

United States

Vaccinations and tests enable some families to gather for Passover Seders this year

By Shira Hanau_ March 5, 2021



A family celebrates the Passover Seder with other family members joining via Zoom, April 8, 2020. (Ezra Shaw/Getty Images)

(JTA) — The Darvick family did Jewish holidays by videoconference long before a pandemic forced them.

“We call it Skypanukkah,” Elliot Darvick told The New York Times in December 2011, when the family was featured in an article about celebrating Hanukkah over Skype. So when Zoom Seders suddenly became standard last year, the Darvicks were prepared.

But this Passover, the Darvicks will be together again.

By the time the holiday begins later this month, both Debra Darvick, 64, and her husband, Martin, 73, will have been fully vaccinated against COVID-19, as will one of their children. Those vaccinations are making the couple feel comfortable getting together with their kids and grandkids from Chicago and New York at their

home in Birmingham, Michigan.

“We’ve Zoomed with Olivia a lot. I haven’t felt totally bereft,” Debra Darvick said of her oldest granddaughter, whom the Darvicks had hoped to visit every month or so but mostly saw over Zoom. “But I know what we’ve missed.”

While Purim 2020 may have been the first Jewish holiday to be altered by the then-novel coronavirus, Passover was likely the one in which the most North American Jews felt the impact. As the most widely observed Jewish holiday ritual in the United States, according to the Pew Research Center’s 2013 study of American Jewry, Passover Seders mark a moment where large family get-togethers double as an opportunity to pass down traditions from one generation to the next.

For many households last year, those gatherings were replaced by small Seders among members of the same households or conducted over Zoom.

But this year, with some 54 million Americans having received at least a first dose of the vaccine as of March 4 and with the rate of vaccinations ramping up to approximately 2 million doses a day, some families are considering ways to celebrate in person.

While Americans wait for new guidance from the Centers for Disease Control as to which activities can be resumed safely after vaccination, many experts have said those who are vaccinated can likely gather in small groups with others who have taken the COVID shot without taking on major risk.

“Interactions of people who are fully vaccinated with other people who are fully vaccinated (or immune due to previous infection) likely come with a very low risk for everybody involved,” Florian Krammer, a vaccinologist at the Icahn School of Medicine at Mount Sinai in New York City, wrote in a recent Twitter thread about how vaccinated people should think about changing their behaviors.

But in the absence of clear guidelines on how to balance the risks with the benefits of gathering, many have come up with their own plans to gather as safely as possible. For some families, those plans include a strict schedule of quarantining and testing before gathering. For others, vaccinations or recent COVID infections and positive antibody tests mean they feel safe getting together.

For Lesley Herrmann, 74, who lives in Manhattan with her husband, this year’s Seder may include as many as 10 people. The Herrmanns have already been vaccinated, as have many of their relatives with whom they normally share a

Seder. Others in her family who may attend have recovered from COVID and still have antibodies.

For Herrmann, who said Passover is her favorite holiday, this year will still be smaller than the usual 15-20 person Seder she usually hosts. But it will be a major improvement over last year, when she and her husband stayed home and did the Seder by themselves with family joining over Zoom.

“We made haroset and chicken soup, but it was sad,” Lesley Herrmann said. “I’m thinking this year will be a lot more cheerful.”



A woman wears a mask while shopping for Passover items at a grocery store in Overland Park, Kan., April 7, 2020. (Jamie Squire/Getty Images)

For Joel and Fran Grossman, 66 and 70, Passover this year marks a few significant milestones.

To see their son for the first time since the pandemic started and their daughter for the first time since last summer, the couple will fly from Los Angeles to New York and spend the Seders with their children in Brooklyn. The couple wouldn’t have considered making the trip before receiving the second dose of the coronavirus vaccine last month and are still taking precautions — like buying upgraded seats to ensure adequate distancing and holding the Seders outdoors.

They say it's worth it for the opportunity to see their children again after such a long separation.

"Every single mundane task I have to do, maybe normally I'd say what a pain in the butt," Fran Grossman said. "Now I'm saying I'm the luckiest person to be able to afford a safe ticket, to be able to have been vaccinated."

