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Telling gefilte fish tales

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Like any big holiday meal, tonight's Passover Seder brings out the best and worst in most families. In fact, "When Do We Eat?," the **Lesley Ann Warren** comedy that opened over the weekend, covers just that ground.

Unlike Warren's onscreen husband, most dads don't get dosed with Ecstasy during the meal. Still, all families have their Seder setbacks: burned brisket; matzo balls like lead; political outbursts from uncle Leo, now well past four cups of wine. And don't forget complaints from the cranky peanut gallery about the market price for *afikomen*.

Even so, Passover is more than family dysfunction and lukewarm gefilte fish. For insight, we gathered five folks at midtown's La Carne Grill who might have some thoughts: **Bryan Fogel**, one of the young authors and stars of the play "Jewtopia," which pokes fun at Jewish stereotypes; **Letty Cottin Pogrebin**, an author and founder of Ms. magazine and "feminist Seders"; **Isabel Rose**, the author of "The JAP Chronicles," the Random House book on Jewish high society soon to be a one-woman play; **Rabbi Joseph Potasnik**, host of WABC Radio's "Religion on the Line" and head of the New York Board of Rabbis, and "When Do We Eat's" Warren.

While they all have radically different Seders - and some, like Fogel and Warren, haven't attended for awhile - they did agree that the meal still serves up hope, family ties and plenty of stories. Here's a few they shared with us.

Lesley Ann Warren

ON MONTREAL MEMORIES: "I grew up here, in Manhattan ... and my mother's family migrated from Montreal. So we would go to Montreal for Passover to see my grandmother and my great-grandmother and all my uncles and aunts and celebrate the Seder there. And they were very warm, and very loving and fun, but I don't remember the kind of chaos, that for instance, that the movie I'm in sort of glorifies."

ON BEING JEWISH NO MATTER WHAT: "When I was about 14 or 15 I started to move into a different spiritual base for myself. My brother and my mother and my dad continued in reformed Judaism here in New York. So I guess I'm with [Bryan Fogel] in the sort of 'bad Jew' department. But I don't really feel that way. ... I've been talking about this because I've been talking about the movie. And I choose for myself not to follow the religion, but I feel culturally identified with Judaism."

Bryan Fogel

ON INVITING STRANGERS TO SEDER: "Seders for me were always a crazy experience, because my mother was very involved in sponsoring the [immigrating] Russian Jews. ... So [by the time I left for college] it was the six of us, and like 20 Russians. And they're all speaking Russian. And it was really ridiculous, because one of them, the one who spoke English, was translating for the others and the whole Seder would be, 'Da, da, da.' "

ON PASSOVER AND DAD'S FAITH: "My father grew up reform. But every Passover, I don't know what happened, he basically found religion. Literally, you know, he's got like three hours of speeches prepared. So Passover became something that I kind of would dread every year, because it was the day that my father all of sudden became like the super Jew."

ON PASSOVER AND HIS PLAY: "What's funny, when Sam [Wolfson] and I wrote the show, our show, the pivotal scene is all about the Seder. And we wrote the Seder scene, the father of the show is basically my dad, and the mother in the show is basically my mom. ... And when we first wrote "Jewtopia," in place of the sister was all the Russians, and they keep interrupting the Seder, and that got changed to the bratty sister because on a production level you couldn't pay to have six people come on stage every night and not speak a word."

Rabbi Joseph Potasnik

ON THE MEANING OF A MODERN SEDER: I come from a Holocaust background. My parents came here after the

war, in '48. ... And Seder for me, growing up, was always something both sweet and sorrow. I think Shakespeare wrote, 'parting is such sweet sorrow,' he took it from a Passover Haggadah - because you take the bitterness, the bitter herbs and you dip it into the haroset, the sweetness. So, I would hear stories of those who were lost, but at the same time, my family always felt, you know, you look back to the past, you have to look forward to the future. And [my parents] would make sure that at the Seder table there was always room for someone else. ... It's always finding room for those who have been excluded."

ON PASSOVER PRISON HUMOR: "I was chaplain at a federal prison for a number of years The prisoners would always say to me, invariably, 'When do we open up the door for Elijah? That's the most important part of the Seder for us - just open that door for Elijah.'"

ON WHETHER OR NOT YOU REALLY DRINK FOUR CUPS OF WINE: "Did you ever see a Haggadah that's not wine-stained?"

Isabel Rose

ON HAVING THE WORLD'S FANCIEST SEDER: "Our Seders are really wild. I mean, amazing, because I come from a gigantic family. And this year, for the first time, we actually have to hold the Seder in a hotel. Just first cousins, I think we're close to 60, at this point, because we have gone forth and multiplied like crazy. Our Seders are black tie. ... Last year we tried to write black tie optional, but only one person came in a suit."

ON CONSOLING CHAOS: "We talk about the world and politics, and it's incredibly noisy, and one of my uncles always yells at one of the tables for being too loud or ruining it for the children, but it's tremendously joyful. I would never, ever, ever miss a Seder: unimaginable to me."

ON FOOD: "I just want to say that my aunt always served quail, and that should never ever be served. It's the most annoying thing ever. It's all bones. I say go for brisket, I say go for chicken."

ON ATTENDANCE: "I think there was 48 last year. I guess it depends on who got divorced."

Letty Cottin Pogrebin

ON SEDERS AND FEMINISM: "My grandfather ran the Seder in the kittel. The kittel is a long-like sort of robe that you're your supposed to also get married and buried in. ... The first time I ran a Seder, I wore my grandfather's kittel, which was an experience that gave me chills because it embodied the meaning of my life, that I had somehow or other lived to see the day when woman could wear a kittel. ... I didn't notice until I became a feminist that the women were always getting up and serving and clearing and in the kitchen. And it made me very mad because it meant my mother missed the Seder."

ON RETURNING TO JUDAISM (AND SEDERS) LATE IN LIFE:

"I think a Seder is a remarkable ritual. I think it's not an accident that it's a ritual that Jews, no matter how lapsed, come back to. I think it's 85% who do maybe nothing else over the course of the year ... because there's something liberatory about the story, the story of liberation speaks to all of us, and we kind of move it down and set it on top of our own lives, and it becomes a story of hope, it becomes a story of God intervening in history, which repeats over and over."

ON WAITING TOO LONG TO EAT: "We always don't eat until everyone is so ravenous that they end up eating two eggs [that arrive first in the Seder service]. Which is such a terrible mistake, you know, but you're so hungry and the first thing that comes is this huge bowl of eggs."