



“Saturday Night Seder” and the Affordances of Cultural Arts during COVID-19

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Abstract

Saturday Night Seder (SNS) was broadcast online on 11 April 2020 as a public celebration of Passover and as a benefit for the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) Foundation. Part seder, part telethon, and part Broadway theatrical performance, SNS was the first online event to create a national Jewish communal gathering space in the context of coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) and has since been viewed over 1.5 million times. This article examines SNS as a uniquely situated manifestation of COVID-19, and draws attention to the various affordances engendered by SNS for Jewish gathering, learning, and exchange. It draws upon interviews with members of the production team, featured participants, and expert informants, as well as viewer responses from Twitter and YouTube: a dataset that includes 2000 tweets and over 1800 YouTube comments. Collectively, these data suggest that cultural arts productions such as SNS have afforded an expansive network of online Jewish conversations during COVID-19, and have invited a broad audience of Jews and non-Jews into dialogue over Jewish themes and content.

Keywords COVID-19 · Saturday Night Seder · Passover · Social media · American Jews · Jewish learning

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Introduction

In every generation, Jews have used the Passover Haggadah as a template for navigating communal anxieties and for adapting Jewish ritual to the vernaculars of the cultures and contexts in which Jews have lived. Medieval Haggadot deployed illustrations and scribal artistry to illuminate the conditions of contemporary Jewish life in Europe (Kogman-Appel 2006; Ben Simeon et al. 2011). The Freedom Seder of 1969 interwove Jewish ritual with poetry, prayers, and songs from the African American spiritual tradition to highlight the resonance of the Passover story to the campaign for civil rights for Black Americans (Waskow 1969). Amid the Soviet Jewry movement of the same era, the seder was similarly deployed as a strategy of protest and as a tool for raising American Jewish consciousness of the plight of Russian Jews (Kelner 2008). The COVID-19 pandemic lockdowns in the USA went into effect in mid-March 2020, approximately 3 weeks before the start of the Passover holiday. Once again, as in years past, the seder served as a cultural mechanism for American Jews to address contemporary challenges within the context of the holiday's ritualistic practices. This article examines a prominent example of American Jewish efforts to reimagine the Passover seder in the light of COVID-19. Saturday Night Seder (SNS) was broadcast on internet media company BuzzFeed's YouTube channel to mark the third night of Passover on Saturday 11 April 2020. Part-seder, part-fundraiser, and part-Broadway ensemble, SNS offered a lighthearted celebration of the Passover story loosely following the traditional order of the Haggadah. It featured stars from stage and screen as well as celebrity rabbis and authors who filmed short clips in their own homes using iPhones and personal cameras, woven together by a veteran production team. As of May 2021, the broadcast had raised over \$3.5 million for the CDC Foundation COVID-19 Emergency Response Fund, and had been viewed over 1.5 million times on YouTube.

Saturday Night Seder's popularity should perhaps come as no surprise. Passover commands particular affection among American Jews. The Pew Forum's 2013 Portrait of Jewish Americans reported that participation in a Passover seder ranked as the most frequently observed religious ritual among contemporary American Jews, with 70% of respondents reporting that they participated in a seder, inclusive of 42% of respondents who were identified by Pew as Jews of no religion (Pew Research Center 2013, 77). Though the Haggadah, as Vanessa Ochs has chronicled, is riddled with imperfections, inconsistencies, and unreferenced citations, Passover offers the opportunity for a do-it-yourself at home ritual experience that centers on a historic story of liberation from tyranny, a story interpreted by countless Haggadot as having timeless resonance (Ochs 2020). Across the generations, Jews have incorporated themes and images relative to their time and place as they have reimagined the Haggadah and reinterpreted the Exodus narrative in light of contemporary concerns. From the San Diego Women's Haggadah of 1986 to the graphic novel Haggadah of 2019, the images, editorial selections, and interpretative media included in new editions of the Passover Haggadah illuminate the cultural and historical contexts in which they were translated and compiled (Woman's Institute for Continuing Jewish Education 1986; Gorfinkel and Zadok 2019).

As COVID-19 social distancing mandates came into effect across the USA beginning in March 2020, American Jews looked to digital media as a vehicle for communal Passover celebrations. Using technologies like Zoom and Google Meet, virtual Passover seders were conducted by families and friends and organized by institutions including synagogues, Jewish community centers, and independent minyanim. Saturday Night Seder was an online celebration of Passover and fundraiser for the CDC Foundation COVID-19 Emergency Response Fund created by a team of Jewish television and theater producers seeking both an outlet for their own creativity during a time of extended furlough, as well as to provide a morale booster for American Jews more broadly. Unlike most other virtual Seder experiences, SNS was broadcast after the first days of the holiday had concluded and only loosely followed the traditional order of the Haggadah. SNS was light entertainment, interspersing original music and stand-up comedy alongside meditations on the themes of Passover and explanations of its ritual steps. Necessarily, the revue style format eliminated critical elements of the Haggadah in order to keep its duration brief and its content entertaining and accessible. It was a creative artistic rendering of the seder for the purposes of entertainment and communal fundraising rather than an effort to faithfully interpret the Haggadah for an online ritual setting. As host Jason Alexander quipped in the opening song featured in SNS, "there's a smidgen of religion but we're keeping that part light" (Saturday Night Seder 2020).

This article argues that the production and reception of SNS offers a site to examine both the distinctive ways that COVID-19 shaped a particular reinterpretation of Jewish ritual in 2020, as well as the affordances of cultural arts and digital media for expanding Jewish communal conversations. It draws upon interviews with members of the production team, featured participants, and expert informants, as well as viewer responses from Twitter and YouTube: a dataset that includes 2000 tweets and over 1800 YouTube comments. As scholars with particular interests in Jewish education, we highlight the ways that SNS created opportunities for Jewish learning, both for viewers who gathered to discuss the show on social media and for the cast and production team as well. We begin by reviewing current literature on Jewish engagements with cultural arts, and situate our study within affordance theory. We also explore literature on social media as spaces for constructing religious identities, and the landscape of online Jewish communal space. We then analyze the data gathered through the multiple methods deployed as part of this study, starting with the production of SNS, and then analyzing its reception among viewers who utilized social media as a vehicle to engage in conversations with others. Collectively, this corpus of data suggests that the various technologies deployed in the production and reception of SNS intersected to create a network of spaces for the negotiation of Jewish representation and difference, Jewish learning, and communal connection outside of, yet related to, formal Jewish institutions. SNS offers a call to take Jewish cultural arts and creative expression seriously during COVID-19 and to pay attention to the various technologies that create interactive spaces for the negotiation and reception of Jewish cultural products.