She added: "I'm feeling such gratitude for being able to be in the place and time to be able to do this."

For Adina Avery-Grossman, 59, of Teaneck, New Jersey, planning the Seders is usually a multiweek project replete with spreadsheets to manage her menus and grocery lists. This year, a vestige of those huge spreadsheets lives on in the color-coded calendar she's prepared to keep track of the quarantine and testing schedule her family will undergo to assemble this year.

"We had a meeting and we went over this, and first we called the doctor," Avery-Grossman said of her plan.

The plan requires the guests to limit their activity starting about two weeks before Passover, be tested about a week before the Seder and then stay home while awaiting test results until arriving at the Seder. Adding to Avery-Grossman's peace of mind is that some of her Seder participants will already be vaccinated.

"We told everybody, if it's not really conducive to you, we'll pick it up next year," she said, noting that the plan requires strict adherence to the rules. "But everyone wanted to be together."

Avery-Grossman usually hosts some two dozen guests, suggesting this year's gathering of seven could seem like a sadly small group. But that's two more than last year, when she spent Passover with her husband, daughter, son and daughter-in-law.

"Adding two more people, it feels like we're beginning to make that journey from slavery to freedom. The strictures are opening up again," she said.

Of course, the vaccine rollout continues to be sluggish in parts of the country. While President Joe Biden has announced that the United States will have enough vaccines for all of the country's adults by May, the manufacture and distribution have proven erratic.

For many, this Passover will look much like it did last year: alone but perhaps for the company of faces on a computer screen.



Members of Tzedek Chicago hold a Passover Seder in 2018. (Courtesy of Tzedek Chicago)

Although Rachel Arnold's parents, who live in Rhode Island, have been vaccinated, she does not want to take any risks by visiting them because she goes into an office regularly for her job.

Arnold said she hopes to make this year feel special by looking at her Seder preparations as a fun cooking project.

"I'm going to do a roast chicken and tzimmes. I'm also going to make the chopped liver, and I'm thinking about making matzah ball soup," she said.

But the cooking project doesn't make it any less upsetting that she'll be spending another Seder alone.

"When my parents and I talked about it last year, we thought we'll do it again next year," Arnold said. "I haven't seen my parents for a year and it's really sad."

Lisa Goldman, an editor living in Montreal, is also spending this Passover alone, a far cry from the usual Seders when she would host over a dozen people and spend a week cooking in preparation.

Goldman celebrated the High Holidays by hearing the shofar blasts from her Hasidic neighbors' outdoor holiday services. But at Passover, when Montreal is often still cold and snowy, outdoor celebrations aren't a good option. And the idea of signing onto Zoom for Seder again makes her sad.

"You're going to be sad if you go and sad if you don't go, so it's lose-lose," Goldman said. "I can really see myself lying in bed with a book."



A full table at Lisa Goldman's 2019 Seder. Goldman hopes to host a big Seder again in 2022. (Courtesy of Goldman)

But still, after a year of relentless tragedies, the themes of the Seder this year feel especially resonant for many, particularly with the light at the end of the tunnel provided by the vaccines.

Debra Darvick plans to make those themes tangible this year, with special attention to the fact that her two grandchildren will be part of the Seder. She plans to put blue paper with fish stickers on the walls of her basement stairs, then lead the family up the stairs — a metaphorical Red Sea — to freedom and the Seder table.

"COVID has been constriction and it has been a plague," Darvick said. "So yeah, some of the questions will be what do we hope to do in this coming year? What has this year of constriction meant?"

Avery-Grossman, too, is thinking about what she may hold onto from these pandemic Passovers into future years. While she enjoyed the big, boisterous Seders she hosted in years past, she's not sure she will rush back to that, having enjoyed the smaller Seder with just a few family members.

"Maybe we'll do one big Seder and one really intimate Seder," she said.

But Goldman, after two Passovers alone, is hoping for a triumphant return to her pre-pandemic Passover Seders in 2022, with family and friends together at her apartment for the big event.

"I'll probably have to get an extra table," she said. "I'll make the biggest brisket in history."