

Temple Israel Celebrates Passover

Some Background

1. **What is Pesach?** **Pesach** is a major Jewish spring festival, commemorating the Exodus from Egypt over 3000 years ago, whose ritual observance centers around a special home service (the *seder*), the prohibition of leaven (*chametz*), and the eating of *matzah*. The central meaning of Passover (Pesach) is liberation, and hence it is also called *zeman cherutenu*--the season of our liberation. Another name for Passover is *hag ha-aviv*--the holiday of spring. The Jewish calendar is set so that certain holidays always occur in a particular season of the year. Thus, the holiday of liberation is also the holiday of spring, not simply by coincidence but by design. Following the bleakness of winter when everything is covered with shrouds of snow, spring marks the rebirth of the earth with the bursting forth of green life. Similarly, a people ensnared in oppressive slavery, doomed to a slow process of degradation or even extinction, bursts forth out of Egypt into a new life's journey leading to a land flowing with milk and honey.

The uniqueness of Passover is encapsulated in a passage taken from the Haggadah: *In every generation, each person should feel as though she or he were redeemed from Egypt, as it is said: "You shall tell your children on that day saying, 'It is because of what Adonai did for me when I went free out of Egypt.' For the Holy One redeemed not only our ancestors; God redeemed us with them."* This passage teaches us that Jewish history is also a timeless present, that Passover is not simply a commemoration of an important event in our past--analogous to the Fourth of July--but an event in which *we* participated and in which we *continue* to participate. We are meant to reexperience the slavery and the redemption that occurs in each day of our lives. It is our own story, not just some ancient history that we retell at Passover.

To relive the experience, we are commanded to observe three rituals:

- To tell the story of the Exodus. As the Torah states: "Remember this day, on which you went free from Egypt, the house of bondage, how Adonai freed you from it with a mighty hand..." (Exodus 13:3).
- To eat *matzah*--unleavened bread. As the Torah states: "At evening, you shall eat unleavened bread" (Exodus 12:18).
- To refrain from eating or owning *chametz*--leavened bread. As the Torah states: "On the very first day, you shall remove leaven from your houses, for whoever eats leavened bread from the first day to the seventh day, that person shall be cut off from Israel" (Exodus 12:15).

The focus for the reliving is the *seder*. And the special pedagogic and liturgical tool that we use is the Haggadah. *Haggadah* comes from the root meaning "to tell" and reflects the purpose of the evening--the retelling of the story of the Exodus, especially to the next generation. To make sure that the story is told, the Four Questions are asked by the children, and it is the role of the adults present to impress upon the children the significance of the answers, for we understand what our children do not: that the future of the Jewish people lies with them. For that people to continue its 3000-year history, in every generation each of us and each of our children must feel as though they themselves were slaves in Egypt and were redeemed. In this way, each new generation can take its place in the chain of the Jewish people leading down from the Exodus to the present.

2. **How did Pesach, or Passover, get its name?** Actually, *pesach* has five different names, each of which carries a special significance:

- **Chag Ha-Matzot**, the Festival of Unleavened Bread

The name **Chag Ha-Matzot** has both agricultural and historical origins. Scholars of ancient civilizations tell us that prior to the Exodus from Egypt certain peoples used to harvest their spring barley crops and bake the first fruits thereof into special unleavened cakes. These cakes were then eaten as part of a ceremony expressing gratitude to their deity for an abundant crop.

As a primarily agricultural society, ancient Israel shared this custom investing it with powerful historical significance. The Bible tells us that the Jews had to leave Egypt in great haste. Exodus 12:34 records that, as a result, "the people took their dough before it was leavened." Later, in Exodus 12:39, the text relates that "they baked unleavened cakes of the dough which they brought forth out of Egypt, for it was not leavened; because they were thrust out of Egypt, and could not tarry." Finally, in Exodus 23:15, the historical bond is forged: "The feast of unleavened bread (**Chag Ha Matzot** you shall keep; seven days you shall eat unleavened bread, as I commanded you...for...you came out from Egypt."