The Affordances of Cultural Arts

Examining the creation and reception of Jewish artistic and cultural products like SNS offers opportunities to think expansively about participation in Jewish communal space during the COVID-19 pandemic. To date, research on Jewish engagements with cultural arts has largely focused on opportunities for engaging “religious nones” in non-synagogue settings such as community centers, arts organizations, cultural events, and festivals. Demographic community studies have posited that millennial Jews of no religion see cultural arts spaces as accessible venues in which to celebrate their secular Jewish sense of belonging, for example, in Tobin’s study of Jews in San Francisco Bay area (Tobin 2002) and Cohen and Kelman’s (2005) analysis of young Jews in New York. Similar conclusions are evident in market-research studies of millennial and Generation Z Jewish populations that make a case for engaging these Jews “on their own terms” (see Bennett et al. 2006). This research has implied both directly and indirectly that, for secular Jews, increased participation in Jewish culture might lend itself to increased participation in Jewish life more broadly, or at least to stronger Jewish engagement and/or Jewish identification (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 2005, 2). Consequently, interest among community leaders, funders, scholars, and arts and educational practitioners has coalesced around the potential efficacy of Jewish cultural arts ventures as frameworks for enhancing and sustaining American Jewish life.

This framing of the cultural arts as merely a conduit or gateway to Jewish communal life, however, can overlook the integrity of the communal and creative experiences that occur in cultural arts settings. It also runs the risk of placing an artificial boundary between Jewish religious and cultural life, as if these two classificatory concepts exist in a static side-by-side relationship. Beyond the conceptual difficulties of delineating where the religious ends and the cultural starts, these taxonomies obscure as much as they illuminate when they are applied to the creative, subtle, and unpredictable ways in which people make sense of religion in practice (Bender 2003). As Rachel Gross has recently argued, “when Jewish communal leaders and sociologists distinguish between Jewish culture and Jewish religion, many of the ways that American Jews create individual and communal meaning in their lives are flattened or even erased” (Gross 2021, 6). Examining the networks of creativity, exchange, and communal conversation that occur via engagements with Jewish artistic productions, on the other hand, reframes the enterprise of cultural arts as a set of spaces that allows for distinctive experiences that are integral within their own right. As historian James Loeffler has explored, Jewish culture, as well as Jewish cultural art more specifically, is a complex relationality that occurs among Jews, between Jews and the multifaceted artifacts of Jewish tradition, and within a Jewish milieu defined to various degrees by the prevailing values and zeitgeist of the broader social contexts in which such interactions occur (Loeffler 2014). Within the context of twenty-first-century America and during COVID-19 more particularly, Jewish cultural arts create space for Jews from a range of secular and religious proclivities to gather to perform Jewishness, irrespective of any predictable upward trajectory of Jewish engagement.

Adopting an affordance perspective as a frame of analysis for examining the impact of cultural arts helps to overcome the limitations of predicating the arts as a strategy for Jewish communal affiliation. An affordance perspective not only allows for a relational dynamic between culture and religion, but also steers us away from seeing cultural arts as merely a means to a given end. First coined by Gibson (1977) in the field of ecological psychology, contemporary scholarship on affordances, commonly defined as "possibilities for action," emphasizes that what an object or technology affords to its users and to its broader audience may be predictable and desired, but may equally be unanticipated and unwelcome (for example, Wuthnow 2020, 63–72). The indeterminacy of affordances has powerful implications for theories of action that guide cultural arts projects, and for expanding goal-oriented framing of the impact of cultural arts in particular. When we look beyond cultural arts as a step to increased Jewish communal engagement and focus instead on the range of their affordances, we illuminate that cultural arts productions in fact generate a range of discourses that can enlarge Jewish communal conversations in meaningful as well as unprecedented and unexpected ways.

Creating Jewish Space Online

During the lockdowns necessitated by COVID-19, the affordances of Jewish cultural arts were enacted and engaged through online modalities. Video conferencing platforms and web broadcasts served as virtual stages for theater, music, and other creative arts, while social media offered opportunities for audiences to gather and discuss different performances and products. Social media spaces are at the core of digital religion studies, an emerging field that identifies the particular ways that religious identities and practices are performed in virtual platforms (Campbell 2012, 2017). As Miriam Eschbach and Dorothea Lüddeckens have argued, the question of how community and communitization occurs through social media is one of the greatest challenges for theorizing about the operationalization of religion in the contemporary world (Aeschbach and Lüddeckens 2019). Media platforms can be conceptualized as networks that forge online communities through platforms in which users become digitally linked to one another (for example, Gruzd, Wellman et al. 2011). In this article, however, we think of digital media primarily as social media, platforms that offer common public spaces that afford contributors opportunities to interact with each other and share content, irrespective of whether such interactions lead to the establishment of networks (Murthy 2012). Foregrounding digital platforms as interactional social media emphasizes that tweeting or contributing comments to YouTube are performative actions, and that such performance builds a sense of community as users participate in acts of "presencing" that announce their place at the table. When individual users post a tweet in response to a Twitter hashtag, they participate in a social act of self-representation that both constructs and confirms their own sense of identity, and also affirms commonalities with like-minded contributors. This process marks the user as part of a discursive community, even if that community may be momentary and nonpermanent (see Zappavigna 2012; Wills and Fecteau 2016).

