

Passover

Summary: Passover, or Pesach, is an eight day festival celebrating the exodus of the people of Israel out of Egyptian slavery. During this period, Jews abstain from leavened bread and eat only matzah (unleavened bread) to remember the hastiness preparing to depart from their homes. Jews also have a seder (literally “order”), a special meal featuring elaborate symbolism and a distinctive liturgy following the reading of a special prayer book that recounts the Passover story.

Passover, or Pesach, is a festival of deliverance, recalling the redemption of the children of Israel from slavery in Egypt more than 3,000 years ago. Lasting seven days in Israel and eight in the Diaspora, Passover is one of the most important holidays in the Jewish year, celebrating the journey of the people of Israel from slavery to freedom and recalling the nation-building experience of the Exodus from Egypt. In this way, it rejoices in the continuity of the Jewish people from ancient Egypt to the present.

Passover is also called the “Festival of Unleavened Bread” because when Moses gathered the Hebrew people together to lead them out of Egypt, there was little time to prepare for the journey. Rather than baking bread with yeast which would take time to rise, the people made unleavened bread. The eating of only *matzah*, or “unleavened bread,” over the eight-day period is one of the principal observances of Passover. Before Passover, observant Jews will thoroughly clean their homes, getting rid of *chametz*, anything made with leavening. The search for each and every crumb of *chametz*, often by candlelight, has become a lively part of the scrupulous observance of Passover, with some observant communities going through the kitchen with a blowtorch to burn away any crumbs. As the festival approaches, supermarkets stock boxes of *matzah* for Jewish families to purchase and some Jewish communities gather to participate in *matzah*-making demonstrations, recalling the labors of their ancestors in the hours before fleeing from Egypt.

On the first two nights of Passover in the Diaspora and the first night in Israel, Jews have a *seder* (literally “order”), a special meal at which friends and family gather around the dinner table and read the Haggadah (“telling”), the ritual book that recounts the Passover story. People most commonly hold *seders* at home with their own families and closest friends, for Passover is the most important home

ceremony of the Jewish religious year. In the United States today, it is also becoming increasingly common to hold public *seders*, sometimes using narratives which link Passover themes of oppression and liberation to events happening in today's world. In Denver, CO for example, women from all branches of Judaism gather for an annual women's *seder* which uses an egalitarian Haggadah. In remembering the story of how Jews were released from bondage, they focus on the liberation themes which continue to have relevance in their own lives. This Denver women's *seder* has met with such success and generated such enthusiasm that it has grown rapidly, and members have started selling their Haggadah packets so that this kind of *seder* can be duplicated by others. Since 2008, the Anti-Defamation League has hosted a Nation of Immigrants *seder*, welcoming hundreds of Jews and non-Jews alike to celebrate the spirit of resilience represented by the Passover story and to honor the city's immigrant communities. Increasingly, interfaith *seders* have gained popularity as opportunities to share elements of Jewish life and history with non-Jewish neighbors and friends.

The *seder* meal has a distinctive liturgical order and elaborate symbolism. The table is set with a special seat, place setting, and glass of wine for the prophet Elijah. In the middle of the table is the *seder* plate, which contains various foods arranged in a particular order. Each food is symbolic of aspects of the Jews' enslavement. For example, bitter herbs represent the bitterness of slavery, while *haroset*, a mixture of apples, wine and nuts, symbolizes the mortar used by the slaves in building for their Egyptian masters.

The youngest person present reads the Four Questions, beginning with "Why does this night differ from all other nights?" Each year the attendees at the Nation of Immigrants *seder* in Boston watch quietly as the hosting rabbi invites people to the front of the room to ensure that the first of the Four Questions can be read in as many languages as are spoken by attendees. Sometimes there are over 20 different native languages represented at the *seder*.

The unfolding story and sequential actions of the meal form a ritual response to these Four Questions, with all gathered around the table reciting the familiar words that express their identity and continuity with the ancient story of redemption. Every generation is to feel that they themselves experienced slavery's suffering and the joy of liberation: "We were Pharaoh's slaves in Egypt, and the Lord our God brought us forth from there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm. And if the Holy One, blessed

be He, had not brought our forefathers forth from Egypt, then we, our children, and our children's children would still be Pharaoh's slaves in Egypt." The story and ritual unfold, and toward the end of the liturgy there is a break to enjoy a special meal before the final prayers and blessings are said.

One of the final rituals of the *seder* is the children's search for the *afikomen*, the *matzah* hidden by the leader at the beginning of the *seder*. The interest of the children is sustained to the very end by the promise of the search for the *afikomen*. This *matzah* must be found and returned in order to complete the *seder* after the meal is over. When they find this hidden *matzah*, the children traditionally bargain with the leader to get money or toys in exchange. After the *afikomen* is found, the last taste on the lips of those who have observed the *seder* is the taste of *matzah*, the unleavened bread of the slaves Moses led to freedom. The evening ends with songs, often including the wistful words, "Next Year in Jerusalem!" In ancient Israel, Passover was also one of the three great agricultural festivals, falling on the first full moon of the springtime month of Nisan, a time of the first harvest, the barley harvest. Along with Sukkot and Shavuot, this became a time when people would, in the words of the Psalmist, "go up" to the temple in Jerusalem for the celebration with the first sheaves of the harvest. Seven weeks later comes the festival of Shavuot, the first harvest of wheat. In its historical interpretation, Shavuot became the festival that celebrated the pivotal event in Jewish history following the Exodus from Egypt: God's revelation of the Torah on Mount Sinai.