- **Chag Ha-Pesach**, the Festival of the Paschal Offering

The name **Chag Ha-Pesach** also has agricultural and historical associations. According to some scholars, an ancient practice of primitive peoples involved sacrificing one lamb from each flock in order to please their deity and thereby protect the rest of the flock from harm. This paschal offering, or "pesach" became a pivotal element in the Exodus account.

During the night of the tenth plague, in which every Egyptian first-born son died, it was the blood of a sacrificial lamb, smeared on the doorpost of every Jewish home, which safeguarded the Jews from the angel of death. Exodus 12:11 says: "It is the Pesach of the Adonai." Verse 14 continues: "And this day shall be to you one of remembrance; you shall celebrate it as a festival to Adonai throughout the ages; you shall celebrate it as an institution for all time." And Exodus 34:24 specifically alludes to the Festival of Pesach (**Chag Ha-Pesach**).

- **Chag Ha-Aviv**, the Festival of Spring

Pesach is called the Festival of Spring because it always falls in the Spring of the secular calendar year. The Hebrew calendar date for the beginning of **Pesach** is the fourteenth of Nissan. Exodus 12:6 pinpoints the fourteenth day of Nisan as the holiday's date, as does verse 18. And Exodus 13:4 designates the "month of Aviv" (Nisan) as the designated lunar month.

- **Zeman Cherutenu**, The Season of Our Liberation

It was the particular genius of Judaism that it was able to take elements from three essentially agricultural festivals and mold them into a holiday celebrating the freedom of a people. The Exodus itself, the Festival of Matzot, the paschal offering, and the festive seder meal came to be a paradigm for liberation from tyranny and oppression.

Pesach endured through the time of Joshua (Joshua 5:10-11). Hundreds of years later, King Josiah was still instructing the people as to its observance (II Kings 23:21-23). The holiday and its powerful message continued to stir the Jewish soul. And so it was only natural that an evolving rabbinic literature in the first few centuries C.E. captured its essence by referring to it as **Zeman Cherutenu**, the Season of our Liberation. For as Moses said to the people (Exodus 13:3): "Remember this day, on which you went free from Egypt, the house of bondage."

3. **Why Did Pesach Emerge as the Most Popular Name for the Holiday?** This final name derives from Exodus 12:23, an account of how Moses promised the Israelites that God would "pass over" their homes during the terrible night of the slaying of the Egyptian firstborn. **Pesach**, or Passover, ultimately became the name which unified the many concepts embodied by the holiday. It endured throughout the rabbinic period and to this day as its most common designation.

4. **How Many Days Do We Celebrate Pesach?** The Torah commands an observance of seven days (Exodus 12:15; 13:6). Reform Jews and all Jews in the land of Israel follow this injunction. Conservative and Orthodox Jews outside the land of Israel, however, celebrate the festival for eight days. The additional day of observance outside of Israel dates back to 700-600 B.C.E. At that time, people were notified of a holiday's beginning by means of an elaborate network of mountaintop bonfires. To guard against the possibility of error, an extra day was added to many of the holidays. By the time a dependable calendar came into existence, around the fourth century C.E., the additional day was so deeply engrained in the observance of Diaspora Jewry that the talmudic sages made the practice *halachah*, law.

Chametz

1. **What is Chametz?** **Chametz** is a Hebrew word meaning "leaven." It is also the generic term for a class of foods which are traditionally prohibited during the holiday of Pesach. Rabbinic authorities defined **chametz** as any leavened product of five grains: wheat, oats, barley, rye, and spelt. Ashkenazi Jews later added rice, corn, peas, beans, and peanuts to those foods classified as **chametz**.

2. **Why is Chametz prohibited during Pesach?** The Torah specifically mentions **chametz** in three passages in the book of Exodus, with excommunication the severe punishment for consuming, carrying, or even owning **chametz** during Pesach. The disproportionate emphasis given to **chametz** in the Torah has led some scholars to theorize that this prohibition was originally a primitive, powerful tribal taboo. Later rabbinic authorities softened the penalties related to **chametz**, but there is no doubt that the laws were strictly observed and taken seriously.

