

The Sedervantes: Next Year in La Mancha



"The Span-Yid"

Friday, April 22, 1616: Cervantes dies.
Friday, April 22, 2016: First night of Passover.

Introduction.

Haggadah, in Hebrew, means: “the telling.” At the heart of the Passover *seder*, the Jewish people tell the story of Exodus to assembled children, families and friends. We retell the Passover story every year so that we may never forget how the mighty hand of G-D rescued us from bondage.

What, then, shall we make of a Passover that coincides with the death of Cervantes, author of *Don Quixote*? Because on this very night, four hundred years ago, a man died in Spain: Miguel de Cervantes (1547-1616), beloved son, brother, father, husband, soldier, captive, playwright, tax collector, prisoner, author.

Oh, and he also may have been Jewish.

There’s some circumstantial and textual evidence which I won’t go into here, but whether or not the question can ever be settled to anyone’s satisfaction, this year is still a fascinating Calendrical Coincidence. Plus, the Spanish Expulsion in 1492 is such an important part of Jewish history that it’s worth talking about, especially this evening.

But when to discuss? Between the first blessing over the wine and the meal? In between songs following the meal? No, the *seder* is already crowded enough with the accumulated appurtenances of centuries.

That’s why I came up with an idea for a replacement *seder*, a Cervantes-themed commemorative “crypto-*seder*” that draws upon the quotations of *Don Quixote*, and more importantly, the mood and atmosphere of Cervantes’s writing.

A crypto-*seder* isn’t really a *seder*, but since it’s Passover and everything on the plate stands for something else, the lamb shank stands for this, and the egg stands for that, and so on, why can’t we say just this once, that the crypto-*seder* stands in for the *seder*? That’s what Spain’s secret Judaizers would have done. And so let’s give it a try, shall we?

Next year in La Mancha!

Ivan Schneider
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Kiddush. Blessing over wine.

The first cup of wine is poured.

Kiddush is to proceed as follows:

1. The leader begins the blessing with a single descriptor, e.g., the grape: “Blessed art thou, Lord of the Universe, who has chosen us to try this Tempranillo.”
2. Each participant in Kiddush reclines slightly to the left and then takes a sip.
3. The next person to the left adds a new descriptor to the tasting notes; e.g. “Blessed art thou, Lord of the Universe, who has chosen us to try this full-bodied Tempranillo.”
4. The following acts are deemed to be offenses against Kiddush, calling for a dose of penitential spirits:
 - Reclining to the right;
 - Reclining insufficiently to the left;
 - Falling onto the floor;
 - Spilling Kiddush wine;
 - Making an erroneous statement in the tasting notes, either by omission of a previous descriptor; or by offering an observation that a majority of the qualified participants deem to be an invented descriptor. The tiebreaking vote goes to the person who brought the bottle to the Seder.
5. Return to step 2.
6. Kiddush ends when the cycle returns to the leader, who is responsible for one final recitation, which is then inscribed into the Haggadah.

Example:

“Blessed art thou, Lord of the Universe, who has chosen us to try this full-bodied / ruby-red / Tempranillo / with an aromatic nose of fennel / and clove / with hints of vanilla / and licorice / and balanced tannins.”

Urchatz. The ritual washing.

LEADER

“The history tells that when Don Quixote called out to Sancho to bring him his helmet, Sancho was buying some curds the shepherds agreed to sell him, and flurried by the great haste his master was in did not know what to do with them or what to carry them in; so, not to lose them, for he had already paid for them, he thought it best to throw them into his master’s helmet, and acting on this bright idea he went to see what his master wanted with him.” (DQ II.XVII)

The curd-filled helmets are distributed.

ALL

“Give me that helmet, my friend, for either I know little of adventures, or what I observe yonder is one that will, and does, call upon me to arm myself.”

All don the helmets.

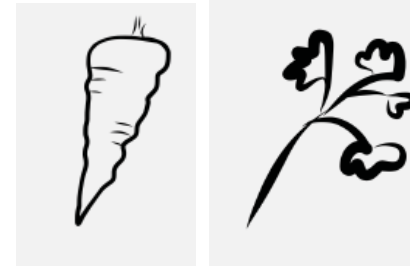
ALL

“By the life of my lady Dulcinea del Toboso, but it is curds thou hast put here, thou treacherous, impudent, ill-mannered squire!”

