The Gateways Haggadah

A GUIDE FOR PARENTS AND TEACHERS

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Does the World Need Another Haggadah?

There are dozens, if not hundreds of Haggadot currently in publication. If so many variations of the same book already exist, one might ask: “Does the world truly need another Haggadah?” As the authors of a Haggadah, our answer is yes! A variety of Haggadot help make Passover seder enjoyable for families and children. However, these books did not address the needs of a small but valuable population within the Jewish community: children with special needs.

Gateways: Access to Jewish Education is a program that serves students with special needs in the Greater Boston area. Before coming to Gateways, many families found it difficult, even impossible, to include their children with special needs at the Passover table. A Passover seder can be long, confusing, and tedious—even for adults! It’s no surprise that children, especially those with special needs, tend to struggle at Passover seders. It was painful for us to hear families tell us about their children having tantrums at the seder table, or playing alone in their rooms while the rest of the family welcomed Passover.

Over the course of several years a Haggadah was written and refined for our students to use in Gateways classes to prepare for Passover, and then take home for the holiday. We hoped that intensive preparation for the seder, combined with an accessible Haggadah, would make seders fulfilling for every member of the family.

While this Haggadah was originally written for students with special needs, the feedback we got from families was that the features which made this Haggadah accessible to children with special needs were really helping all members of the family. A pre-school aged sibling who couldn't read yet was easily able to follow the picture directions. A parent who never attended Hebrew school not only followed along with the symbol prayers, but for the first time began to understand what the prayers meant. The benefits of modifications originally made for children with disabilities go beyond this Haggadah’s original audience. This is truly a Haggadah for all abilities.
Why is This Haggadah Different?

What makes this Haggadah appropriate for student of all abilities? Below we will take a tour of some of this Haggadah's unique features.

**Mayer Johnson Symbols**

This Haggadah includes hundreds of Mayer-Johnson picture communication symbols to illustrate the meaning of prayers and to summarize paragraphs of text. These clear, engaging picture symbols are commonly used in special education classrooms to facilitate communication and provide literacy support.

We supplemented the original Mayer-Johnson symbol set with dozens of new symbols to illustrate some words and concepts unique to Judaism and the Passover seder.

Many children, particularly those on the autism spectrum, think visually and are drawn to symbols and pictures. These visuals can hold their attention and interest much better than text alone. In addition to making the Haggadah more attractive, Mayer Johnson symbols convey meaning and aid comprehension. One way this is achieved by using the symbols in the Haggadah next to paragraphs of text. The symbols provide a visual summary of each paragraph, which helps focus children on the main point of each paragraph. Symbols also aid children, especially children who are not yet reading, in understanding what each paragraph is about.
Pre-readers can ‘read’ the symbols, and those who can read still benefit from the use of symbols due to improved reading comprehension.

The other way symbols are used in the Haggadah is to illustrate the Hebrew words of blessings and songs. Many people recite Hebrew blessings and songs at Passover each year without giving any thought to what those Hebrew words mean. This is a pity, because understanding the prayers and songs makes the seder a more enjoyable and meaningful experience. Not only will children have a greater appreciation for the Hebrew words they say, but understanding those words will likely help them learn the songs and blessings faster; it is easier to learn a meaningful phrase than it is to learn a string of nonsense words. Additionally, pre-readers and those who struggle with reading transliterations can learn how to ‘read’ the symbols.

**Step-by-step Picture Directions**

Directions are often given to children in one big clump: “Take a vegetable off of the plate and dip it in salt water, and then say the blessing before you eat it.” This list of directions can be a lot for a child to remember, especially for a child who has special needs or executive functioning issues.

![Picture of children holding vegetables](image1)

Take one vegetable.  

![Picture of children dipping vegetables](image2)

Dip the vegetable in the bowl of salt water.

Children are more likely to remember directions and follow them correctly when they are broken down into small steps and delivered one by one. It is also easier to teach students a multi-step
process when directions are broken down. Children can learn the steps one at a time, not moving on until the next step until they have mastered the previous step.

Each direction in the Haggadah is illustrated with a photograph, so even students who can’t read the words have the opportunity to follow directions independently. These photos also serve as a helpful visual aid for students who are able to read, ensuring their comprehension of the directions.

**Explaining Why**

Haggadot all tell us what to do on Passover. However, few clearly explain the meaning of our symbolic objects and actions. This is vital when working with younger children and children with special needs, who can process concrete ideas well but have trouble grasping symbols and metaphors.

The roasted **egg** has a round shape. If you run your finger around an egg you will always come around to the point where you began. The round shape of an egg reminds us that every year we go around the same cycle of months and seasons.

