

The CJN goes one-on-one with Amy Acton:

State medical director talks Judaism, Israel, COVID-19 and more

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Dr. Amy Acton, the director of the Ohio Department of Health, called her first virtual seder a “healing” experience with family and friends – and one in which she had new insight on the Exodus story.

“That journey is a journey we’re all on collectively,” she said in a CJN interview April 9, just after participating in her daily press conference with Ohio Gov. Mike DeWine. “The symbolism is there for me. And in the haggadah last night, there were

a few parts that took me by surprise ... that I’ve interpreted anew.”

Specifically, she said she found new meaning in song lyrics that spoke of “the need to persevere in spite of the fact that you aren’t being understood.”

Acton is among those taking center stage during the COVID-19 pandemic that has rocked the world. Her efforts with DeWine to take, in some cases, unprecedented early action to stem the pandemic are showing evidence of paying off. Projections as early

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Dr. Amy Acton



Park Synagogue daylong telethon to benefit health care workers

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Think variety show. Think tzedakah. Think telethon. Rabbi Joshua Skoff already has.

The senior rabbi at Park Synagogue in Cleveland Heights and Pepper Pike will host an all-day Zoom event April 19 at which members of Park Synagogue will daven, perform, study, laugh and exercise together in order to raise funds to buy personal protective equipment for health care workers and food staples for those in need.

“One-hundred percent of funds received will purchase PPE (gloves, masks, gowns) for local health care workers

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Video chats invite families around country to enjoy seders ‘together’



Ilana Kramer set up her seder plate along with her laptop to lead seders for her family virtually this year. | Submitted photo

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Joshua Kramer is used to planning seders – in the flesh.

In each of the last two years, the Cleveland resident spent months planning seders for 60 to 70 people in his mother’s extended family.

“It’s a good thing we weren’t planning on doing that this year,” Kramer said, adding the only reason the family’s so-called “super seder” wasn’t planned for 2020 was Passover’s first nights fell on weeknights.

And due to the COVID-19 pandemic and abiding by social distancing, Kramer hosted seders this year in a different way and for a much smaller crowd. He was the Zoom host while his sister, Ilana, a dental student

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as last week predicted a peak of 1,600 cases per day, as opposed to early models that predicted 9,800 new cases per day – a positive change recognized both in the state and nationally. Now, it's all about continuing with caution and making sure residents know early success doesn't mean the threats are even close to over.

Jackie Jacobs, president emerita of the Columbus Jewish Foundation and now-consultant at JewishColumbus, called Acton a “rock star” in both the Jewish and general community. Jacobs had worked with Acton while she was working at the Columbus Foundation.

“She’s really been holding all our hands from a virtual distance throughout the entire crisis, at the side of the governor,” he said, “Always deferential to him, but together, I think Ohio has been a leader throughout the nation.”

IN THE TIME OF A PLAGUE

At the April 8 press conference, Acton spoke of Passover and her religiously blended family. Her husband, Eric Acton, is Episcopalian, as are his children.

“Chag sameach to all my friends,” she said. “I am Jewish. Even my background was a mixed background growing up, and my children were raised in the Jewish faith.”

As she discussed her own Judaism, she appealed to religious leaders to find ways to celebrate without congregating.

“One of the worst things we can do is congregate in any way that puts our population at risk,” she said, referring to social distancing.

She discussed her own plan for a virtual seder that night.

“My friends dropped off – I couldn't cook – they've dropped off the foods I love,” she said. “And I love to cook. That's another thing I haven't shared – my matzah ball soup is the best, just saying. But, you know, my friends cooked for me, they dropped it off on my doorstep, and we're going to be together talking about the story of the plagues of which have very poignant meaning as we go through what we're going through.”

Acton said she has finger puppets depicting the plagues from when her children were in preschool at the Jewish Community Center of Greater Columbus, where she was a board member. She still uses a children's haggadah dating to when her now-adult children were young.