LEADER

“If they are curds let me have them, your worship, and I’ll eat them; but let the devil eat them, for it must have been he who put them there.”

The company uses five or six buckets of water (for as regard the number of buckets there is some dispute) to wash their heads and faces.



Karpas. Tasting of the vegetables.

LEADER holds up a plate with raw onion, cheese, and matzoh

LEADER

“I have here an onion and a little cheese and a few scraps of bread, but they are not victuals fit for a valiant knight like your worship.” (I.X)

ALL

“Eat not garlic nor onions, lest they find out thy boorish origin by the smell.” (II.XLIII)

LEADER

“I can live just as well, simple Sancho, on bread and onions; as governor on partridges and capons.” (II.XLIII)

ALL

“Omnis saturatio mala, perdicis autem pessima.”

“All excess is bad, but that of partridge worst of all.”
(II.XLVII)

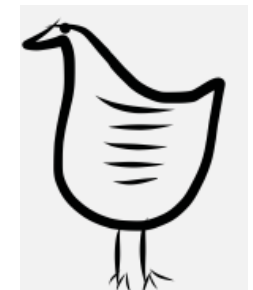
LEADER

“I take a leap out of the government and pass into the service of my master Don Quixote; for after all, though in it I eat my bread in fear and trembling, at any rate I take my fill.

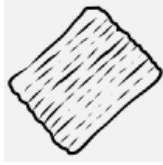
ALL

And for my part, so long as I’m full, it’s all alike to me whether it’s with carrots or with partridges.” (DQ II.LV)

All eat the raw onion, cheese, and matzoh.



Yachatz. Breaking the middle matzoh.



COMMENTARY

In the Jewish tradition, the matzoh symbolizes the bread of affliction, the unleavened bread of the Israelites departing from Egypt. At this part in the seder, the leader is to break in half the middle of three matzot. This half-matzoh, known as the *afikomen*, is then to be wrapped within a napkin and concealed from view until the conclusion of the seder.

The broken matzoh reminds avid Cervantistas of “El Curioso impertinente,” the interpolated story contained within Don Quixote (I.33-35) translated variously as “The Ill-advised curiosity,” “The Curious Impertinent,” “The Tale of Foolish Curiosity” or even “The Story of the Man Who Couldn’t Keep from Prying.”

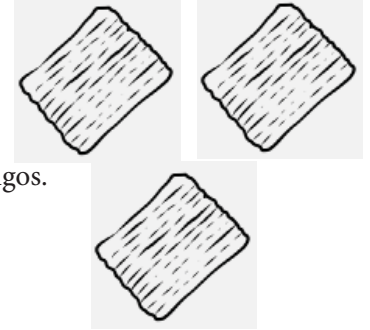
But is El Curioso truly *impertinente*? In English, the main sense of “impertinent” is someone meddling, the actions of an insolent type without respect to their social superiors; whereas in Spanish, *impertinente* has the connotation of “not-pertaining,” that is, “irrelevant.” The English form of impertinence connotes rudeness, even if such outbursts may be very much to the point; the Spanish *impertinente* suggests an irrelevant appendage.

While “El Curioso impertinente” exists as an *impertinente* in relation to Don Quixote, within the frame of the story itself, there is nothing impertinent about El Curioso. That is to say, on its own terms, we may consider the real title of this story to be “El Curioso,” or, “The Curiosity.”

Such an *impertinente* is “El Curioso impertinente,” a story with seemingly little to do with Don Quixote and his squire Sancho Panza. Most people can summon an image of the book-mad knight and his squire, or tilting at windmills, or some other incidents depicted in the abridged version of the novel or the versions that have come to us in popular culture on stage and screen. But who remembers the Florentine friends Anselmo and Lothario, or the woman Camila between them?

The setup: Don Quixote, Sancho Panza and their company (a barber and a priest from La Mancha, plus Cardenio and Dorotea, whom they met on their travels) arrive at an inn. Don Quixote sleeps, Sancho is absent, and the rest have dinner with the innkeeper, the innkeeper’s family, and other guests of the inn. The innkeeper, following a discussion of chivalric books, produces his collection of books and documents. Among those documents is the full text of “El Curioso impertinente” (I.XXXII).

