

P E S A C H

THE FESTIVAL

Pesach is a major spring festival, commemorating the Exodus from Egypt over 3,000 years ago, whose ritual observance centers around a special home service (the Seder), prohibition of leaven or *chametz*, and the eating of matzah.

Pesach is known by four different names, each highlighting a different aspect of the festival. *Chag Ha-Matzot*, Festival of Unleavened Bread, refers to the haste with which Jews left Egypt, with no time to leaven their bread. *Zeman Cherutenu*, the Season of Our Liberation, celebrates our freedom from bondage in Egypt. *Chag Ha-Aviv*, Festival of Spring, came into use because of the season during which Passover occurs.

Chag Ha-Pesach, Festival of Passover, developed as a name for the holiday to remind us of what Exodus 12:11 calls, “the Pesach of the Lord.” On the night of the tenth plague, every Egyptian first-born son was killed. The blood of a sacrificed lamb, smeared on the doorpost of every Jewish home, safeguarded these homes from the angel of death. This is the name that has become most popular, as we remember the “pass over” of God.

The Torah commands Pesach be seven days long, which Reform Jews and all Jews in Israel observe. Conservative and Orthodox Jews outside of Israel observe Pesach for eight days. In 700-600 BCE, an elaborate network of mountaintop bonfires alerted observers to the beginning of a holiday. An extra day was added to many holidays to guard against the possibility of error.

Chametz

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

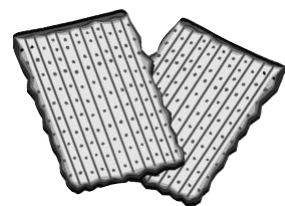
Jews who strictly observe Pesach undertake a thorough cleaning of their homes just prior to the holiday, removing or setting aside all leaven. The Mishnah ordains *bedikat chametz*, a formal search for leaven in the home on the night before the first Seder. A blessing is recited and the family moves from room to room in the darkened house. The head of the household carries a candle, a wooden spoon, and a feather. The feather is used to sweep pre-placed pieces of bread, usually ten, into the spoon. When the search is over, a special statement is recited indicating that the house is free of *chametz*.



The next morning, the *chametz* gathered the previous evening is burned in a ceremony called *biur chametz*. Most Reform Jews do not observe either of these rituals.

The custom evolved of placing all leaven in a secluded part of the house and selling it, on paper, to a non-Jew, to be repurchased at the end of the holiday. Eventually it became common for the rabbi to conduct a single transaction on behalf of the entire community, called *mechirat chametz*. In most Reform homes, leavened products are simply set aside without this formal act.

Matzah



We eat matzah during Pesach to remember our ancestors who fled Egypt so quickly their bread couldn't be leavened. Matzah is the unleavened product of wheat, oats, barley, spelt, or rye, although wheat is its most common basis. Matzah was once prepared exclusively by hand and baked in special ovens. The first matzah-baking machine was invented in Austria in 1857. Matzah was most often round before the advent of these machines, which could only form square sheets.

There are three types of matzah: *matzah shemurah*, regular matzah, and enriched matzah. *Matzah shemurah*, or watched matzah, is so called because the grain from which it is made is watched from the time it is harvested until it is baked, to make sure that no moisture comes in contact with it to initiate the leavening process. It is usually made by hand, and the whole process, from kneading the dough to the end of baking, does not exceed 18 minutes. After 18 minutes, the dough is considered leavened, and thus unsuitable for Pesach. Traditional Jews eat this matzah during the two seders, eating regular matzah for the rest of the holiday. Regular matzah is watched only from the time of milling and is usually made by machine, although still within the 18-minute time limit. Enriched matzah contains eggs, fruit, juice, milk, and wine to give more nutrition than regular matzah. Enriched matzah does not fulfill the commandment of eating matzah on Pesach.

Jewish law requires the consumption of matzah only during the Seder. Matzah may or may not be eaten during the rest of the holiday, so long as *chametz* is not eaten. The law also dictates that one should refrain from eating matzah for at least a day prior to the Seder so as to heighten enjoyment of eating it during the meal.

THE SEDER

The Hebrew word *Seder* means “order” and derives from the same root as the word *siddur*, prayer book. The Pesach Seder is the only ritual meal in the calendar with such a prescribed order.

Exodus describes the meal of lamb, unleavened bread, and bitter herbs which the Jews ate just before leaving Egypt. The Torah also commands parents to tell the story of the Exodus to their children. However, the Seder as we know it developed around 70 CE, the year of the Temple’s destruction. The Seder emerged as a means of preserving historical memory in a time of upheaval. The format came from Greco-Roman talk-feasts, great banquets which served as forums for philosophical discussions. The *haggadah* replaced philosophical discourse at the meal. The essential elements of today’s Seder were already established by the end of the first century CE—1,900 years ago.

The Seder Table

Certain items should be present at the Seder table. Each participant should have a *haggadah*. Festival candles and candlesticks should grace the table. In addition to a kiddush cup and wine for the kiddush, each participant should have a wine glass. We drink four glasses of wine during the Seder as a reminder of the four promises that God made to our people in Egypt: “I will bring you out,” “I will deliver you,” “I will redeem you,” and “I will take you to me for a people” (Exodus 6:6-7). We also set out a special cup for Elijah, symbolizing the potential for a messianic age, and thus our hope and confidence in the ultimate betterment of society.

Three whole matzot should be placed in front of the leader of the Seder. The top and bottom matzot correspond to the two *chalot* which tradition ordains for Shabbat. The third piece represents the matzah which we must eat on Pesach. Half of the third piece also serves as the *afikomen*, or dessert, which is hidden away for the children at the Seder to find. Some say the three matzot represent the three patriarchs, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob; others say they represent the three categories of Jews in ancient times, *kohen*, Levite, and Israelite.

Each participant should have the following items at their place: a wine cup, matzah, maror (usually horseradish), charoset, salt water, karpas (usually parsley), and a hard-boiled egg.

The Seder Plate

The Seder plate is also placed in front of the leader and contains the symbolic foods referred to in the Seder itself:

A roasted shankbone is symbolic of an offering brought to the Temple in Jerusalem in ancient times. Many also see it as a symbol of God’s “outstretched arm,” helping the Jewish people in times of trouble.



Maror or bitter herbs, usually a horseradish root or romaine lettuce, are symbolic of the bitterness our ancestors experienced as slaves in Egypt.

Karpas can be any green vegetable, usually parsley, lettuce, or celery. It symbolizes spring and its spirit of hope, as well as Jews’ undying faith in the future.

A roasted egg represents the continuing cycle of life. It is also a symbol of the Jewish people’s will to survive. Just as an egg becomes harder the longer it is cooked, so the Jewish people have emerged from persecution as a strong and living people.

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

A dish of salt water represents the tears shed by our ancestors in Egypt.

The Haggadah

The word *Haggadah* means “telling” and refers to the special book containing the order or prayers, rituals, readings, and songs for the Seder. It was originally appended to the prayer book and was not published as a separate volume until 1482, in Spain. The first Reform *haggadah* also first appeared as an appendage to the *Union Prayer Book* in 1892. It was published on its own as the *Union Haggadah* in 1907, to be replaced by the *CCAR Haggadah* in 1974. Even today, new editions appear almost every year, but all serve to “tell the story” of a people who believe in justice and freedom for all humanity.

Our Thanks To . . .

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