

Passover: A time to share family stories

Passover is a time for families to gather, to enjoy each other's company and to recall the story of our shared ancient history.

By ELLIE KAHN **Published:** APRIL 1, 2023 01:05

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Bernie Faller attends a Seder dinner party for 10 people vaccinated against COVID-19 in Louisville, Kentucky, on March 27, 2021.

When I was growing up, my family's [Passover gatherings](#) were a joyful blend of holiday traditions, overeating, stand-up comedy and, most important of all, storytelling by our "tribal elders."

I was always moved by one of my Grandma Lena Goldhamer's stories from the 1920s, during the Depression, about her mother, Leba Klein.

"So many people were in need," Grandma Lena said. "Occasionally, I would come home from work and find a strange, unshaven man dressed in rags,

sitting at our kitchen table. Your great-grandmother Leba would be serving him an entire meal – from soup to dessert. It scared me that she let strangers into the house when she was alone; she was a tiny, frail woman. But when I asked her how she could do this, she simply said, ‘How could I not do this? He was hungry.’”

I never knew Leba Klein, but when my grandmother shared such memories, I learned something real about my ancestors.

I only wish we had recorded my grandparents’ stories. I think that’s why I became an oral historian – to make sure that families like mine know about those who came before them – about their traditions, their values, their relationships and what made their lives meaningful.



Ellie Kahn's grandmother Lena Goldhamer (credit: COURTESY ELLIE KAHN)

Passover is a time for families to gather, to enjoy each other's company and to recall the story of our shared ancient history.

It also might be the perfect time to preserve your own family's greatest treasure: the memories and stories your older family members have to share.

Everyone has a story. But not many people get a chance to tell that story.

I'm saddened by the fact that the majority of our older relatives take their life stories with them when they die. This is a huge loss – both for the person who didn't get to review their life and find meaning in their recollections... and for their descendants who miss out on knowing the unique details of their heritage and ancestors.

I so often hear these kinds of comments:

"We kept meaning to ask Bubbe about her childhood in Europe. But both of us are so pressed for time with work, the kids, soccer games and temple committees that we just never got around to it."

"I bought my father a family history book to just fill in. But he wouldn't do that, and now his memories are fading."

"I wish I knew how my grandparents ended up in Cleveland or how they met. Or what their parents did for a living. We don't know anything about their lives. We have names and dates and the name of the ship they took to Ellis Island. But that's all. It's really frustrating and sad."

Having a sense of our family's history is an important piece of the puzzle of who we are.

"We don't come from thin air. We come from somewhere," Danny Maseng, spiritual leader and founder of Makom Los Angeles, once told me. "If you don't know where you come from, you are, in a sense, missing a whole element of yourself. That can come into true relief if you know the stories of those who came before you."

I realize that most of us really are busy. Maybe older relatives don't like talking about themselves. Maybe they repeat the same story over and over

again and it's grown old. (Possibly they're worried that you will be bored because they know they've told the same story over and over again.)

But those same old stories are probably the ones their great-great-grandkids will wish they knew.

If you are fortunate enough to still have a chance to save your parents' or grandparents', aunts' or uncles' stories, I hope to inspire you to do just that.

How to get started

Extend the invitation. Determine who your family storytellers are, and let them know how much it would mean to the family to have their personal recollections recorded. They may say they have nothing important to share. They may feel uneasy talking about their past. As gently as possible, encourage them to just give it a try.

Plan for the recording. Most of us have smartphones, so this can be an easy way to record both the video and the sound of the interviews. A grandchild might be willing to handle the technology. It's important to have the phone on a tripod for stability. Someone in the family might have a more sophisticated video camera that could be used. Of course, checking the sound and picture before actually starting the interviews is important.

Maybe your relatives are in different cities and you already meet each other on Zoom. It's very easy to record a Zoom meeting. The only challenge is making sure that the light is good where your relatives are sitting, and the microphone is working. Do a test run first.