The landscape of spaces for presencing and performing Jewishness online is expansive. Some spaces are identifiably Jewish, conducted under the institutional auspices of synagogues or other Jewish organizations and focusing on content that is unambiguously Jewish in character. For example, online learning of Jewish texts is fostered by the digital resource site Sefaria, and live streaming from synagogues offers opportunities to remotely join in Jewish prayer and virtual minyanim. Yet, outside of these identifiably Jewish settings, social media and messaging platforms such as Twitter, YouTube, Facebook, TikTok, and Instagram also offer independent convening spaces for Jews to gather around common interests and shared content. As Barbara Mann has argued, any typology of Jewish spaces must include not only ostensibly Jewish infrastructures but also secular, public spaces that are made Jewish when they function as settings for the performance of Jewish ritual, memory, history, language, and community. The shabbes park where Jewish families gather on Shabbat afternoons remains ontologically a public and secular domain, yet its function as a meeting place for Jews observing Jewish ritual time also claims it within a Jewish spatial and religious ecosystem (Mann 2012). SNS offers an online example of Mann's secular yet Jewish space. Rooted in ritual practice, it unabashedly celebrated Jewish religious belonging. However, it was broadcast and received through social media platforms that exist broadly outside of the parameters of Jewish institutional life, created on Zoom and Google Hangout video conferencing, shared through BuzzFeed's YouTube Channel, and discussed by viewers who gathered on Twitter and YouTube.

Our methodological approach to this study was limited to online research modalities as a consequence of the continuing limitations of the COVID-19 pandemic. We conducted interviews with representatives of the cast and production team via Zoom, and used coding software to perform content analysis of tweets with the hashtag #Saturdaynight seder and comments posted to the show's YouTube site. Focusing on social media responses to a cultural arts event such as SNS has evident limitations. With little identifying information to contextualize the positionality of users, social media posts offer little to qualitatively illuminate the reception of SNS across the demographic categories of age, gender, and religious affiliation or lack thereof. However, in the context of COVID-19, in which online engagement became a de facto modality for communal gathering, focusing on social media offers a window on viewer engagements with SNS—and with each other—as they watched the broadcast in real time. It highlights their immediate responses and reactions. Unable to gather with friends and family physically, viewers took to social media for collective conversation. Analyzing the dynamics of these conversations on the platforms in which they occurred highlights the capacity of social media to create Jewish space during COVID-19, even absent of contextual data on the demographics of its users. Furthermore, by focusing on conversations that took place via social media platforms situated outside of formal Jewish institutional auspices, in this article we highlight that engagement in Jewish communal life during COVID-19 was not restricted to explicitly Jewish institutional domains, but also took place among users on social media who announced themselves as being on the margins of organized Jewish life. We highlight the affordances that these sets of digital platforms provided for Jewish communal gathering during COVID-19, first by bringing a diverse

cast and production team into a creative conversation about the themes of Passover and Jewish representation in contemporary America, and second by enabling a broad audience of Jews and non-Jews to continue the dialogue via digital media. By framing these interactions not as steps on a path towards stronger Jewish communal affiliation but as sites for the creative exploration of Jewish themes and tropes, we highlight SNS's affordances for both its producers and consumers.

Production

Tonight is even stranger than the average Pesach meal,
Cause we're trapped in our apartments and the plagues are effing real (Jason Alexander, Saturday Night Seder).

Any new edition of the Haggadah is a product of the culture and context in which it was compiled as well as the particular proclivities of its compilers. Saturday Night Seder was shaped by the themes of twenty-first-century American Jewish culture broadly, by the context of COVID-19 specifically, and by a production team whose expertise lay more centrally in the world of entertainment than in religious ritual. As American Jews began to plan for seders that were confined to their households or that took place around virtual rather than actual tables, a group of Jewish producers furloughed from their usual work on theater and television productions began to devise an alternative to what they imagined would be "depressing" Zoom seders: a virtual variety show that would raise money for the CDC Foundation and celebrate the power of the Passover narrative to speak to a reality in which the themes of confinement, plague, and hope for liberation had become all too real. Filmed on personal cell phones and iPads rather than by professional camera crews, SNS represented an ad hoc response to limitations on public gathering, the product of a creative team who began to assemble online just a few weeks prior to Passover (Blickley 2020). Yet it also drew upon an extant prototype for retelling the Passover story utilizing the creative talents of celebrities and artists. SNS was an adaptation of *Unleavened*, a star-studded, song-filled celebration modeled on the traditional order of the Haggadah performed to a celebrity audience in 2017. *Unleavened* was created by two of SNS's executive producers, Benj Pasek and Adam Kantor, as a project of the creative organization StoryCourse. *Unleavened* featured Broadway stars performing original material inspired by the themes of the Passover story, renditions of songs such as "Go Down, Moses" and "Over the Rainbow" by Grammy award-winning artists and the narration of the real-life exodus story of Mohammad al Samawi, a refugee from Yemen (Rosman 2018; StoryCourse 2020). Though SNS presented itself as an innovative response to COVID-19, like any interpretation of the Haggadah it built upon extant paradigms and introduced new framing and content in response to the challenges of the times. Both *Unleavened* and its 2020 digital offshoot SNS were funded by Reboot, an organization that seeks to promote the talents of Jewish artists and to incubate Jewish cultural arts projects with the ultimate agenda of showcasing Judaism as meaningful, accessible, and avant-garde to a generation of unaffiliated American Jews who ostensibly eschew institutional Judaism

as irrelevant, otiose, or hollow to their beliefs or lifestyles (Lambert 2015; Laderman 2019; Reboot 2020).¹

For the production team of SNS, the experience of making the seder offered catharsis during a time of unprecedented isolation, as well as an opportunity for Jewish exploration and learning as they adapted the Passover Haggadah for the purposes of light entertainment. The executive team of SNS included Benj Pasek, recipient of a Tony Award for his work on the musical *Dear Evan Hansen*, Broadway stars Adam Kantor and Erich Bergen, and head writer Alex Edelman, an award-winning stand-up comedian. For this group of creatives, furloughed from their usual venues of artistic expression, SNS provided, in the words of one of its executive producers, “an outlet for our professional energies and our religious energies and our desire for community, and our desire to make something that has quality.” “I was supposed to go home to metro Detroit for the seders,” one of the producers explained, “and so this felt like a way for me to celebrate with my chosen family of artists, by putting together an event.” For the production team, creating SNS fused Jewish ritual practice with Jewish art. One executive producer remembered “bawling” during the first production meeting, explaining, “I knew I was missing a Jewish experience, I wasn’t with my family, and I was lonely when COVID started. It was from the beginning highly emotional.”

