach. Its website attracts about 400,000 users a year from throughout the U.S. and overseas, she said.

The website includes a printable Haggadah, or guidebook or script, to the revised seder.

Another new plague is being "self-centered."

It says: " 'I've never experienced antisemitism, so how bad could it be?' Well, very. Even if you have not experienced it, your people have, your community has, your family has. Isn't that enough?"

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