“It was probably a month ago when I said something about locusts and firstborn sons because ... there was a period at which every single thing you could think of

wasn't happening,” she said. “I remember thinking of the plague puppets ... for our seder, and sort of the importance of the fact that you do have these dark shadowy times, but can emerge together as a people. And I see that same story and metaphor in other traditions.”

The festival of freedom came at a particularly trying time for Acton, who has been at the forefront of efforts to protect Ohioans from COVID-19. During the April 9 press conference, shouting could be heard outside the Ohio Statehouse in Columbus by protesters who objected to Acton's stay-at-home order.

“You know, this was when the weather got better and people feel because we've done such a good job in Ohio, we're not seeing the horrors that others are living,” she said. “There are horrors going on in Ohio, I must admit that. I think as people are paying attention to the news, but they're not seeing ... sort of the scale of Italy or New York, and then they sort of feel that this was all for naught or a hoax. And it's quite the opposite. It's this long, slow struggle of patience and perseverance that we have to have, and our very success is begetting a different set of problems where folks ... sometimes don't even believe that this virus is real.”

CONCERNS FOR HUMANITY

Social justice work in Israel and more broadly has been a part of Acton's life and work.

“I had the opportunity, more in the 1990s, to spend a lot of time in Israel pre-intifada times, where there was a lot of coexistence work going on,” she said. “I was able to spend time in Palestine and had the opportunity to see children being educated and learning both Hebrew and Arabic, and people being on the same soccer team and being able to coexist, so some of those things really influenced me.”

She draws little distinction between volunteer and professional commitments.

“My work has always sort of morphed – it's never stayed inside the lines of work or volunteerism because I think the social justice threads are there,” she said. “And the same things are, you know, playing out in the social determinants work, and this homelessness work and things I've worked on in philanthropy.”

Prior to taking on her current role, Acton worked at the Columbus Foundation as a community research and grants management officer, focusing on community leadership and nonprofit effectiveness, according to her biography on the Ohio Department of Health's



Dr. Amy Acton kvells about her matzah balls. | Screenshot / The Ohio Channel

website. The Youngstown native has more than 30 years of experience in medical practice, government, community service, health care policy and advocacy, academic and nonprofit administration, consulting, teaching and data analysis, the website said.

She drew parallels between her previous work and her current position regarding the disproportionate impact of COVID-19 on African Americans and Latinos. At the April 9 press conference, she invited Dr. Anthony J. Armstrong, president of the Ohio State Medical Association, to speak on the issue.

Acton previously served on the board of Columbus Jewish Day School in New Albany, where her children attended. She noted the school was founded on the teachings of Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, who was famous for his civil rights activism. She also served on the board of Congregation Beth Tikvah in Worthington, where she was a member.

“That was a great home for me,” she said of Beth Tikvah. “It is a Reform synagogue, but one that was started by a group of university professors, many of whom I knew.”

Jacobs could not recall when he met Acton, but was aware of her volunteer work for the former Jewish Federation of Columbus and her status as a board member at the Columbus JCC.

“It was always a pleasure working with her,” Jacobs said, adding that she is “warm, helpful, unassuming, but effective.”

He said he was surprised when DeWine tapped her for his cabinet.

“It's like when you see somebody who you know suddenly gets statewide recognition for a major, major department head like that – You feel great. You say, oh my G-d I know ... that person. She's gonna

do great,” he said.

“What I never knew until I read about it was more about her personal background,” Jacobs said, referring to Acton's experience of childhood homelessness and abuse. “She really comes from a place where she can identify with the people that she serves because she apparently did not have an easy life. And it just gives her more credibility and empathy and my deepest respect for overcoming all of her personal challenges to rise to the very top of leadership, and doing it so well.”

GOVERNOR'S PHILOSOPHY

At the March 25 press conference, DeWine discussed his decision to hire Acton in February 2019 to lead the \$1.4 billion state health department.

“I wanted someone who could be a spokesperson, who was articulate and could talk directly to other people in the state,” he said. “I had no idea that we were going to end up with this: Dr. Acton was going to be on TV every day at 2 o'clock.”

He said Acton has built up Ohio's public health efforts on both the state and local levels.