Making SNS was not merely another job, but an opportunity for the production team to create a Jewish experience for Passover that integrated their Jewish identifications with their professional skills as artists and creatives. In fact, most of the production team, and the cast of the seder, contributed their time and talents without remuneration. During interviews, the producers of Saturday Night Seder reflected candidly on the fact that the project was enabled by the labor of volunteers who, in other circumstances, would have demanded compensation at rates that may have stalled the production entirely. The social isolation of the pandemic brought together a group of people who saw Saturday Night Seder as an act of Jewish and creative therapy. “We had all this talent out of work,” one of the producers explained, “these people who literally have nothing to do. Something like this would never happen again.” The collective spirit engendered by spending long hours on video conferences putting the seder together persisted among the group long after final edits were complete. The production team watched the broadcast together, via Zoom, and 6 days later they gathered for a virtual Shabbat celebration facilitated by one of its featured participants, Rabbi Dana Benson. As Benson recalled, though the team had already met for a programmatic evaluation of the Seder and its critical reception, they wanted an additional opportunity to reflect upon their contribution to Jewish life during COVID-19, about what felt meaningful, and the contributions they were proud of.

¹ Reboot specifically engages the talents of artists and creatives to develop new approaches to Jewish life in America, an enterprise centered around the annual Reboot Summit, “a closed gathering that convenes a diverse group of prominent Jewish change agents in an intellectually-provocative environment that inspires them to discover new ways to engage with their Judaism.” “All Reboot projects,” the organization claims, “imagine Jewish tradition and ritual afresh” Reboot. (2020). “About Us.” Retrieved September 8, 2020, from <http://www.rebooters.net/about-us..>

The production team represented a range of denominational, secular, and other Jewish identifications, and the negotiation of their internal Jewish diversity afforded opportunities to explore contemporary American Jewish pluralism during writing and production. In a retrospective on the Seder he titled "Remote Producing as a Religious Experience" published in the *Hollywood Reporter*, Benj Pasek recalled that the team would meet for daily 17 h Zoom calls in which "biblical material was adapted by atheists and blasphemous jokes about Moses were penned by people who keep kosher" (Pasek 2020). Early in the process of constructing SNS, the production team decided that its cast should similarly represent a diverse spectrum of Jewish identifications, leading to lengthy discussions about borders and boundaries and about the normative claims made on Jewish ritual made by various sectors of denominational Judaism. Because SNS was ultimately a fundraiser, the team was also acutely aware that, to be successful in raising money, the production would need to represent diverse American Jewish voices. Drawing from the production team's own personal and professional networks, the cast ultimately brought together rabbis affiliated with some of the most prominent communities in contemporary American Judaism, including Sinai Temple's Rabbi David Wolpe, Ikar's Rabbi Sharon Brous, and Chabad Twitter personality Rabbi Mordechai Lightstone, alongside up-and-coming LGBTQ Rabbis Dana Benson and Amichai Lau-Levi, African-American rabbinical student Kendell Pinkney, and Daily Show correspondent Dulce Sloan, the daughter of a messianic Jewish mother. The seder's celebrity cast interspersed seasoned Jewish media personalities such as Bette Midler, Jason Alexander, and Chuck Schumer with actors and artists known for more recent work, including Billy Eichner, Ilana Glazer, and Beanie Feldstein. The eclectic cast, one executive producer explained during an interview, sought to showcase the diversity of contemporary American Jewish life without sacrificing the normative claims made by its more traditional religious constituents, "a sort of centrist but inclusive depiction of Judaism, something that was progressive but grounded in tradition."

The script for SNS exhibited its grounding in tradition by showcasing Hebrew and Yiddish, celebrating the performance of Jewish ritual, and highlighting the timeless relevance of the Exodus narrative. Its categorical use of a religious format and celebration of a complex religious ritual marked a departure for the representation and celebration of Judaism in public media. SNS was not entertainment that included scenes of religious ritual as the background for a story arc; rather, the ritual itself provided the narrative, script, and setting of the production. As one Twitter user commented during the broadcast, "After watching so many Christmas specials through the years, I am so happy ya Jews are getting the Passover special we deserve."² Indeed, SNS presented Passover as a quintessentially insider Jewish ritual activity. Translation for Hebrew and Yiddish terms utilized within the Seder were deliberately omitted from the captioning for SNS, restricting its interpretation to an audience familiar with the liturgy. The blessing over wine and the Four

² All Twitter and YouTube comments appear throughout this chapter in their original forms as published by their authors. We have intentionally chosen not to correct or mark errors in spelling, grammar, or punctuation.

Questions, sung by Alan Menken and Idina Menzel, respectively, were offered in Hebrew without explanation, contextualization, or even transliteration. As one of the seder's executive producers explained, the creative choice to eschew translation was a deliberate signal that the production was created primarily for Jews familiar with Passover traditions rather than as a vehicle for public education about Jews and Judaism. Use of insider language peppered the broadcast, with author Sarah Hurwitz explaining that Passover honored the story of "our ancestors," and actor Joshua Malina encouraging viewers to give "chai, twice chai or ten times chai" to the CDC Foundation. Children who appeared in a video montage during the Four Questions filmed themselves singing in front of Israeli flags and sporting AZA and BBYO shirts, proclaiming their organizational commitments to membership in the tribe.

