

CULTURAL HISTORY IN THE SUPERMARKET: THE ICONIC MAXWELL HOUSE HAGGADAH, FROM 1932 TO MRS. MAISEL

By Peter Levitan

From "The Global Haggadah" by Peter Levitan

The iconic Maxwell House Haggadah was first introduced by the Maxwell House company in 1932. It is the best known and most widely used Haggadah both among American Jews and throughout the world, with over 50 million copies in print, and one million copies being distributed in 2006 alone. But how did this cultural icon come to be?



The Maxwell House Haggadah was conceived as part of a marketing campaign for Maxwell House's coffee aimed at Jews. During the 1920's, Maxwell House found that its large base of Jewish customers weren't buying their coffee during Passover, under the mistaken notion that coffee beans are *kitniyot* – a legume or bean that is not kosher for Passover for Ashkenazic Jews, then the overwhelming majority of American Jews. Jewish grocery stores would put away coffee with the *chametz* under the mistaken assumption that coffee beans were *kitniyot*, when in fact they are botanically a fruit.



In 1923, the company got Joseph Jacobs, an advertising manager for the *Forverts*, to run an ad assuring readers that Maxwell House coffee was kosher for Passover, based on a certification that Jacobs obtained from an obscure Lower East Side rabbi certifying that coffee was fine to serve following the Seder dinner. In 1932, Jacobs, who had now established his own advertising firm that specialized in marketing to Jewish consumers, convinced Maxwell House to print and distribute its own haggadah and distribute copies in-store with the purchase of its coffee.

The Maxwell House Haggadah quickly became the best known and most widely used in American Jewish homes over its competitors' (Manischewitz and Streit's) haggadahs for several reasons: (1) the growing need for a Haggadah by American Jews interested in conducting a Passover Seder but having little familiarity with religious observance; (2) the easy availability of the Maxwell House Haggadah via a trip to the local supermarket; and (3) the simplicity of its pamphlet format and the user-friendly English and Hebrew layout.

It's commonly believed that the Maxwell House Haggadah was handed out for free in supermarkets, but that's not quite true. The deal was supposed to be that for each purchase of a can of Maxwell House Coffee, the buyer received one copy of the Haggadah free. But clearly, at some point that honor system fell by the wayside



and shoppers did receive the haggadah free without purchasing the coffee. Carole B. Balin, professor of Jewish History at Hebrew Union College, commented, "I don't think 50 million cans of coffee were sold, let's just put it that way." The arrangement today is that a supermarket that wants to give the Maxwell Haggadah away free has to commit to Maxwell House to purchase a minimum amount of their coffee.



One key to the Maxwell House Haggadah's continued popularity is that the company keeps updating it to keep up with the changing times. In 2011, the company released its new revised version, with both more modern language (replacing the archaic "thee" and "thine") and gender-neutral language (replacing the Four Sons with "four different sorts of children," and referring to God as a monarch rather than a king). And in 2019, it issued a "Marvelous Mrs. Maisel" limited edition designated as the "New 1958 Edition" (the year the popular award-winning TV series takes place) and a pink cover instead of the iconic blue. So who knew? How could it hurt?

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