Create a list of questions. Involve the grandchildren and adult family members. Ask each person to come up with a list of things they'd like to know about the family's history and about the person who is being interviewed.

In coming up with questions, think in terms of different generations: There are so many possibilities for questions to ask. I encourage you to brainstorm. Here are just a few suggestions.

Ancestors – What do you know about our heritage? Where the family lived, what they did for a living, their challenges. What stories did you hear about ancestors?

Grandparents – Did you know your grandparents? How would you describe them? What are memories of times you had with them? What was the importance of being Jewish for them? Are there ways they impacted you? What role did they play in the family?

Parents – What's the sense you have of your mother's and father's childhoods and family life? How would you describe your mother? Your father? What did you learn from each of them? How did they deal with life's challenges?

Childhood – What are some of your earliest memories? Childhood illnesses? Favorite hobbies? Describe the home where you lived. Did you have childhood fears? What did you want to be when you grew up? How were holidays celebrated? The importance of being Jewish in your family? Favorite foods cooked by relatives?

Teens – When you were a teenager, what did you do for fun? What were parents worried about in those days? First boyfriend or girlfriend? Favorite subjects in school? Least favorite? Adults who influenced you the most?

Young adulthood – What did you do after high school? First jobs, goals, adventures? Challenges? Important friendships?

Adulthood – How did you meet your wife/husband? What attracted you? How did you decide on the work you've done? What has been most important to you as an adult?

The times you've experienced – Memories of World War II or wars in Israel? Changes in lifestyles, medicine, science, politicians you liked and didn't like? Your thoughts about the world today?

Reflections – What are you most proud of? Regrets? Challenges you've faced and how did you handled them? What are your hopes for your grandchildren? What values do you want to pass on? Further thoughts as you look back on your life?

Make sure you invite grandchildren to come up with their own questions. Children might want to know what kind of toys their relatives played with when they were young. Teens might wonder if their older family members ever got into trouble. Encourage them to ask anything they want.

A few final suggestions.

Practice patience during the interview.

Let the person you are interviewing wander wherever their memories take them. Some great stories emerge when this happens. Don't interrupt. If the person is having memory problems, be extra patient. Don't correct them; just move on. If they are getting frustrated, be aware of this. No pressure.

This is not a "conversation" where the family members do a lot of talking, judging or expressing their own point of view. This is a time to listen. Yes, you will ask questions, but if you are really willing to listen, the storyteller will be more likely to talk... and talk.

Acknowledge their life and experiences.

This will happen just by you showing your sincere interest.

Be prepared for emotions.

If your older relatives have experienced trauma during their lives, it will be understandable, and to be expected, that they might cry.

Many people I interview cry at some point during the time we spend together. I'm totally at ease with this and don't feel any need to distract them or avoid potentially emotional topics. This might happen when they talk about their deceased parents. Or they might cry over other losses or unfulfilled dreams. I've interviewed many Holocaust survivors; their experiences are obviously traumatic for people to recall. But it's a relief for them to be heard and to know that their stories will live on.

Whatever the source of sadness is for the person you are interviewing, just listen. Tears are OK. Don't rush in to stop the crying. You might hold their hand or just say, "It's okay. Take your time." If they need a break or want to

stop completely, honor their needs. It's important for them to know that they don't have to protect you from what they want to share.

The chance to reminisce is healing, and you will be allowing this process by your caring and listening.

Savor the time.

We never know how much time we have left with our loved ones. Be grateful that you have the chance to share this experience with them. And that you have given them the opportunity to be truly heard.

“The connection to storytelling in Judaism is inextricable,” says Maseng. “So that you know where this happened, where you came from, why this happened. When you are aware of such histories, you are better prepared for life.” ■

Ellie Kahn is a professional oral historian and is available to help preserve your family's stories. She can be reached at ekzmail@gmail.com or www.livinglegaciesfamilyhistories.com