Yet, while SNS was an unambiguously Jewish production, it simultaneously signaled to non-Jews that their presence at the table was welcome too. If the quintessentially educational dimension of the Haggadah, alongside the injunction "let all who are hungry, come and eat," typically encourages Jewish hosts to welcome non-Jews to their physical seder tables, the virtual table of SNS was no exception. Singing, "tonight it doesn't matter if you are or aren't a Jew," host Jason Alexander welcomed viewers of any religious proclivity in his opening song, and throughout the broadcast SNS emphasized that the resonance of the Haggadah's story of freedom from oppression extended beyond the Jewish people. Broadway star Billy Porter offered a heartfelt rendition of the spiritual "Let My People Go" to accompany Henry Winkler's paraphrasing of the Passover story, and scholar Reza Aslan joined the cast to explain the relevance of the narrative to Christians and Muslims. In her portrayal of the prophet Elijah, Bette Midler quipped that she was "like Santa Claus, but my people leave me wine instead of cookies and milk," assuming that her interlocutors included viewers more familiar with Christmas holidays than Jewish ones. SNS even feted non-Jews for their Jewish content knowledge expertise, with Muslim fashion expert Tan France offering tips for exodus appropriate clothing to Jewish actress Beanie Feldstein, and non-Jewish stars Josh Groban, Darren Criss, and Rachel Brosnahan berating host Jason Alexander for omitting Had Gadya, the Four Sons, and Hillel's sandwich.

That SNS was designated for a broad audience was signaled not only by its welcome of non-Jews, but also by celebrating alterity and difference within contemporary American Judaism as well. Instructions on how to prepare an ersatz seder plate were offered by Michael Solomonov, famous for his celebration of Israeli cuisine, while Harvey Fierstein confessed his apathy for the modern state of Israel with a resigned "Miami, it ain't." The humor of the seder parodied both religious literacy as well as religious illiteracy, implying that Jews from a range of educational backgrounds and of both religious and secular proclivities could share in a collective Jewish joke aimed equally at their expense. The cast of SNS included four rabbis, a rabbinical student, and the author of a popular introduction to Judaism, yet their elucidation of the Haggadah and the Passover story was offset with jokes that played upon the trope of American Jewish apathy towards religious ritual and the Hebrew language, as the audience was told that "we don't have time for you to google-translate Hebrew." Comedian Nick Kroll, in this vein, recalled that because he didn't know the Four Questions "I just used to sing Hakuna Matata and then my

grandfather would cry in embarrassment." "For those who don't know what Passover is all about," explained author and actress Julie Klausner at the beginning of the seder, "congratulations, you skipped Hebrew school." More than just acknowledging Jewish difference, the production crew tacitly staged the broadcast as a virtual *kibbutz galuyot* that could bring together Jews of different orientations and proclivities to celebrate Jewish peoplehood. As head writer Alex Edelman explained during his guest appearance in the seder, "what you realize from this communal holiday, is that we all are alike."

Yet while the demographics of the SNS cast offered a representative sample of the new realities of contemporary American Judaism, its script, paradoxically, remained mired in tropes from the past. SNS embraced language and aesthetic forms that have long been used to define the American Jewish experience in Ashkenazi terms. SNS featured abundant references to the Ashkenazi Jewish experience along with tropes and stereotypes about rhinoplasty, neurotic mothers, and culinary creations like gefilte fish and tzimmes. The strategic deployment of klezmer tunes, of Yiddish words such as *putz*, *alte kaker*, *macher*, and of Yiddish-inflected English further combined to underscore the production's Ashkenazic-centric orientation as representative of *the* American Jewish experience. In confining the scope of contemporary American Jewish pluralism to a predominantly Ashkenazi cultural milieu, what SNS left behind is as telling as what was put in. The singer Josh Groban and actors Darren Criss and Rachel Brosnahan were included in the cast because they were assumed to conform to Ashkenazi-inflected stereotypes of what Jews look like and because they play Jewish characters on television. Yet the same openness could not be said for non-Ashkenazi Jews, or for global Jewish celebrities. There was a conspicuous absence of non-American Jews in general, and of Israeli celebrities and actors in particular, even with the recent popularity of Israeli television shows such as *Shtisel* and *Fauda* being streamed to large and highly receptive audiences in the USA. Save for the last skit in which actor-playwright Harvey Fierstein renounced the literal meaning of the phrase "Next Year in Jerusalem" that traditionally concludes the Passover seder, there was no mention of the modern state of Israel.

These additions and omissions infused SNS with a particularly American Ashkenazi valence. It overwhelmingly featured a USA-based cast, despite the affordances of its virtual format for including international participants, and it relied upon stereotypes of the Ashkenazi American Jew for much of its humor. This domestic stance came through not only in the content of the production, but in the form in which it was wrapped and delivered. The broadcast echoed the style of telethons, a distinctly American cultural invention popularized during the second half of the twentieth century that successfully combined eclectic entertainment, heart-tugging narratives, and powerful fundraising objectives put together under the cloak of American civic engagement, consumerism, and altruism (Longmore and Kudlick 2016). SNS directly framed its charitable appeal using the discourse of *tzedakah*, enacted satirically by actor Joshua Malina in an "early Kol Nidre appeal" skit—a familiar genre of fundraising at American synagogues during the High Holidays when attendance is at its peak. Nonetheless, the producers decided not to raise money for a Jewish cause, but rather for the CDC Foundation—an independent nonprofit organization established by Congress to mobilize philanthropic and private sector resources to

support the Centers for Disease Control. Doing so served to remediate the Jewish notion of *tikkun olam* in an American idiom, thereby positioning SNS as an American cultural product, and not solely as a Jewish one. Recalling Daniel Itzkovitz's astute reflection about representations of Jewishness in contemporary cinema, "if we can learn one thing from the 'new Jews,' it is that they are in some elusive essential way the same old Jews, or more so" (2006, 249) reminds us that SNS was both an innovative response to a novel situation as well as a continuation of genres and tropes that have long been synonymous with American Jewry. Invoking the old genre of the telethon and well-trod stereotypes of American Jewish identity while also seeking to attract the new Jews of the twenty-first century through its insouciant content and diverse cast, SNS laid the contours for a broad audience to engage the themes of Passover in the service of a philanthropic effort at a moment of broad societal disjuncture.

