Specialty Seders offer alternative to traditional Passover

By Lois K. Solomon, Staff writer

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The traditional Passover Seder, with family assembled in the dining room to hear the biblical story of the Jewish exodus from Egypt, is so last century for some.

At the 21st-century Seder, South Florida-style, like-minded people gather to tell the tale from their own perspective: men-only; women-only; a "Sober Seder" for alcoholics; a Beach Seder to re-enact the 10 Plagues and the Israelites' crossing of the Red Sea.

These Seders offer alternative perspectives on the Passover story, which has proven resilient and adaptable to creative approaches.

"These types of activities get people re-engaged," said Amy Tupler, a mother of two from Hollywood who attended "Passover at the Beach" last week sponsored by Temple Solel at John U. Lloyd Beach State Park in Dania Beach. "They break up the monotony and the routine of the Seder for my kids."

Most Jewish families still conduct traditional Seders for Passover, which begins at sundown Monday. The ceremony, taking place on the first and sometimes the second nights of the eight-day holiday, consists of relatives and invited guests reading from the Haggadah, or book chronicling Jewish slavery in Egypt, the rescue by God and freedom. The dinner table is filled with ritual items that illustrate the narrative, such as matzo, wine and bitter herbs, meant to remind participants of the harshness of servitude.

In South Florida, many Jews who don't live near their families gather with friends or neighbors for their Seders. Synagogues, hotels, country clubs, cruise ships and restaurants have long hosted elaborate ceremonies followed by dinner.

But over the past few years, Seders have proven to be a versatile ritual that is receptive to innovation. Seders that cater to special interests have grown in popularity across the country, including Chocolate Seders, Vegetarian Seders and "Green" Seders. Many Christians, too, have transformed Seders to tell the story of Jesus, with the broken matzo symbolizing his broken body and the wine his blood.

These Seders are a natural extension of the preference among many Americans to spend time with similar-minded people, as well as the trend of targeting religious events to specific audiences, said Fred Greenspahn, eminent scholar in Judaic studies at Florida Atlantic University in Boca Raton.
"It's typical in American culture for people to seek out their own kind," Greenspahn said. "You see this with senior congregations and gated communities. It's easier to attract them to something aimed specifically at them."

The Passover story is easily applicable to people dealing with alcoholism, who seek to experience freedom from "the killing fields of addiction," said Rabbi Meir Kessler of the Jewish Recovery Center in Boca Raton, which will host an alcohol-free "Sober Seder" on Monday at Chabad of Boca Raton.

The Seder offers grape juice instead of wine as participants share stories about their enslavement by alcohol and their personal journeys toward sobriety, Kessler said. The Seder has grown from 15 people six years ago to 200 expected on Monday, he said.

The special Seders held over the past few weeks are not a substitute for the family gatherings this week, according to Rabbi Dan Levin of Temple Beth El in Boca Raton, which hosted a Men's Seder and Sober Seder and will offer a "Second-Night Seder" for families on Tuesday.

"The creative Seders inform and enhance the broader Seder experience," he said. "There's a takeaway that applies not only to Passover but to your spiritual life the rest of the year."

Larry Hotz, Beth El's Brotherhood president, hopes members took home a sense of camaraderie and religious connection from the Brotherhood's Men's Seder, which he said explored concerns such as relationships between fathers and children and the pressures on breadwinners.

"You leave with a feeling of, 'I'm not alone, there are people dealing with the same issues as me,'" said Hotz, a father of two from Boca Raton. "It makes me feel better about myself and the world."