

Rabbi: Staying Healthy More Important Than Passover Traditions

Brian Brehm, *The Winchester Star*, April 3, 2020

WINCHESTER — In the midst of a global pandemic, Jews are preparing to celebrate their ancestors' survival of the 10 plagues sent by God.

"There's no small amount of irony there," Rabbi Scott Sperling, leader of [Beth El Congregation](#) at 520 Fairmont Ave. in Winchester, said in a telephone interview on Thursday. "We're thankful for surviving plagues during a plague."

Passover, the most widely celebrated Jewish holiday, is a seven-day recognition of the biblical Exodus that led to the Egyptian pharaoh releasing Jews from slavery. Along with memorializing the 10 plagues that forced the pharaoh to free the Jews — water turning to blood, frogs, lice, flies, livestock pestilence, boils, hail, locusts, darkness and the killing of firstborn children — Passover is a celebration of spring, renewal and taking responsibility for yourself and the community.

This year, Passover begins on Wednesday evening and ends on the evening of April 16. Traditionally, the first two nights are observed with a seder — a festive meal with ritual foods and retellings of the Exodus story — that often involve large gatherings.

Not this year, though. This is the age of COVID-19 and social distancing, so Sperling said Beth El is foregoing the usual Thursday night Passover seder that typically attracts 60 people to his temple's social hall.

"That's not a safe thing to do," he said.

Instead, Sperling said, members of Beth El's congregation will gather in "Zoom rooms" — a reference to the Zoom videoconferencing service — to celebrate Passover together from the safety of their own homes. Sperling's Zoom room is his kitchen, where he plans to sit at the table and lead next week's seder service.

Finding the foods needed for seder can be a challenge. Anyone who has visited a local grocery store lately has seen plenty of empty shelves and refrigerated meat cases containing little more than pork — a strict no-no for traditional Jewish diets.

Sperling said some members of his congregation are vegetarians, so kosher meat is not a concern for them. Others are being forced to change their shopping habits.

“We ordered all of our Passover supplies from Amazon this year,” Sperling said. “I would prefer to shop locally, but it’s just not a viable option this year.”

Sperling has advised temple members to be flexible and make do with what they can find. For example, they may not be able to buy fresh matzah, which is an unleavened flatbread that is the main food of Passover, but they can probably find a boxed matzah mix in a grocery store’s kosher section that can be prepared at home.

“Don’t go to four different grocery stores to look for Passover items,” Sperling said. “As important as Passover is, staying healthy has got to be the most important thing at this point.”

While this year’s Passover celebration may be unlike any that has come before, Sperling said he and his congregation are grateful that technology has made it possible for them to gather together in cyberspace “and send virtual hugs.”

“Extraordinary circumstances call for extraordinary flexibility,” he said. “We’re doing the best we can with what we’ve got to work with.”

For more information about Beth El Congregation, visit bethelcongregation.org. Links to online services are available at the temple’s [Facebook](#) page.

— Contact Brian Brehm at bbrehm@winchesterstar.com