Reception

Saturday Night Seder was first broadcast at 9 pm EST on 11 April 2020, after the conclusion of the third day of Passover on the US East Coast. It was shared and consumed across an ecosystem of technological platforms that created an interlocking network of spaces for Jewish gathering and conversation. It was broadcast on saturdaynightseder.com through sponsor BuzzFeed's channel on video streaming site YouTube, from which it was streamed by viewers on personal devices, as well as in virtual gathering spaces enabled by video conferencing technologies that enabled groups to experience the seder as a collective Jewish event. Long after the initial broadcast had concluded, commentary on the Seder continued to be shared on social media site Twitter as well as on the YouTube page on which the video was hosted, creating opportunities for viewers to engage in collective conversation across time and space absent of any personal connections to one another.³

If SNS offered a virtual ritual theater for the celebration of Passover during COVID-19, Twitter functioned as a technological peanut gallery for viewers to share reactions and responses in real time. Twitter responses to SNS overwhelmingly expressed gratitude for an unabashed celebration of Judaism and Jewishness during a holiday spent isolated from friends and family. Head writer and executive producer Alex Edelman tweeted throughout the broadcast, offering exposition and behind-the-scenes stories about how contributors came to be included in the playlist to enthusiastic responses from viewers. As one user quipped, referencing terms used by Joshua Malina in SNS, the volume of conversation about this post-holiday seder on Twitter made the social media site the "cheder of the later seder."

³ In focusing on these two social media sites, we recognize that there are demographic disparities between the audiences that various social media platforms attract. While Twitter and YouTube attract a generally older demographic for example, TikTok and Instagram are largely used by younger audiences. Because we do not investigate the offline identities of the users that we analyze here, focusing instead on posts as acts of presencing, we do not focus on that disparity in this present paper.

Twitter users wrote about their own personal responses to the seder and also about experiencing the broadcast with family members. A common thread within tweets featuring the hashtag #saturdaynightseder was of adult children troubleshooting technology challenges so that older relatives could view the seder online. If the dominant learning archetype of the traditional Passover seder is of adults answering questions posed by children—represented through the Four Sons and through the singing of the Four Questions by the youngest child—then, in the context of SNS, the barriers presented by technology subverted the paradigm of content knowledge expertise. Adult children were called upon to help parents access the YouTube platform or to stream the broadcast from a phone to a larger television screen. As one tweet complained, "I don't have kids but I spent the last 30 min homeschooling my grandparents how to watch the Saturday Night Seder on YouTube. #ifeelyourpain #quarantine #homeschooling #saturdaynightseder." Though members of a family might have been physically isolated, through the sharing of technological expertise viewing the seder became a family affair as well as an educative one. Twitter users also wrote about using instant messaging technologies to create a family viewing experience, as one user shared, "Watching the #SaturdayNightSeder with the entire extended family group text and it's the same eyeroll as if Mom was right here." Indeed, a common theme within the #saturdaynightseder Twitter feed evoked comparisons between the polished use of technology by SNS and the seders that users had organized with family. As one user shared, "SaturdayNightSeder just makes me laugh because my virtual seder consisted of, can you hear me? hello? I can't see you, and most importantly muting my grandma on zoom." The dominant theme of comparison between SNS and the family seders experienced by Twitter users however, centered on Idina Menzel's singing of the Four Questions. Amidst reports of "crying" and "kvelling," Twitter users shared effusive emotional reactions to her rendition of the passage, concluding that they would no longer perform the Four Questions at future family seders but would be content to play a recording of Menzel's vocals instead. As one user tweeted, "sorry, all future youngest children. The Four Questions bar has been set at @idinamenzel."

Accolades and tributes to SNS posted to the Twitter hashtag #SaturdayNightSeder emphasized its cathartic qualities as a public celebration of Jewishness. Twitter users applauded SNS's public mainstreaming of Jewish practice in a secular media space as a celebration of Jewishness in contemporary America. As one tweet described, SNS "was beautiful, healing, gave me much Hebrew school nostalgia, and made me feel more connected to my heritage than I have in a long time." Twitter users expressed joy at SNS's unabashed celebration of Passover and Jewishness and appreciation for celebrities publicly claiming Jewish identifications. "The star-studded #SaturdayNightSeder reminded me why it matters so much to see famous people be visibly and publicly Jewish," contributed one Twitter user, while another suggested that the affective experience of watching SNS could be described as "The Joy of Watching Celebrities Proclaim Their Jewishness." Twitter users contrasted the public celebration of Passover in SNS with the disappointment of their own COVID seder experiences. As one user shared, "like most of us, I missed out on my traditional #PassoverSeder w/family & friends this year. Yes, it has been sad to spend the holiday alone. Thankfully @frandrescher, @BetteMidler, @BenSPLATT

and many more have made my #Passover2020 EPIC w/ #SaturdayNightSeder.” Perhaps the most poignant tweets within this genre referenced losing family members to COVID and the catharsis supplied by SNS in the midst of personal grief. Framed as a thank you to the production team, one user wrote, “Thank you @benjpasek & @erichbergen & all who brought us #SaturdayNightSeder. We just lost my Dad so Passover this year is not only complicated but also sad and tough. Seeing everyone come together on Sat & having some laughs was just what I needed!”.