3. **What are the rituals related to Chametz?**

- Those Jews who strictly observe Pesach thoroughly clean their homes just prior to the holiday, removing or setting aside all leaven in the process.

On the night before the first *seder*, the Mishnah ordains **Bedikat Chametz**, a formal search for leaven in the home. A blessing is recited, then the head of the household, usually accompanied by the rest of the family, moves from room to room. The house is darkened. The individual conducting the search carries a candle, a wooden spoon, and a feather. As preplaced pieces of bread (usually 10) are discovered, they are swept into the spoon with the feather. When the search has been completed, a special statement of nullification is recited, indicating that the house is now free of **chametz**.

- On the morning after the **bedikat chametz**, the tradition calls for a simple ceremony, called **Biur Chametz**, wherein the **chametz**, gathered the previous evening is burned. In traditional homes, this ceremony takes place before 10:00 A.M., after which no **chametz** is eaten until the end of Pesach.

- While the law calls for the physical removal of all personally-owned leaven from the home, the rabbis realized that this practice would impose a financial hardship upon those families who had substantial amounts of **chametz** products in their households. Therefore, the custom evolved of simply placing all leaven in a secluded part of the home and selling it, on paper, to a non-Jew. This "sale" is called **Mechirat Chametz**. At the conclusion of the holiday, the leaven was then repurchased by the family. At first, each family handled its own sale. Eventually, however, it became common for a single Jew, usually the rabbi, to conduct a single transaction on behalf of the entire community. In most Reform homes, leavened products are simply set aside for the duration of Pesach.

Matzah

What is Matzah? **Matzah** is the Hebrew word for "unleavened bread" and refers to the special waferlike food eaten by Jews particularly on Pesach.

What is the origin of Matzah? The earliest mention of matzah in the Torah occurs in Genesis 18:6 where it is recorded that Sarah served unleavened bread to the three strangers who visited her and Abraham at Haran. I Samuel 28:24 also relates a story in which matzah was served to King Saul by the woman at En-Dor. In both instances it is clear that matzah was a food hastily prepared for unexpected guests, allowing no time for leavening. Hence, the term matzah, or unleavened bread.

How did Matzah come to be associated with Pesach? Three passages in the Book of Exodus specifically command the eating of matzah during Pesach. The severe penalty for transgressing this *mitzvah*, cited in the Torah, is excommunication, especially if *chametz* was consumed instead of matzah. Modern Jews, of course, reject this severe approach.

The historical tie between Pesach and matzah is articulated in Exodus 12:34-39 and Deuteronomy 16:3. In the former instance, it is implied that we eat matzah as a reminder of the haste with which our ancestors had to leave Egypt, leaving no time to bake leavened bread. The Deuteronomy passage and the Haggadah refer to matzah as the "bread of affliction," alluding to the simple fare of the slaves in Egypt, and establishing matzah as a symbol of oppression.

How is Matzah made? Matzah is the unleavened product of one of five grains: wheat, oats, barley, spelt, or rye. Wheat, though, is most commonly used in making matzah. Until the 19th century, matzah was prepared exclusively by hand and baked in special ovens. Matzah must take no longer than 18 minutes to make, from kneading the dough to finished product.

There is no required shape for matzah. Until the advent of the matzah-baking machine in 1857, most matzah was round. This practice is derived from Exodus 12:39, which required the eating of **uggot matzah**. In Hebrew, the word *uggot* means "cakes," but it has the additional meaning of "circles." Thus, most Jews baked matzah according to this linguistic interpretation. Modern technology dictated a square shape for matzah, since the early machines could not be tooled for circular shapes. There is, however, no prescribed shape for matzah, and most Jews today consume either the round or square variety.

Temple Israel Celebrates Passover: The Seder Table

As the time for the seder approaches, after the house has been cleaned and the **chametz** removed, be sure that your seder table includes the following:

1. A Haggadah for each participant.

There are many fine **Haggadot** (plural of *Haggadah*) to choose from (in fact, there are more than 3000 published versions). The Central Conference of American Rabbis has published a beautiful one for use in Reform households. Beautifully illustrated by Leonard Baskin, the *CCAR Haggadah* is a wonderful choice for a seder in which the majority of those attending are adults.