Acton, 54, also taught at The Ohio State University in Columbus, where she received her master's in public health. She received her medical degree at Northeastern Ohio University College of Medicine in Rootstown.

Acton's early and frank advice to Ohioans to help flatten the curve and her frequent promises to tell Ohioans “what we know when we know it” has inspired compliance from residents across the state, even as the virus has spread.

When asked about Ohio's early intervention efforts to protect its residents,

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at The Ohio State University in Columbus, coordinated and led seders for their siblings, parents, nieces and nephews.

Their parents, Roger and Sylvia Kramer, raised their family at Park Synagogue in Cleveland Heights and Pepper Pike, where Joshua Kramer is a member.

The Kramers held an adults-only first-night seder starting at 8 p.m. April 8. The second seder started at 5 p.m. April 9, and was geared toward the youngest participants.

They used their family Haggadah and sang Passover parody songs.

“For the first night we were on the Zoom for about two hours,” said Kramer, adding the adults had dinner together by Zoom and did the second half of the seder after eating. “We were really able to have conversations and a focused seder.”

Kramer said he found the experience satisfying.

“It was a unique Passover for us,” he said. “But obviously it’s important to us to

get together and observe this holiday to all of us.”

Ilana Kramer said many of her commitments at OSU have been canceled because of COVID-19, so she had time to plan both seders. She stripped the seder to its bare bones for the children’s version, she said, crediting her 6-year-old niece in Detroit with coming up with a virtual way to conduct an afikomen search, using an “I Spy” concept.

The highlight for her was hearing the Four Questions chanted by the two oldest children.

“I think we would definitely do it again,” she said, if the situation warranted it. “Hopefully, we’ll all be together in person for the next holiday.”

Rob Rosen, who lives in Columbus, said his Zoom seder with family in Cincinnati, North Carolina and Florida, went smoothly.

“We didn’t have any technical issues, believe it or not,” he said. “My mom and dad were on their cell phones together in the same room.”

He said the only glitch was following the

Haggadah’s instruction for everyone to read in unison. Zoom’s sound quality limitations presented issues.

“We kind of went through and skipped through the all read,” he said. “It was too difficult to do it that way.”

He said the family sung three songs together.

“The fact that we’re going through this pandemic that we’re going through and the ability for everybody to kind of participate, be together, was worth it more than anything else,” Rosen said. “It wasn’t a very long ... traditional service, but the fact that we were all able to see each other, communicate, kind of laugh and giggle, it was very family oriented and enjoyable.”

For Craig Smylie, a multimedia teacher at Jefferson Area High School in Jefferson, Ohio, hosting a Zoom seder seemed like a relatively simple proposition.

After the COVID-19 pandemic took hold in Ohio, he taught his grandmother, Francine Smylie of Moreland Hills, how to use Zoom to hold virtual medical appointments.

“She was adamant that after learning about Zoom that we do a virtual seder,” Smylie said. But as the seder started, Francine Smylie had trouble with the technology in seeing and hearing at the same time. Smylie said as he tried to troubleshoot in vain, some attending had a second virtual seder to get to and were impatient.

“Needless to say, it was an absolute train wreck,” he said. “We did get Grandma, by the end of it, to get both video and audio and be able to see at least a few members.”

But the seder was both delayed and rushed.

Nonetheless, Francine Smylie was grateful for being able to have the connection.

“They’re not letting me out of the house,” she said, adding that she usually hosts seders with help from her family. “I could hear the whole thing. It really was something really special to me and my family to be able to do that. ... It meant a lot – the world – to me.”

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DeWine said he tried to make decisions based on facts.

“Throughout my career in public service, as I look back on it, the biggest mistakes I’ve made have come about because I didn’t have enough facts,” he said. “I didn’t drill down deeply enough, I didn’t ask enough questions, I didn’t ask the right people. And so we saw this coming, as everybody did, and you know, I started asking the questions.”

DeWine then credited Acton.