Similarly evoking the theme of catharsis within Twitter contributions to #SaturdayNightSeder were tweets that claimed appreciation for SNS as a mitigation of marginal Jewish identifications and practices. Viewers took to Twitter to pronounce that enjoyment of SNS vindicated their attachments to Judaism, despite their self-identified liminality towards religious practices. Tweets in this category typically opened by referencing a statement of alterity towards Jewish religion, or a non-halachically observant activity such as eating pizza in the context of Passover, and offering affective responses to SNS as an indication of deep Jewish attachments. As one user shared, “I’ve never been super into holidays anyway, tbh—not that I judge others; it’s just not something I seem to be capable of really being excited about, kind of like how being a spiritual person just doesn’t really compute for me. But #SaturdayNightSeder, y’all.” Tweets describing the experiences of interfaith families followed a similar structure, offering SNS as the Jewish complement to Easter celebrations. “Mixed faith family: I (the Jew) am cooking bacon, while kiddo does her Easter egg hunt, and then we are going to re-watch #SaturdayNightSeder with the whole family,” and “True to my brand, I am currently watching the #SaturdayNightSeder, and waiting for my daughter to fall asleep, so I can hide eggs and chocolate around the apartment and remember to retrieve a carrot she confused with afikomen, and hid under a chair.”

The media platform YouTube also provided SNS viewers with opportunities to convene, discuss, and engage with others about their viewing experiences. If SNS viewers on Twitter highlighted their experiences on watching the broadcast with family members as a form of domestic Judaism, they took to YouTube to reach beyond the immediate confines of their homes in an effort to connect and create a sense of community with other viewers. For a Jewish senior citizen watching the feel-good broadcast alone in her home, engagement in the YouTube universe afforded the opportunity for sociability, as reflected in the personal narrative she chose to share:

My dad was a doctor. He had a patient who was an elderly widow. Every Christmas she would call with some “issue”. My father would make a house call, rolling his eyes because she was “just lonely”. We were Jewish. Note the past tense. Everyone else is gone. I am 70. And I have become that lonely lady. Only for me it’s the problem of having no one to even Zoom seder. So MANY THANKS! To the creative, superlative performers who wrote and performed. And also to ALL of the many commenters who welcomed this beautiful expression of Jewish tradition. Your warmth made all the difference for me.

The multiple responses to this post read as an act of community formation defined through the principles of welcoming the stranger, on one hand, and Jewish

peoplehood, on the other. Responses included: "Hugs from Jersey City xoxo," "Hugs also from Ventura, California...Never alone," "Hugs from NYC!" and "You are never alone. Warm hugs and more hugs from Dubai." Recognizing the remote nature of Passover celebrations as a result of COVID-19, one person added: "I wish I'd known you didn't have family to zoom-seder with. You're always welcome at our table, virtual or otherwise (we're in NYC & the suburbs)." Along with the linguistic expressions of physical outreach, namely the lexical items "hugs" and "xoxo," geographic identifications in these responses work together to overcome the shallow, impersonal, and often confrontational aspects of social media that invariably characterize this modality, so that personal connections over geographic space could be established. YouTube interactions like these offer a corrective to Turkle's notion of "alone together," that is, being physically present in one space but mentally or emotionally engaged elsewhere, as well as exemplify how one medium—in this case, the broadcast itself—became imbricated in webs of connectivity in unpredictable ways (Turkle 2011). If the COVID crisis amplified feelings of isolation, SNS played an important role in launching opportunities for public expressions of togetherness and solidarity, extending one's immediate family to include the entirety of the Jewish people, as reflected in one YouTube proclamation: "I've never felt more connected to a global mishbocha" (sic).

The YouTube context also provided an opportunity for viewers to extend the boundaries of Jewish communal participation to users who were not religiously Jewish or, in fact, Jewish at all. Sentiments like "Anyone else a Christian and still watching this?" were common, as self-proclaimed atheists, Muslims, Messianic Jews, Protestants, and Catholics announced their presence as viewers of SNS. More than acknowledging their emotional connection to the SNS's themes, YouTube users representing different religions and levels of religiosity engaged in interfaith public dialogues about religion and Judaism, often at times with a sense of surprise, as one YouTuber shared: "As someone who knows nothing of the Jewish faith I feel much closer to my neighbors in just seeing how alike we are than not through this virtual seder. (Not a sentence I thought I'd type in my lifetime)."

Among self-identified Jews, YouTube, like Twitter, provided a platform to display Jewish pride and to commend celebrities for publicly celebrating their Jewishness:

Beautifully done! Couldn't be prouder to be a MEMBER OF THE TRIBE!
 Jews in showbiz ROCK because they went to HEBREW SCHOOL, MISSED
 OUT ON BASEBALL PRACTICE, WERE BAR/BAT MITZVAHED
 AGAINST THEIR WILL, RAN AWAY TO THE BRIGHT LIGHTS..... and
 then came home to roost.

Comments about Jewish pride shared on YouTube also extended to "performances of discovery" of Jewish ancestry, both biological and desired (Fox 2020). YouTube commenters revealed family biographies that established Jewish genetic roots and connection to the broader Jewish narrative. As one YouTube user noted, "I recently found out my great grandparents were Jewish and fled Spain. This is wonderful. Thanks so much." Responding to this post, others commented, "Oh this is lovely!!! ...My ancestors were Sefardita Jewish! Not long ago was confirmed to us!" Yet, others did not need genetic proof linking them to the Jewish experience, as one

poster commented: “I swear I was born in the wrong body! Watching this makes me feel even more like I should have been born Jewish.”

Taking a more serious and contemplative tone, other self-identified Jews on YouTube reflected on the ongoing struggle of determining Jewish insider identity within the context of broader acculturation into American sociocultural norms. While one YouTube user noted, “So often, as Jews, we have to leave our religious traditions at the door in order to achieve mainstream success and recognition,” another poster marked his reconnection with Judaism after experiencing exclusion by more traditional gatekeepers: “As a gay man I’ve spent much of my life running away from Judaism, but after a long journey I have discovered that Judaism has not once given up on me, and will always be waiting with open arms when I need it most.” Representing alternating sides of Jewish visibility and estrangement, YouTube posts created space to engage in broader questions about American Jewish life not directly related to SNS specifically or even to Passover more generally.