This Haggadah aims to explain the meaning behind each symbol and ritual in a concise and clear manner that will be understandable to most children.

**Giving Kids an ‘Out’**

Some children don’t enjoy vegetables, and very few look forward to eating maror! Additionally, children with special needs may have sensory issues that make them averse to certain tastes or textures. It is understandable that children may become distressed when it comes time to eat something at the seder that they don’t like.
This Haggadah aims to stop that distress before it starts. Whenever the Haggadah directs children to eat or drink, there is a colorful bubble next to that direction which tells children to simply put down the food or drink if they don't want to try it.

![Image of a child drinking a beverage with a bubble that says, "Drink your wine or grape juice.*"]

These little asides give children an appropriate way to refuse food or drink, so there is no need for raised voices or whining. It also relieves children of anxiety to know that they are in control of what they eat and drink at the seder.

These bubbles are especially valuable to children on the autism spectrum and any other children who may be rigid about following the rules exactly as they're written down. If no alternative to eating a food is listed, then they may feel they have no choice. Even a parent's whispered reassurance that they don't need to eat something might not be accepted, because what they say deviates from the written directions. Therefore, we hoped by adding these bubbles to the Haggadah we would make refusing a food or drink ‘officially’ okay.

**Inclusive Photographs**

Our Haggadah is inclusive, not only because it is accessible to children of all abilities, but because its pages are filled with pictures of children of all abilities. The children and adults featured in this Haggadah have visible disabilities, invisible disabilities, or no disabilities at all. They are just a group of people enjoying Passover and each other's company.
A Modern Four Children

Many parents, especially parents of children with special needs, struggle with the story of the four children. The shallow characterizations of children as ‘wicked’ or ‘simple’ can be painful for parents whose children are often in trouble at school, or whose children are falling farther and farther behind their classmates.

Instead, we decided to classify the children not by seemingly permanent and insurmountable personality traits, but by their initial feelings about Passover. Their feelings about Passover and reactions to Passover are things that can be managed and changed. Now instead of a wicked child, there is a child who acts out because of the unexpected changes to her routine. Instead of a simple child, there is a child who is curious and has lots of questions.

The story of the four children can also serve as a guide to parents. Perhaps parents will recognize their children in one of our four children. In the story, each child's parents use clever strategies to help prepare their children for Passover. Parents at home reading the Haggadah can use these suggestions to help their own children as Passover approaches.
Including the Story of Passover

Traditional Passover Haggadot do not include the entire Passover story. Moses’s name isn’t even mentioned in a traditional Haggadah so we can focus more closely on God’s role in freeing the Jews. So much of the Passover seder is meaningful only if we know the Passover story.

THE PASSOVER STORY

The Jews were slaves to King Pharaoh in Egypt. They worked hard every day.

We chose to include the story so it would be fresh in children’s minds.

If the Passover story was not included in this Haggadah, parents would need to find another book to tell the Passover story for their children. While this is easy for some parents, not everybody has the time to look for a book that tells the story of Passover in a way that is appropriate for their children. Adding the Passover story to this Haggadah makes it more convenient for many parents.

Now What?

You’ve bought the Haggadah, but that’s only half the battle; simply possessing this Haggadah does not guarantee a successful seder. The Haggadah is a tool that can help children achieve success, and it is a tool that parents and teachers might need help learning how to use.

In the following pages you will find a teacher’s guide to using the Haggadah to prepare children for Passover, a parent’s guide to using the Haggadah to prepare children for Passover, and tips for running a successful seder at home or in the classroom.
Preparing for Passover

Exposure Your Children to the Haggadah

Don't wait until the last minute to buy your Haggadah! Children feel more comfortable with familiar objects, and they may reject a new book at first. You don't want that rejection to happen at the seder. Instead, exposing children to the Haggadah several times before Passover makes it more likely that they will feel comfortable with it in time for the seder.

Tips:

- Buy the Haggadah a few months in advance and put it in on your classroom bookshelf or somewhere they can access it.

- Open the Haggadah up to any page and play ‘I Spy’ with the illustrations.

- Use the Haggadah scavenger hunt (see appendix) to encourage your students to look through the Haggadah.

Familiarize your Students with the Symbols

Every word of the prayers and songs in the Haggadah is illustrated with Mayer-Johnson symbols. These symbols represent the meaning of the Hebrew words, and also provide a way for pre-readers to ‘read’ from the Haggadah.

Tips:

Copy the blessings from the book. Cut the rectangles with the symbols out and use them for a variety of activities, including:

- Playing Memory
- Playing Go Fish
- Making Bingo boards and playing Bingo
- Mixing them up and putting them in the correct order
- Hide the symbols around the classroom and let the children find them in a scavenger hunt
Create Seder Activity Centers

Practicing the different parts of the seder in advance will make children better prepared for when Passover starts. Not only will children have some level of mastery of the skills they need, but they will have less anxiety because they will know what to expect.

