Maxwell’s golden Haggadah

Tracing a Passover staple from Tennessee through Tarrytown and Teaneck

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Why Maxwell House?

A look at the country’s longest-running promotion — and its local connection

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It is traditional to ask questions at the Passover seder.

There are the four the youngest child traditionally asks, of course, about the details that make this night different. There’s also the challenge the bad son throws out — why is this night special to you?

And then there are the questions that American Jews ask.

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Unlike the questions in the haggadah, which have mainly open-ended answers and are meant to stimulate discussion, the Maxwell House haggadah questions have fairly easy answers.

Elie Rosenfeld of Teaneck owns Joseph Jacobs Advertising, a nearly century-old firm (founded in 1919) that moved to Teaneck from Manhattan a few years ago. Maxwell House began its relationship with the agency in 1923, he said, and printed the first haggadah in 1932.

The relationship seemed unlikely from the beginning. General Foods bought Maxwell House, and then Kraft Foods bought General Foods. But at the beginning, Maxwell House, named after a fancy hotel in Nashville, was made by a small Tennessee-based concern, the Nashville Coffee and Manufacturing Company. It was founded by the wonderfully named Joel Owsey Cheek, who soon renamed it the Cheek-Nee Coffee Company to acknowledge his business partner, John Neal.

Mythology has it that Mr. Cheek was “Colonel Cheek,” Mr. Rosenfeld said, but that piece of information, evocative of the Old South (and therefore particularly ironic when you think of the haggadah’s story of the escape from slavery to freedom), seems not to be true.

The reason the haggadah was created was...
good enough to be apocryphal, but it’s not. Mr. Jacobs, the ad agency owner, who knew Mr. Cheek, pitched the idea of a haggadah as a way to educate Jewish consumers. Many of them were immigrants; many came from cosmopolitan places where coffee was a staple, but many others came from poorer places, shtetls, where coffee had not filtered in. Coffee was new to them.

Once Jews learned to drink coffee, Pesach became a challenge, because of kitniyot.

Kitniyot are legumes, which, according to Torah law, and to Sephardi Jews, are Pesachdik — not forbidden on Passover — but according to the accumulated weight of nearly a thousand years of Ashkenazi tradition are chametz, not allowed on Passover, nonetheless. (There is some give around the edges on the question of eating kitniyot, with the Conservative movement in North America joining its sister movement, Masorti, in Israel, in permitting it to Ashkenazim.)

Legumes are beans. Forbidden on Pesach. Coffee is made from beans. Forbidden on Pesach?

As it turns out, no, not forbidden on Pesach. Coffee beans are not beans in any way except linguistically. They are berries. They are fine on Pesach.

How to convince the Jewish market of the fact?

By putting out a haggadah, by not selling it but instead giving it away, by putting your corporate logo not only into a family’s kitchen cabinet but actually onto its dining room table on one of the most emotionally resonant times of the Jewish year.

“The Maxwell House haggadah was not the first one that had been given away free, and it was not the last one either, but it was the most popular and successful one,” Mr. Rosenfeld said. It has been published every year except a few during World War II, when paper was rationed. “It is known to be the longest-running consumer promotion in the United States,” he added.

The haggadah changed slowly over the decades, one element at a time.

The Hebrew side of the haggadah has not changed, of course; it is the entire traditional text. But the typeface has been modernized. Most of the English text changed just once, in 2011. Until then, it used the pseudo-archaic constructs that often were meant to signify capital-D Devotion, as well as capital-E Earnestness.

In fact, it was capital-P Ponderous, all thees and thous and theines. Or, as we read the answer to the fourth son, “But as for him who hath no capacity to inquire, thou must begin the narration as it is said.”

“There is no record of the translator’s name, he added.

Occasionally the cover image changed, and so did the haggadah’s size. At some point, blue was added to the black ink, and new art, introduced in the mid 1960s and strongly reflecting its period, remained in use until 1998. That year, both the art and the type were reset.

“In 2011, we introduced the current version,” Mr. Rosenfeld said. The new translation, while still retaining the formality that makes it clear that the text is not conversation, was modernized. The thees were gone. No more pseudo-King-James text.
The largest change — and it was a big one — was to make the English text gender-neutral. “The haggadah now is acceptable across the board,” Mr. Rosenfeld said. “It doesn’t question gender; it just translates it more accurately.”

For one thing, using gender-neutral English nouns and pronouns, when possible, to describe God, “is more accurate.” The Rambam — Maimonides — “says that God isn’t a male or female.” The earlier haggadah translations were accurate in that Hebrew, which is not a Romance language, nonetheless is like those languages in that they are heavily gendered. Every noun has a gender. The translations were very literal.