“As you can see, I’ve got an amazing director of health,” he said, “We also put together a group of 14 doctors around the state of Ohio who we call upon to get advice from,” DeWine said. “In addition to that, we reach out beyond Ohio to doctors and people who are doing the modeling, experts on pandemics. So we were just gathering all this information as we could get it, and the decisions were really, really based on that.”

“I think the essential job of government is to protect people, particularly the most vulnerable,” he said. “And so these decisions, I’m not going to say they were easy, but they were decisions we made based upon how do we protect people’s lives and how do we set Ohio up for the future.”

UNCHARTED TERRITORY

Reflecting on the pandemic, Acton said there have been many difficult decisions.

“It has been truly a gauntlet,” she said. “I don’t want to sugarcoat any of it. I know there’s a lot of social media things out there, but I think probably the most difficult thing for me was recognizing early on that something was not right.”

She suspected Ohio had community spread prior to having tools to head off the virus.

“And that’s when I realized that there wasn’t a perfect playbook for this outbreak, that it was going to be so huge and unprecedented in our lifetime, and that our infrastructure throughout our country had really been neglected in terms of this work, in terms of public health,” she said. “The blessing in that is that I have a governor that’s very deeply committed to the health and well-being of Ohioans, and he really digs deeply, asks the hard questions and was able to really learn from the science and really think proactively to protect Ohioans.”

She said DeWine has tremendous energy.

“I mean, he pushes all of us,” Acton said. “He’s 73 years old, and I’m exhausted at 54. I can’t keep up with him – that’s no joke. I went to Haiti with him and (his wife) Fran because they do a lot of work in Haiti on behalf of their daughter who died, Becky. And I could not

keep up with him.

“He just so does not want to see anyone get hurt, or one doctor have to make a difficult decision like we see all around the world. And so that compassion I think is very authentic. I hope people can see that. And people have all different views and all different politics, but that kind of thing definitely falls away and that is maybe one of the gifts of this moment.”

Acton said Ohioans’ efforts have paid off in flattening the curve so health care workers have time to respond and hospitals have adequate beds and ventilators during the surge.

At the April 9 press conference, Acton spoke of an emerging plan that will lead Ohio out of the crisis, but said she still has deep concerns.

“It’s going to be a long journey, a year to two in length ... before we really have immunity in our whole population,” she said. “So my worry is this quick success we’ve had, this enormous success we’ve had, that with the good weather, or with just our exhaustion with it – and that’s known, that’s been studied too – that people let up and that we’ll see spikes and resurgences. So, you know I worry that people will have the faith, the trust to kind of carry on through this period. It’s a war, but it’s a silent enemy.”

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and food staples for those in need,” Park Synagogue’s website states in the announcement of “The Park Telethon! 10 hours of making a difference.”

The event takes place from 8:30 a.m. to 6:30 p.m. April 19.

“We want to find a way to help those on the front lines.”

Rabbi Joshua Skoff



Skoff

“This is a totally unique thing in this period,” Skoff told the CJN. “We want to find a way to help those on the front lines.”

Skoff said Zoom has offered a way to maintain bonds during the stay-at-home order and social

distancing required to prevent the spread of COVID-19.

“It’s provided a great deal of connectedness through our community,” he said of Zoom. “The seders worked very

well.”

He said he thought of the idea to fill a need.

“I just felt that we needed to do some active tzedakah,” he said. “I am bringing together talent from within the congregation. First of all, just in terms of sheer entertainment I think they’ll enjoy it.”

The event will feature cooking demonstrations, sing-a-longs, exercise classes, yoga, current event discussions and Yiddish classes. The full schedule is available April 17, Skoff said.

Also, Skoff foresees one of the benefits of attending the telethon is for Park

members to learn about each other.

“The most interesting group of people are the people you overlook,” he said.



WHAT: “The Park Telethon! 10 hours of making a difference” to raise money to buy personal protective equipment for local

health care workers

WHERE: Desktops, laptops, smartphones, tablets, etc., via Zoom
WHEN: 8:30 a.m. to 6:30 p.m., April 19

FOR DETAILS AND TO DONATE: Visit parksynagogue.org