“The Curiosity.”



LEADER

Anselmo and Lothario are Los Dos Amigos.

Stack two matzoh in a pile.

This is Camila.

Show the third matzoh.

Camila marries Anselmo.

Take the top matzoh, place it atop the third matzoh in new pile

They’re married, so Lothario stops coming around, it’s not right. Anselmo objects, says, “Come by twice a week, and on holidays.”

Take the lone matzoh and place it on and off the pile.

Lothario and Anselmo go for a walk.

Take the top two matzoh off the pile, hold in one hand.

Anselmo wonders whether Camila can be trusted without her fidelity being tested. He asks Lothario to make advances on Camila. Lothario refuses, he asks: Why put a diamond between hammer and anvil?

Make hammering motion toward third matzoh.

Anselmo says he’ll find someone else. Lothario says no, don’t do that, I’ll do it. I’ll test her. He comes over for dinner.

Place the two matzoh on top of the first one.

Anselmo makes an excuse to leave. Camila begs him not to go, but he goes.

Remove the middle matzoh, place to the right.

Rather than speak alone with Camila, Lothario feigns fatigue and says he needs to sleep right there at the table. Camila goes to her own room.

Remove the bottom matzoh, place to the left.

Anselmo returns and questions Anselmo.

Pick up the matzoh on the right and the one in the center.

Lothario claims that he’s taking it slowly. Anselmo says, come back daily. Lothario maintains the fiction, ignoring Camila.

Repeat several times: One matzoh joins a pile of two matzoh. Remove the middle matzoh. Move the bottom matzoh away, join the top matzoh with the first matzoh. Place the first matzoh on top of the other matzoh.

Anselmo spies on Lothario alone with Camila and observes that they do not speak in his absence.

Shuffle matzoh accordingly.

Anselmo confronts Lothario. Now, almost as a matter of honor, Lothario must try to seduce Camila to assuage Anselmo’s fears.

Keep shuffling matzoh.

Anselmo leaves for a week, telling Camila that Lothario would take care of the house and dine with her, treating him as her own husband.

Place one matzoh aside, align the other two closely.

Lothario falls in love with Camila's beauty and goodness, and woos her in earnest. He succeeds.

Break one of the matzoh in half.

THE ONE WHO MARRIED SOMEONE MORE BEAUTIFUL

Does not the broken matzoh symbolize Anselmo's dishonor as a cuckold?

ALL

Es de vidrio la mujer;
pero no se ha de probar
si se puede o no quebrar,
porque todo podría ser.

[DQ I.33]

"Women are made of glass, but they should not be tested to the breaking point, because anything's possible."

THE OLDEST BACHELOR

Does not the broken matzoh symbolize Lothario's infidelity as an unfaithful friend?

ALL

Y es más fácil el quebrarse,
y no es cordura ponerse
a peligro de romperse
lo que no puede soldarse.

[DQ I.33]

"And it's unwise to risk the danger of breaking that which is easily cracked and cannot be welded together."

THE OLDEST VIRGIN

Does not the broken matzoh symbolize Camila's destroyed virtue?

ALL

Y en esta opinión estén
todos, y en razón la fundo:
que si hay Dánaes en el mundo,
hay pluvias de oro también.

[DQ I.33]

"And all are of this opinion, and founded on this wisdom, that where there are Danaës in the world, there are also golden showers."

THE MOST INNOCENT

What is a golden shower?

THE MOST INCONTINENT

"King Acrisius," the Oracle did confide:
"Your own grandson will commit regicide."

The king locked his daughter in a tower,
Zeus poured inside as a golden shower,
Deus ex nebula with an eye for Danaë.

Meanwhile, the LEADER has hidden the larger half of the broken matzoh.

LEADER

And thus we end the impertinente.

THE MOST RECENT DIVORCÉ(E)

But why does matzoh break so easily?

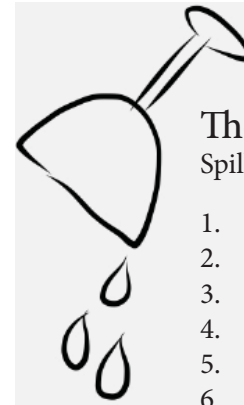
Maggid. Retelling the Passover story.