Some changes were easy. The four sons, for example, became four children. Others presented initially more challenging but eventually easy-to-solve problems. In every blessing, “king” became “monarch.” It means the same thing, but it’s a bit less in-your-face about it. “We really strove to have it so that if you weren’t looking at it critically, you wouldn’t notice,” Mr. Rosenfeld said.

To celebrate the new haggadahs, Mr. Rosenfeld and his team decided to show their colleagues at Maxwell House, most of whom were not Jewish, what the haggadah was for, and what a seder actually is.

Back then, the “brand team,” as he calls the people who work for Kraft Food’s Maxwell House division, still was in Tarrytown, in New York’s Westchester County. “The brand team understood what the project was about, and how important it was, but they didn’t understand how it is used, how it works, and how families sit around the table,” Mr. Rosenfeld said.

“So we decided, instead of going out for coffee, to have a model seder. So we went up to Westchester, went into a conference room — about 10 of them — and we brought all the accoutrements, the seder plate, everything. We did it in about an hour, we explained the three matzahs and the four cups of wine. And because I am not going to sing along, there isn’t much singing.” Because this was during the middle of a work day, though, the four cups of wine were four symbolic sips of grape juice, and then soda.

“Sometimes we have had people who can ask the Four Questions in Hebrew; otherwise we do it in English,” he said.

And then there are the deeper concepts. “We explained the difference between celebrating freedom and remembering oppression,” Mr. Rosenfeld said. “And I explain why, when it comes to the plagues, the custom is to take out drops of wine from the cup. I explain that although we have a need to escape our captors, to fight an army, we also have to remember the other side, that real people are being harmed.

“People who don’t know about the seder learn about people who take their books and their coffee around the table” — Maxwell House’s instant coffee is a huge seller among people who do not brew coffee or heat water on Shabbat or holidays, but can stir crystals into preheated water. “And we juxtapose it a bit to Thanksgiving, to the idea of going home for the holidays. The idea is that no matter what part of the Jewish community people come from, they go home for the holidays.”

The seder is about teaching the next generation, Mr. Rosenfeld tells the high-level Kraft Food guests. That’s why some
of the things we do serve no purpose other than the very important one of forcing the question “Why?”

Maxwell House moved from Tarrytown to suburban Chicago, and then to downtown Chicago. “We had 18 people, including very upper-level people, from various departments at Kraft Foods, including the cheese and beverage departments,” Mr. Rosenfeld said. “It is an interesting way to have people sit around a table and learn about brands and cultures.

“It’s also an educational opportunity to discuss what Passover is in terms of kosher.” Often, when high-level executives talk about selling kosher or specifically kosher-for-Passover products, they think only about the products themselves, he said. “There is never the chance for a discussion about what a Jewish home goes through for the holidays.

“I explain that people remove products from their homes, and change their dishes. I talk about brands other than their own — Coke, Pepsi — and about Welch’s joining with Manischwitz for kosher-for-Passover grape juice.

“It blends the cultures of marketing and branding and religion into a very fun, enjoyable hour,” he said.

And how does he convince people to try the model seder in the first place? “There’s nothing better to get people to a meeting than to tell them there will be matzah ball soup and potato kugel.”

Back to the haggadah.

“We believe that this is the most widely used haggadah in the world,” Mr. Rosenfeld said. “It is distributed only in this country, but they have made their appearance on every U.S. battlefield since World War I to this day; they are sent out through the chaplain’s office to Jews serving in the U.S. armed forces around the world.

“There are stories about Russian immigrants to America, who didn’t speak English, having them; they’d been smuggled into the former Soviet Union.

“And they are used in the White House. President Obama has held a private seder every year, and they use the Maxwell House haggadah.

“There’s a very cool story about it,” Mr. Rosenfeld added. “A few years ago, Jeffrey Goldberg and Jonathan Safran Foer wrote commentary for a new haggadah.” (It was 2012; “The New American Haggadah” actually was edited by Mr. Foer, the novelist; Mr. Goldberg, who writes for The Atlantic, was one of an impressive list of Jewish intellectuals who contributed to it. Jeffrey Goldberg was in the Oval Office, interviewing Obama, and when he was finishing the interviewing he said, “Wait, I have a book I want to show you.”

“It was “The New American Haggadah.”

“Does that mean we can’t use the Maxwell House?” Mr. Obama asked.

In 2013, Joseph Jacobs Advertising displayed the haggadahs at the White House for Jewish Heritage Month.

“This is a quintessential American brand,” Mr. Rosenfeld said. “And it has entrenched itself and become part of the Jewish community. This is a perfect blend.”

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