For a seder where many children are present, or for families just learning how to conduct a seder, another choice for a Haggadah is *A Children's Haggadah*, written by Rabbis Howard Bogot and Robert Orkand and beautifully illustrated by Neil Waldman. The publisher is the Central Conference of American Rabbis.

For a Haggadah online, check out the one written by Rabbi Mark Hurvitz.

2. Festival candles and candlesticks.

The blessing for Erev Pesach is: *Ba-ruch A-tah Ado-nai E-lo-hei-nu Me-lech ha-olam, a-sher ki-de-sha-nu be-mitz-vo-tav v'tzi-va-nu l'had-leek ner shel Yom Tov.*

3. A Kiddush cup and wine for the festival kiddush.

In addition, every participant should have his or her own wine glass. We drink four cups of wine during the seder service as a remembrance of the four promises which the Torah tells us God made to our people in Egypt: "I will bring you out"; "I will deliver you"; "I will redeem you"; "I will ake you to me for a people" (Exodus 6:6-7). Many Reform Jews add a fifth cup of wine, calling to mind the plight of all Jews not yet free and/or our commitment to the State of Israel.

4. Elijah's cup.

The theme of redemption is expressed by the prayer for *Eliyahu ha Navi*, Elijah the prophet, to come speedily in our day. Historically, Elijah was a prophet from Gilead who was the outstanding religious leader of his time. The Bible records that he did not die, but was carried to heaven in a chariot pulled by horses of fire. For centuries, the legends and folklore surrounding Elijah have firmly established him as the forerunner of the Messiah. He is not considered to be the actual Messiah; rather, he will herald the future redemption of Israel.

The popular legend of Elijah quickly became associated with the Passover seder and its theme of redemption. Stories of Elijah visiting the homes of every Jewish family on Pesach probably stem from another popular view of Elijah as a kind of heavenly emissary sent to earth to combat injustice. A special cup is set aside for Elijah at our seder. That cup is filled to the top with wine. During the seder, the door is opened for Elijah. Tradition has it that if the cup of wine is diminished while the door is open, Elijah has come and the Messianic age is at hand.

5. Three whole matzot.

Three whole matzot should be set before the leader of the seder. Jewish custom has been that these matzot are contained in a special three-section matzah cover.

Why three? The top and bottom matzot correspond to the two chalot which tradition ordains for Shabbat, an extra portion for a special day. The third piece represents the matzah which Jewish law specifically ordains for Pesach.

This third, or middle matzah, also serves as the *afikoman*, or dessert, which is hidden away as the object of a search by children at the seder. Over the centuries, the three matzot have acquired special symbolic associations. Some say they represent the three patriarchs, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Others associate the matzot with the three categories of Jews in ancient times, Cohen, Levite, and Israelite.

6. The seder plate.

The idea of the seder plate, the *K'arah*, is recent. A special plate is not mentioned in the Mishnah's account of the seder, nor in the commentary on the Mishnah, the *Gemara*. In a commentary written about the year 1000, there is some mention of a basket into which all the symbolic foods were put. In fact, many Sephardic communities still use a basket for the seder objects. The plate itself is probably an innovation of about the 5th century C.E.

The first actual description of how the plate should be arranged comes from a commentator named the Maharil. His arrangement became the standard which we still follow.

The seder plate, also placed before the leader, contains the various symbolic foods referred to in the seder itself.:

- **A roasted shankbone, z'roah**--symbolic of the paschal offering brought to the Temple in Jerusalem in ancient times. Many Jews also see the shankbone as a symbol of God's "outstretched arm," (the word *z'roah* means "arm") helping the Jewish people in time of trouble. It is of interest to note that the Samaritans and Ethiopian Jews sacrifice a lamb on Pesach.

