Passover

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The Social History of the American Family: An Encyclopedia

Passover

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Passover is a Jewish spring festival that primarily commemorates the ancient liberation of the Hebrew slaves and their exodus from Egypt and secondarily commemorates the liberation of Jews on various instances throughout history. The festival begins on the 15th day of the Hebrew month of Nisan (March or April) and lasts for seven days (eight days in the Diaspora). Passover consists of the traditions of (1) a pre-Passover home cleaning and (2) the Seder (meaning order), an evening ceremony on the first day of Passover that is usually observed with family and friends. Passover season is a time for Jewish families, regardless of the level of religious observance, to gather together to teach their children, connect with their Jewish heritage, and reflect on the liberation of their earliest ancestors from slavery in Egypt more than 3,000 years ago.

According to Jewish sacred texts, specifically the book of Exodus, the God of Israel charged Moses to lead the Children of Israel out of Egypt around 1250 b.c.e. Moses accomplished this task, amid refusals from Pharaoh to release the Hebrew slaves, with a series of 10 plagues upon Egypt. The last of these plagues was the plague of death upon every first-born (including animals). Hebrew households were passed over by this plague by demonstrating obedience to the God of Israel who commanded them to paint the lentils and door posts of their homes with the blood of a sacrificial lamb. Thus, the Passover festival is referred to in the Hebrew Bible as Pesach, meaning “to pass over” or “to spare.” The Passover festival is also referred to as Hag ha-Matzoth, meaning the “feast of unleavened bread.” Among other things, the Hebrews were commanded by the God of Israel to quickly bake their bread, not allowing time for leavening, so as to be ready for a speedy escape. Later generations of Hebrews or Israelites, subsequently called “Jews,” held an annual commemoration of this exodus from Egypt that has endured across more than three millennia to the present.

Based on the biblical commandment that prohibits both the consumption of chametz (leaven) and the presence of chametz in the house during the seven days of Passover, Jews have developed pre-Passover rituals and traditions of deep cleaning that include the burning of chametz. A typical observant Jewish family will spend several days prior to Passover ridding the entire house of even the smallest morsel of chametz, including crumbs from bread, cookies, and crackers. On the night and morning before Passover, formalized rituals concerning chametz are conducted.
These rituals, called _b'dikat chametz_ (searching for chametz) and _biyur chametz_ (burning chametz), involve (1) the disbursement of 10 pieces of chametz around the clean house to avoid blessing and searching for chametz in vain, (2) a recitation of a blessing by the head of the house concerning the commandment to remove chametz, (3) a formal search for chametz by the entire family using a candle and feather (or flashlight and dustpan), and (4) a ritual destruction of all chametz by fire at the home (usually outside in the yard)—or outside the synagogue with other members of the local Jewish community.

On the first night of Passover, a highly anticipated ceremony (including a formal banquet), often lasting as long as four or five hours, is observed in the home. The Seder ceremony is based on a biblical commandment to teach one's children about the exodus: “You shall tell your child on that day, ‘It is because of what the Lord did for me when I came out of Egypt” (Exodus 13:8). The order of the ceremony—including what to eat, when to eat, what blessings and questions to utter, etc.—is recorded in a text titled the _Haggadah_ (telling).

The Seder table is set with several items for each participant before the ceremony begins. These items include three stacked pieces of _matzoth_ (unleavened bread); a roasted egg and bone (e.g., shankbone) in remembrance of the Passover sacrificial lamb and festival offering in Temple times; bitter herbs (e.g., horseradish) representing the bitterness of slavery; _charoset_ (clay) to represent the mortar made by the Hebrew slaves to build structures for Pharaoh (the dish contains a mixture of chopped nuts and apples, cinnamon, and wine); a small dish of salt water as a symbol of the Hebrews' tears; parsley or lettuce to dip in the salt water; wine and/or grape juice; a wine goblet for each participant; and a cup for the Prophet Elijah (who, according to tradition, will one day return during Passover). This cup is placed in the center of the table in symbolic anticipation.

One of the primary purposes of the Seder ceremony is to answer one overarching question, followed by five specific questions. These questions, usually asked by the youngest child in attendance, are (1) Why is this night different from all other nights? (2) Why on all other nights do we eat bread or matzah, but on this night we eat only matzah? (3) Why on all other nights do we eat all kinds of herbs, but on this night we eat only bitter herbs? (4) Why on all other nights do we not dip our herbs even once,
but on this night we dip twice? (5) Why on all other nights do we eat sitting or reclining, but on this night we eat only reclining? The father responds to these questions with the statement, “We were slaves in Egypt, and God took us out,” teaching the child that the unique observances of the Seder remind the Jews of what God did for their ancestors on this night.

A family gathers for a Passover Seder service, the most widely observed Judaic practice worldwide. The Passover plate contains charoset (a mixture of apples, nuts, wine, and spices), zera (a poultry neck or shankbone), baytzah (a hard-boiled egg), karpas (usually parsley dipped in salt water), maror (bitter herbs), and chazeret (a bitter vegetable). Prayers and stories are told and 15 rituals are performed throughout the dinner.
The Passover experience, including the pre-Passover cleaning rituals and the Seder ceremony, is a testament to the salience of tradition and family-centeredness in the Jewish family and community. Numerous surveys and polls have revealed that a large percentage of American Jews, regardless of the level of observance, participate in Passover and agree that observing Passover is an important part of forming and maintaining a Jewish identity.

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See Also:

- Bar Mitzvahs and Bat Mitzvahs
- Judaism and Orthodox Judaism
- Religious Holidays

Further Readings