One effective way to give children a chance to practice the skills they will need to participate in the seder is through activity centers. An activity center has three elements: the page of directions that accompany a task in the Haggadah, the blessing from the Haggadah, and the additional materials needed for each task. For example, in addition to the directions and the blessings, the kadesh center would have a Kiddush cup and a small bottle, and the karpas center would have a plate of parsley and a bowl of salt water.

In the weeks leading up to Passover, you can set up several centers in your classroom. It may not be possible to have the centers for every part of the seder in a single day. If you only have one day to prepare for Passover, choose the centers that you think will be the most engaging for your students. If you have more than one day, then you can choose a few centers to do each week.

If you have several centers available, you can make a centers passport or checklist for your students. This provides them with a guide to what activities are available, and lets them know how much they need to do. As the children go around to each center, they can check off, stamp, or put a sticker on their passports. Stamping a passport is a wonderful way to motivate students to try every activity.
Tips for a Successful Seder

Explicitly State Expected Behaviors

There are expectations for how children should behave at a seder: they should sit at the table, stay on the same page as everybody else, not eat without permission or saying a blessing, etc. As adults and experienced seder-goers, we know what behaviors are expected from us at a seder. But children will not know how we expect them to behave unless we tell them. Just as you would teach your children how to behave in a restaurant before going out for dinner, you should teach them how to behave at a seder before Passover. When children know what is expected of them, they are more likely to live up to those expectations.

Tips:

- If your child has attended a seder in the past, ask for their input on what they think expected behaviors should be.
- Illustrate the list of expected behaviors with symbols, drawings, or photos. Children are more likely to comprehend text when it is accompanied by graphics.
- Make up a song, chant, or hand motions that go along with the expected behaviors. Using music and movements make the list easier and more fun to remember.
- Keep the list of expected behaviors in a visible spot during the seder, so your children can remember what the behavioral expectations are.

Catch your Children Being Good

One effective way to increase the behaviors you want to see at a Passover seder is to reward your child for them. Children are motivated by positive attention and other rewards, so they will be more likely to behave in a way that gets them what they want. As adults we often focus so much on reacting to children’s negative behaviors that we forget to praise children when they’re behaving well.
**Tips:**

At least once every ten minutes, try to praise your child. Praise can be verbal, such as saying “good job for __________,” or it can be physical, such as giving a high five. And praise can be given for an action as big as reciting the entire Ma Nishtana, or as small as wearing a kippah for a minute.

Copy the order of the seder or download the placemat from the Gateways website. If your child follows expected behaviors during a certain portion of the seder, reward them with a fun sticker that they can stick onto the schedule.

Allow your children to earn breaks by following the expected behaviors. By earning a break, they can go and recharge their batteries so they'll be ready to continue with their best behavior at the seder.

If children are accustomed to earning tokens at school, they may also enjoy earning tokens that they can use towards a reward after the seder.

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**Use the Schedule**

The order of the seder may be the most important page in the Haggadah. For children with special needs, a seder can already be a source of heightened anxiety because it is a change in their regular routine. Not knowing what to expect during a seder can make that anxiety even worse. Children want to know what to expect in order to feel comfortable.

The schedule provides children with a lot of information. First, it lets them know what is going to happen and in what order it will happen. In addition to reducing anxiety, knowing what part of the seder is going to come next helps a child transition from one part of the seder to the next. Additionally, the schedule lets children know how much they have done and how much more they are expected to do. We all ration out our energy and attention based on how much longer we think we need to focus and be engaged. Having a schedule helps children anticipate this and prepare themselves to focus.
Having a schedule also stops a child from asking “When are we going to eat?” every five minutes. A child can independently check the schedule to see what is going to happen next instead of asking a parent.

**Tips:**

Copy the seder schedule page or download it from the Gateways website. Put the copied schedule in a page protector or laminate it to make the page more durable.

Go through the entire schedule with your child before the beginning of the seder.

Keep the schedule in a visible place throughout the seder.

If you know a tune for the order of the seder, teach it to your child. They will be more engaged by the music.

Think of a fun way to mark off the completed parts of the seder as you go along.

Maybe you’ll put a star sticker on the completed parts, mark them with a dry erase marker, or maybe you’ll cover them up with plastic frogs. Try to do it in a way that is fun and motivating for your child.