Just as YouTube provided a low barrier opportunity for viewers on the margins of Jewish life to claim Jewish identification, it also created space for Jewish viewers to perform expertise and display Jewish knowledge, even if that knowledge was questionable on the facts. Responding to comments by self-identified non-Jews who noted their lack of familiarity with the Passover seder, one YouTube user sought out the opportunity to explain the requirements of Passover, and then supplemented information about other Jewish holidays with different religious practices:

L’Chiam (sic). Passover is definately (sic) the most shareable holiday in Judaism. You are required to explain the holiday as part of the holiday. It’s not like Tu BiShvat where you start shaking some weird plants in all directions and sleep in a tent that is required to have holes.

His comment was immediately followed by a nonjudgmental response stating “awww wrong holiday (you are thinking of sukkot) but this comment made me smile.:),” itself a form of knowledge showcasing. Another interaction initiated by one viewer’s exclamation that popcorn was needed for Idina Menzel’s upcoming performance was greeted by others debating the acceptance of *kitniyot* on Passover, and the difference between Sephardic and Ashkenazi dietary customs on the holiday.

The range of Jewish expertise showcased in the broadcast, from esteemed rabbis to non-Jewish television actors alongside its direct appeals to non-Jews and to Jews of various Jewish identifications, gave implicit permission to an equally diverse spectrum of viewers to participate in an online conversation about the nature of Jewishness, a “cheder of the later seder” inspired by the motifs and the themes of Passover during COVID-19. If the SNS broadcast afforded the production crew and performers with opportunities to showcase diverse connections to Judaism and Jewishness, then Twitter and YouTube offered a virtual venue for its viewers to participate in similar acts of presencing Jewish authority and knowledge. Although more traditional physical spaces of Jewish practices and learning certainly do not foreclose on the possibility of such interactions, the relative anonymity of a YouTube username or a Twitter handle emboldened knowledge showcasing by a variety of social media commentators, both those with extensive Jewish knowledge, as well as those without.

Reflecting on the Affordances of SNS and Cultural Arts during COVID-19

Inviting viewers into a celebration of Passover was that unrestricted by denominational identification, halachic practice,⁴ or even, at times, Jewish knowledge, Saturday Night Seder proclaimed the vibrancy of Jewish religious ritual, even while affectionately mocking Jewish and Hebrew literacy and playing off stereotypes and other well-worn tropes. SNS blurred boundaries of religious expression by utilizing a secular media streaming site to enthusiastically affirm Jewish difference, providing a platform for celebrities, artists, and public figures to claim Jewish connections and publicly share their ritual practices. The range of themes engaged in SNS, as well as the diversity of its cast yielded a broad range of affordances for its creators as well as its viewers. For the production team, the Zoom platform utilized to create and edit the broadcast stimulated Jewish learning, the negotiation of Jewish difference and representation, and the navigation of normative religious claims. Once available on the internet, the platforms of Twitter and YouTube afforded viewers opportunities to reflect upon contemporary Jewish life in America and beyond, turning SNS into a site for the Jewish and non-Jewish public to engage in these learning and interpretative processes as well.

Although much of the reception of SNS took place on secular social media channels far removed from the typical settings of Jewish institutional life, the project was also tightly interwoven within mainstream American Judaism. It included prominent rabbis and communal figures in its cast, and bore the imprint and financial backing of Reboot—a major Jewish philanthropic nonprofit organization active in some of the most widespread initiatives to promote engagement with Jewish content among contemporary American Jews through art, culture, and technology. Hence, SNS can be viewed as a product of a broader philanthropic strategy for making ritual and religious participation attractive to contemporary American Jews through engagement with the cultural arts. While viewers frequently announced their alterity to mainstream American Judaism in the comments about SNS that they posted on social media, in engaging with a Reboot product they were in fact participating in one of its major representative organizations, potentially without realizing they were doing so.

The creation and reception of Saturday Night Seder thus offers a window into the affordances of cultural arts media for convening Jewish conversations across fault lines often considered endemic to American Jewish communal life. SNS afforded the creation of a range of technologically facilitated communal spaces in which viewers with or without commitments to mainstream Jewish institutional life could participate in the seder's project of "presencing"—announcing and reflecting

⁴ An important exception to SNS's accessibility lies in the halachic prohibition on listening to music in the period between Passover and Lag B'Omer. The broadcast was carefully scheduled to stream after the conclusion of restrictions on the use of technology had ended for traditionally observant Jews on the east coast, yet for this population the *halachic* restrictions imposed to signal the mourning customs of the period of *Sefira* between Passover and Lag B'Omer could prohibit viewing a song-filled spectacular even after restrictions on technology use had ended.

on Jewish commitments and identifications. Shachar Pinsker has suggested that in thinking about the production of discourses of Jewish modernity, paying attention to the spaces that allow modern Jewish creatives to gather is critical for understanding networks through which Jewish belonging has been negotiated—even if the cultures they fostered became difficult to pinpoint as “Jewish” in traditional terms (Pinsker 2018, 5). So too Saturday Night Seder functioned as a space that allowed not only creatives to reflexively imagine their relationships to Jewishness, but that invited viewers isolated within their own homes into a series of technologically facilitated spaces to continue the conversation in numbers that more traditional cultural arts venues can only aspire to reach.

In every generation, Jews have reimagined the Passover Haggadah in parallel to the particular dilemmas posed by contemporary Jewish life. The distinctive feature of that project in 2020 lay in the affordances of digital media to not only create a platform for the performance of a seder, but to engage a range of platforms that continued to convene conversations related to its content many months after the broadcast first aired. The range of responses to SNS recorded on Twitter and YouTube highlight the multivalent ways that virtual platforms afford opportunities for the Jewishly engaged, the Jewishly marginal, and the not Jewish at all into communal conversations about Jewish identity and identifications. Jewish cultural arts, particularly when produced and shared virtually, offer an expansive invitation into Jewish communal space. Saturday Night Seder illustrated that in the hands of artists and celebrities, the themes of Haggadah could be marshalled not only in support of a fundraiser in the midst of a global pandemic, but as the instigator for conversations about Jewish belonging across the global space of social media as well.

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