The shankbone is strictly a symbolic food. It is not eaten at the seder, lest one suggest that it is possible to engage in ritual sacrifice today. It is a custom not to eat any roasted meat at the seder, and certainly not lamb.

- **Maror, or bitter herbs**--usually a horseradish root or romaine lettuce, symbolic of the bitterness our ancestors experienced as slaves in Egypt. As with matzah, the eating of maror is a biblically commanded ritual act based on the prescription for the Passover celebration detailed in Exodus 12:8 ("And with bitter herbs they shall eat it [the paschal sacrifice]"). Maror is a taste of slavery. It is the bitter, pungent symbol of degradation, a reminder of the bondage in Egypt.

Zalman Schachter-Shalomi, a modern mystic and teacher, points out that the root word of "maror" is "mar," teacher. The maror teaches us that pain is sometimes purposeful. Like an alarm, a pain can be a warning of something amiss. Each of us experiences Egypt in a variety of ways. The maror of Pesach, like the shofar of Rosh Hashanah, comes to warn us, to teach us to learn from the bitterness which life hands us and to move on, ever on the road out of our personal Egypt.

- **Karpas**--a vegetable, usually parsley, symbolic of spring and its spirit of hope, as well as the Jew's undying faith in the future. Any green vegetable is permitted, and many Jews use lettuce or celery instead of parsley.

Karpas is the appetizer. While the Greeks began their feasts with the tickling of the palate, the seder begins by gently stimulating the imagination, inviting all present to explore and explain and make meaning of this historic eve.

In the days of the rabbis who composed the seder, dipping food was serious business. In the seder we have two instances of dipping food: *karpas*--a vegetable into salt water, and *maror*--a bitter herb into *charoset*. Dipping food was a sign of freedom. Slaves were not accustomed to dipping food or eating appetizers. Second, and much more intriguing, is the possibility that this dipping is a reminder of the actual paschal offering--the act which helped save the Israelites from the Angel of Death.

The seder was created in a context where the patterns of Greek and Roman banquets were part of the common culture. These banquets began with appetizers. Probably, in one way or another, the rabbis were influenced by these popular patterns.

- **A roasted egg (beitzah)**--which traditionally symbolizes the continuing cycle of life. It also reminds us of the special festival offering brought to the Temple in Jerusalem in ancient times. In addition, there are those who see the egg as a symbol of the Jewish people's will to survive. Just as an egg becomes harder the longer it cooks, so the Jewish people have emerged from the crucible of persecution as a strong and living people. The beitzah, like the *z'roah*, is strictly a symbolic food on the seder plate. It is not eaten at the seder. True, many eat hard-boiled eggs at the beginning of the meal, but not the beitzah from the seder plate, since it symbolizes the sacrifice which we can no longer bring.

- **Charoset**--usually a combination of apples, wine, walnuts, and cinnamon which symbolizes the mortar that our ancestors used to make bricks in Egypt.

The rabbis decided to temper the bitterness of slavery, as symbolized by the maror, by dipping the maror into charoset. Like matzah, charoset sends two messages simultaneously. On the one hand, charoset symbolizes the mortar with which our ancestors were forced to bake bricks in the grueling heat of the Egyptian sun. On the other hand, charoset is sweet, dulling the sharpness of the maror, hinting at optimism in the midst of degradation.

Charoset is one of the few ritual items at the seder which has no blessing. Unlike matzah and maror which are commanded in the Torah, charoset is a creation of the rabbis and, as such, does not require a specific blessing. Since it is also integral to the maror ritual, charoset is not a separate obligation at the seder, and thus, the blessing for maror encompasses it.

7. Salt Water.

A dish of salt water is placed on the table as a symbol of the tears our ancestors shed in Egypt. As explained above, the greens are dipped into the salt water.

The materials in this section were adapted from:

The Jewish Holidays: A Guide and Commentary by Michael Strassfeld, Harper and Row, 1985

The Jewish Home by Daniel Syme, Union of American Hebrew Congregations Press

The Art of Jewish Living: The Passover Seder by Dr. Ron Wolfson, The Federation of Jewish Men's Clubs and the University of Judaism, 1988