The four punchlines

1. A blind man attends his first seder, picks up a matzoh, feels it in his hands for a moment. He says: "Who wrote this shit?"
2. The Queen of England is to confer knighthood upon one of her Jewish subjects, who is so nervous that instead of the customary oath of investiture, he mumbles the first thing that comes to mind: "Ma nishtanah ha laila ha-zeh?" The Queen turns to one of her nobles to ask: "What makes this knight different from all other knights?"
3. "This soup is wonderful!"
"Yes, isn't it? It's matzoh-ball soup."
"Hmm. Do you serve other parts of the matzoh?"
4. Two elderly Jewish men are reminiscing about their travels. One recalls having visited Egypt, but can't remember the name of the city. He rambles on and on describing the city, what it looked like, what it smelled like, what he had for lunch when he was there, who he met on the ship. The other man, exasperated from this endless recitation, mutters: "*Putz a yid.*"
"Yes! That's it! Port Said! How did you know?"

The four children

- The Anusim, or involuntary convert, asks: "Are we allowed to do this?"
- The Meshumadim, or voluntary convert, asks: "Why are we still doing this?"
- The Limpieza de sangre, or pure of blood, asks: "Does anyone else know I'm here?"
- The Relajara, "relaxed," or condemned for heresy, asks: "What's the difference?"



The ten plagues

Spill from the cup of wine for each of the ten plagues.

1. Phylloxera
2. Drought
3. Flooding
4. Frost
5. Excessive heat, winds or hail
6. Oxidation
7. Sulfurization
8. Cork taint
9. Damaged by heat or light
10. Microbiological faults



The fourteen levels of favor ("The Evolutionary Dayenu")

1. If He had given us a cell nucleus and other organelles within an enclosing membrane, but had not made us multicellular, it would have been enough!
2. If He had made us multicellular, but had not introduced sexual reproduction as a means of genetic recombination, it would have been enough!
3. If He had introduced sexual reproduction as a means of genetic recombination, but had not given us a triploblastic germ layer during embryogenesis, it would have been enough!
4. If He had given us a triploblastic germ layer during embryogenesis, but had not given us a complete gut, including both mouth and anus, for extracellular digestion, it would have been enough!
5. If He had given us a complete gut, including both mouth and anus, for extracellular digestion, but had not made us eucoelomates with a fluid-filled, peritoneum-lined body cavity surrounding the digestive tract and other organs, it would have been enough!
6. If He had made us eucoelomates with a fluid-filled, peritoneum-lined body cavity surrounding the digestive tract and other organs, but had not made us deuterostomes with radial cleavage and enterocely, it would have been enough!

7. If He had made us deuterostomes with radial cleavage and enterocely, but had not given us a bilateral body plan, a notochord, dorsal neural tube and various other defining characteristics, it would have been enough!
8. If He had given us a bilateral body plan, a notochord, dorsal neural tube and various other defining characteristics, but had not given us a backbone, it would have been enough!
9. If He had given us a backbone, but had not given us a skull, it would have been enough!
10. If He had given us a skull but had not given us an endoskeletal mandibular arch and exoskeletal teeth, it would have been enough!
11. If He had given us an endoskeletal mandibular arch and exoskeletal teeth, but had not given us four limbs, it would have been enough!
12. If He had given us four limbs, but had not given mammary glands to the females, it would have been enough!
13. If He had given mammary glands to the females but had not given them a wide opening at the bottom of the pelvis and a convenient absence of epipubic bones so as to allow the birth of a large infant, it would have been enough!
14. If He had given the females a wide opening at the bottom of the pelvis and a convenient absence of epipubic bones so as to allow the passage of a large infant, but had not given us stereoscopic vision, opposable thumbs, sexual dimorphism, dry noses with downward-facing nostrils, a rotating shoulder joint, and large brains with a significant advantage in cranial capacity relative to other creatures, it would have been enough!

Thus our gratitude for the mitotic blessings bestowed upon us; for He has made us human.

SANCHO

For the love of G-D, let's eat!

(The Sedervantes ends here.)