

# **The Jewish Center**

## **Holiday Guide to Passover**

### **From Start To Finish (And Everything In Between)**

[Ed. note: This article as well as recent articles on our holidays and traditions were written by Mindy Langer and other members of our Religious Affairs Committee; we're grateful for their ongoing educational efforts such as these articles.]

On the Hebrew calendar, Passover begins the same day every year: the eve of the 15th of Nisan. Known in Hebrew as Pesach, Passover is one of the best-known Jewish holidays, and is the one most universally celebrated by Jewish people. According to the 1990 National Jewish Population Survey, more than 80% of Jews have attended a Passover Seder, regardless of their level of ritual observation the rest of the year.

The origins of Passover can be found in the Book of Exodus, the story of the Jewish people's slavery in Egypt after the Pharaoh who valued Joseph's counsel dies and a new pharaoh arises who does not appreciate this past relationship. The Jews are forced into hard labor on Pharaoh's public works projects and persecuted in other ways, including the requirement to throw all Jewish male babies into the Nile immediately after their birth. This leads to the story of Moses, who is found floating in a basket and adopted by Pharaoh's daughter.

Moses grows up to be the leader of the Exodus of his people out of Egypt. The story of the Exodus is recounted in the text of the Haggadah, the book that is read during the Passover Seder. The holiday gets its name from the fact that during the tenth plague visited upon Pharaoh by God in order to force him to free the Israelites - the slaying of the first born - the Jews were instructed to place the blood of a lamb on the doorposts of their houses, signaling the Angel of Death to pass over their houses and spare their first born children.

On Passover, we traditionally celebrate with friends and family at the Seder. The word Seder comes from the Hebrew word for "order" because this is not just a regular festive meal. It begins and ends with special prayers and readings, and it includes rituals that are described in the Haggadah. The centerpiece of the Seder is the Seder Plate, which contains symbolic foods: the roasted egg (Beitzah), the greens (Karpas), the roasted shank bone - or beet for vegetarians (Z'roa), the Charoset (mixture of fruits and nuts and wine to symbolize the mortar the Israelites were forced to use when laboring on Pharaoh's building projects), the bitter herbs (Maror), and the lettuce (Chazeret). The Maror is a symbol of the bitterness of slavery; the shank bone and the Charoset refer directly to the story of the Exodus; and the egg and greens are symbols of spring and rebirth. At the Seder it is also customary to provide salt water for dipping the greens (symbolic of the tears of slavery and suffering), and to drink four cups of wine or grape juice

during the service. Probably the most commonly known symbol, however, is the Matzah, unleavened bread to remind us that the Israelites fled Egypt in haste, without having time to let their bread rise.

A well-known highlight of the Seder is the recitation of the Four Questions, traditionally by the youngest person at the table. These questions help to point out the differences between the nights of Passover and all other nights of the year, and serve as a jumping-off point for the retelling of the story of the Exodus.

On Passover, we are commanded to eat only unleavened bread (Matzoh) for the duration of the holiday (eight days traditionally in the Diaspora; seven days in Israel), and therefore it is customary to rid the house of all leavened food (Chametz) before the holiday begins. A very thorough spring cleaning is done, followed by the symbolic search for every last crumb of Chametz with a candle and a feather. It is traditional for Jews to ritually “sell” their Chametz to a non-Jew for the week of the holiday; the Rabbi can arrange this for us at The Jewish Center. For further instructions in the tradition of Kashrut for Passover, consult the document ‘Rabbinical Assembly – A Pesach Guide’ on the TJC website.

The basic parts of the Seder are as follows:

- *Kadesh* (blessing over wine);
- *Ur'chatz* (hand washing); Karpas (dipping greens in salt water);
- *Yachatz* (breaking the middle one of three matzoth and hiding the larger half for the children to find later);
- *Maggid* (telling the story of the Exodus); Rachtzah (washing again, saying the blessing);
- *Motzi Matzah* (saying the blessing “ha-motzi” and eating the matzah; Maror (dipping and eating the bitter herbs);
- *Korech* (eating a “sandwich” of bitter herbs and Charoset);
- *Shulchan Orech* (eating the meal!);
- *Tzafun* (finding and then tasting the *Afikomen* - the hidden matzah);
- *Barech* (blessing after meal);
- *Hallel* (singing songs of praise);
- *Nirtzah* (concluding the Seder).

This universal order of the Seder serves as a framework. Many families enjoy creative and varied traditions of their own as they participate in the Seder every year, sometimes changing them or adding new ones as their children grow and as new members join the family. There are many Haggadot available, to suit every age and level of tradition.

Another important tradition of Passover is to be sure that everyone has a place to attend and participate in a Seder. If you would like to share your Seder with someone who needs a place to celebrate Passover, or if you or someone you know would like to find a Seder in the area, please contact The Jewish Center office and a “match” will be made.