**Schedule Breaks**

It can be difficult for many adults to sit through an entire seder, and even more so for children. Although this seder is designed to take only half an hour, some children may need breaks in order to successfully make it through the entire ceremony. Breaks can help prevent behavioral problems before they start. When the seder is divided by breaks, children are expected to stay engaged at the table for smaller, more manageable chunks of time. Breaks allow children to either move around and let out energy, or lie down to rest and recharge. As a result, they will be better able to focus and participate while they are at the seder table.
The type of break your child can have will depend on your child, your family, and your level of observance. Some children are able to take a break at the table by drawing, playing a game on a phone, or snuggling with a favorite stuffed animal. Other children would prefer to go to another room in order to escape from the stimulation of the seder.

**TIPS:**

- Indicate on the seder schedule when breaks will be, and keep the schedule in a visible place throughout the seder, *or*
- Use a visual timer to show your child how much longer they need to sit until it’s time for a break, *or*
- Allow your child to earn a break by following expected behaviors.
- Give the break reasonable limits that your child is aware of. Use a timer so they know how long their break is and how much time they have left.
- When your child returns from a break, let them know when their next break will be.

*Don’t Start on an Empty Stomach*

It is hard to behave when your stomach is empty! A hungry child can easily be a grumpy child. People usually begin their seders in the afternoon or evening, when a lot of time has passed since lunch. Although many of our parents have told us never to spoil our dinners with a snack, it is a very smart choice to make sure your child is not hungry during the seder.

**TIPS:**

- Give your child a snack about fifteen minutes before the beginning of the seder.
- Make a small amount of food available to snack on during the seder. One snack idea is vegetable platters that can also be used as karpas.
Make sure your child has a cup of water or water bottle that they can drink from freely throughout the seder. When children are well hydrated they will be more likely to feel full.

**Help Your Child Follow Along**

There are lots of things to look at during a Passover seder, and children can easily become distracted. However, in order to be part of the seder, children need to be able to follow along in the Haggadah.

**TIPS:**

If your child is not able or inclined to point to the symbols, point to the symbols yourself, or lightly take your child's hand and guide them to point.

Use a pointer that your child will be attracted to and enjoy using, such as a decorative yad, a colorful straw, or a fun pen.

If your child's attention wanders, tap the page in the correct place to refocus their attention.

**Make it Multisensory**

People learn best and are most engaged when multiple senses are being used. The Haggadah will engage visual learners, while the songs and blessings will engage auditory learners. But there are still steps you can take to engage tactile and kinesthetic learners.

**TIPS:**

Make your seder as musical as possible. If your favorite Passover songs aren't in the Haggadah, print them out and add them to your seder. Accompany your family's singing with small instruments such as maracas, drums, or tambourines.

Add hand motions to the story of Passover. When the Jews were slaves in Egypt [mime swinging a hammer]. When Moses was born [mime holding a baby]. When Moses saw the burning bush [wiggle your fingers to make an imaginary
fire. You might be able to ask your children what hand motions they think are appropriate for each part of the story.

Make a story box by filling a box with small objects that help illustrate the Passover story. For example, use a toy hammer or pyramid to illustrate when the Jews were slaves, use a baby doll and a basket to illustrate when Moses was in the river, and toy frogs during the ten plagues. As you tell the story, take out each object and let your child handle it. Story boxes are a great way of engaging students with visual impairments.

**Assign Your Child a Job**

Having a job gives children an opportunity to participate more fully in the seder. Focusing on that job can help some children stay more engaged. Additionally, certain jobs can get children up out of their seats so they can burn off a little bit of energy in an appropriate way. Some jobs for children might include passing out foods, such as karpas or maror, breaking the matzah, reading certain blessings, or counting to three at the beginning of each song to make sure everybody starts together.

**TIPS:**

- If your child is already familiar with a Passover seder, ask them if there is a job they would like.
- Make sure that your child has mastered the skills that they need to complete their job before the seder.
- Indicate on the schedule when your child's job will be. As their job approaches, let your child know that it's coming up soon.
- Give your child a lot of praise for completing the job.
Appendix A: Haggadah Scavenger Hunt

Can you find these things in the Haggadah?

- matzah
- moon and stars
- goat
- pyramid
- Seder plate
- Pharaoh
- something green
- matzah ball soup
- flag
- Miriam
- kiddush cup
- kippah
Appendix B: Sample Communication Board for Passover

Yes

Let's sing
I can read this one
Where is the afikomen?
Turn the page
I want a break
I'm having fun
I'm bored
I'm tired
I'm hungry
I'm thirsty
Grape juice
Wine
Water
Matzah
Egg
Maror
Charoset
Karpas
Soup
Dessert
Yummy
Yucky
More
Enough
All done
Appendix C: Sample List of Expected Behaviors

- sit up in your chair
- follow along in the Haggadah
- wait to eat
- ask if you need a break