

Grandma has the cure for **PASSOVER STRESS**

By Todd Svanoë, *The Capital Times*



DAVID SANDELL/THE CAPITAL TIMES

Anabelle Argand, 82, holds a Haggadah, the book that tells the Passover story. It will be read at Seder meals at Jewish homes throughout Madison, beginning at sundown today. Behind her are Seder plates available at her Beth Israel Center gift shop at Mound and Randall streets.

For many, the “gift shop grandma” is saving the day, as last-minute purchases complete a season of preparation. It’s time for Madison’s Jewish community to begin the ancient celebration of Passover.

Stationed at the Beth Israel Center at Mound and Randall streets, the community grandma sells everything but the lamb shank and parsley that adorn the Seder plate during this high holiday meal – the setting for the celebration and recounting of the exodus of the Jews from Egypt.

To Jewish kids, Anabelle Argand is an awesome “bubby” who lets them dip into secret stashes of sweets on credit. To the non-observant Jew, she’s the surrogate aunt who will guide them in holiday-keeping without cross-examination or chiding.

A young woman slipped in Thursday, seeking the 82-year-old’s direction. “What do I need?” was all she needed to ask. The woman’s husband was not Jewish, she explained, and she did not even own a Seder plate. She’d be starting her tradition on a shoestring.

She found this a conservative synagogue of the liberal-hearted. “We have a plate for every budget so no one has to be without one,” said Argand.

The woman paid \$3 for her plate and received much more in encouragement. “Come again. We’ll chat some more. You’re most welcome to use our library.”

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“People to people” is how Argand describes her philosophy. “You don’t have the money? We can work it out. It’s not the sale that matters, but that they leave with something extra special.”

The shop is bustling during this busiest week of the Jewish year. Homes are being scoured to remove every last crumb of

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chametz or leavened food, a spring cleaning by command of the sacred Scriptures: “For seven days eat bread made without yeast. No yeast is to be found in your houses.” (Exodus 12:15-19)

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The lamb shank, for example,

stands for the animal whose blood God commanded to be placed on the lintel and doorposts of Jewish homes as a sign. When the angel of death came to slay the firstborn children of the Egyptians — the final plague against this slaveholding people — he would “pass over” the Israelite homes and spare them.

When Pharaoh finally relented, the delivered Israelites scurried from their dwellings with bread dough before yeast had been added — thus the timeless memorial to bread without leaven.

“Mom’s just begging us to eat all this leavened food up before tomorrow,” Josh Onheiber, 12, one of Argand’s most faithful patrons, said Thursday.

On Thursday night the Onheiber family searched their house

for remaining fragments of the forbidden food, using a candle and feather in a traditional rite of cleansing. Final pieces are planted around the house for children to find and throw into a fireplace to be burned.

Onheiber attends Hebrew School every Tuesday and Thursday at Beth Israel and stops in every time for Argand’s taffy, red licorice and soda, which she pulls from beneath her desk. “Most of the time I have hardly any money,” he admits, “but she has this account and a piece of paper.”

Rumor has it she’ll let an outstanding balance run for as long as a month before subtly suggesting it’s time to pay up, another child said.

Beth Israel member Judith

Zukerman-Kaufman's preps Thursday brought her to the synagogue shop in search of a cassette tape, this year's children's prize for finding the afikoman, a select piece of matzah cracker hidden during the Seder celebration.

Mention of the prize sparked conversation among shoppers Lisa Stein, 30, and Robin Lee Garber, 30, visitors from the Hillel Foundation on the University of Wisconsin-Madison campus.

"I liked our family tradition," said Stein, "because no matter who found the afikoman, all the children received gifts. It took out all of the competitiveness."

"My family had the best Seder I've ever seen," said Garber, a native of Philadelphia who will join about 100 for the service at Hillel tonight. "We'd love to sing and harmonize and would go past midnight. Our Seders rocked."

This may not have been a traditional experience of

the ancient meal, but most did see the joy of family togetherness as an inseparable feature of the feast. When asked what made all the work of preparation worth it to her, Sandy Schwartz, 66, said it would simply be looking up and seeing her family gathered at the table.

Her three sons' families from Missouri, Illinois and Wisconsin were en route, she said. A place with a cup of wine will also be set for Elijah, in keeping with tradition.

"At the right moment, I will open the door to allow the spirit of Elijah to come in and everyone will look at the glass to see if the wine goes down." Passing such traditions on to her 2- and -8-year-old grandkids was what Passover was all about, she said.

For those who have no

family to join, a welcome must always be extended, said Argand.

"All who are hungry, come and eat," chimed Argand and Zukerman-Kaufman in chorus, quoting the Haggadah, a book which contains the Passover story and liturgy.

That principle has led to occasional romancing at this springtime meal, said Zukerman-Kaufman, 60.

"Part of Passover is you cannot turn somebody down who needs a place to eat, so oftentimes people match up couples saying, 'Well, he couldn't go home for the holidays, so we invited him to our table.'"

"I'm looking for a nice husband," said Stein bravely as the women howled.

"Put that in the paper. It's part of the holidays. I'm serious."