

Passover: A Holiday Guide from The Curriculum Initiative



You shall observe the [Feast of] Matzah, for on this very day I brought your ranks out of the land of Egypt; you shall observe this day throughout the ages as an institution for all time.

Passover, or *Pesach* in Hebrew, is the most celebrated holiday in the Jewish tradition. The eight-day holiday commemorates the exodus from Egypt, and the formation of a disparate group of Israelite slaves into what becomes a Jewish people with a national identity.

“Passover” references the pinnacle moment in the Passover story, when the enslaved Israelites are planning to retaliate against the oppressive Egyptian Pharaoh with 10 plagues. At this point in the story, God issues the 10th, and most terrible plague, the killing of the

firstborn. On this night, God warns the Jews about this plague, instructing them to mark their doorposts with lamb’s blood to make Jewish homes distinguishable from Egyptian homes. And thus, God “passes over” the Jewish people, afflicting only the Egyptians. It is only after this final plague that Pharaoh is convinced to free the slaves.

Passover begins on the 15th day of the Hebrew month of Nissan, and continues for seven consecutive days.

In the first month, from the fourteenth day of the month at evening, you shall eat unleavened bread until the twenty-first day of the month at evening.

No leaven shall be found in your houses for seven days.

History

Passover’s historical significance is drawn from Exodus chapters 1 – 20, which recount the Israelites’ years of enslaved servitude to the Pharaoh. In chapter two, the Pharaoh’s daughter retrieves a baby from a reed basket and cares for him as her child.

Named Moses, meaning ‘drawn from the water,’ the child is raised knowing that he is an Israelite. God, aware of Moses’ unique power and proximity to Pharaoh, approaches Moses when he is an

adult, and petitions him to help the Israelites. Eventually, Moses agrees.

Assembling the Israelites into a unified group, Moses then combats the Pharaoh’s tyrannical rule with a series of plagues from God: blood, frogs, vermin, cattle disease, lice, boils, hail, locusts, darkness, and slaying of the firstborn. The Israelites save themselves from enduring the final plague, by marking their doorposts with lamb’s blood.

(Exodus 12:17-19)

History, continued

Today, Jews still mark their doorposts to remember this moment, but now with decorative *mezuzot*, small boxes filled with a scroll.

After the tenth plague, the Pharaoh lets the Israelites go. Fleeing with little time for preparation, they leave with bread dough on their backs, baking in the sun. The bread does not rise and becomes *matzah*, the cracker-like bread still eaten on Passover today.

Matzah — perhaps the most widely known symbol of Passover — is steeped in baking regulations, including that it must only contain flour and water, and that it is created entirely in under 18 minutes.

After 18 minutes, the flour and water begin to rise: this is forbidden.



When they arrive at the Red Sea, the Israelites stop in their tracks, unsure of how to proceed. The Pharaoh changes his mind and sends the Egyptian army to herd them back to his land. As the army approaches the Israelites from behind, the great sea splits open like a mouth and the Israelites proceed through hastily, the water closing in on the Egyptians following them.

Finally on a path to freedom, the Israelites continue to wander in the desert, for forty years before they reach the land of Canaan.



Bedikat Chametz :

A holiday that celebrates freedom, Passover ironically imposes a bevy of restrictions upon its observers.

From the dietary restrictions during the eight days, to the cleaning and cooking preparations in the days and weeks leading up to it, getting ready for Passover can be a chaotic frenzy.



Chametz is the name for all foods that are not kosher for Passover. That includes all products made from wheat and most other grains, including breads, cookies, cakes, crackers, cereal, and noodles.

Tradition prescribes Jewish households to get rid of all products made with *chametz* before Passover.

Observance

Passover is grouped with Sukkot and Shavuot as the three pilgrimage festivals very closely linked to the seasons in which they take place. These were the three times of year when Jews traveled to the Temple in Jerusalem to make sacrifices. After the destruction of the Temple in 70 CE, however, animal sacrifices ceased, and the nature of the Pesach observance — like all Jewish ritual observance — had to radically change to accommodate this loss. Specifically, prayer replaced sacrifices.

For Passover, observance transformed into the *seder*. The *seder*, which means order, is the central Passover ritual that commemorates the Exodus. Typically, it is a formal gathering around a dinner table composed of many rituals that help each person feel as if he or she has actually lived through the historic redemption. As it says in the Mishnah: "In every generation, a person is required to view himself as if he or she went out of Egypt," (Mishnah Pesachim 10:5).



The Haggadah

The *haggadah* (from the Hebrew root "to tell") serves as the *seder's* liturgy and guidebook. A storybook composed of texts, songs, and customs, the *haggadah*, in essence, is a "multi-media" presentation of the Exodus: people hear, feel, touch, taste, and smell the story. The *haggadah* should be thought of as a guidebook, not as a textbook. Seder participants should feel free to improvise on the *haggadah's* structure and bring to the ceremony texts, songs, and food that help them feel closer to the story of redemption and nationhood. Today there are many artistic and interesting *haggadot*, including those with feminist, social justice and environmental themes.

The first documented evidence of the Haggadah is found in the Mishnah (circa 200 CE).

The Haggadah began to be copied as a separate book in the 12th century.



The Seder Plate

The seder plate is the centerpiece of the Passover table. A dish with five or six sections, each part calls attention to a different aspect of Passover.

Karpas—A Green Vegetable

Karpas symbolizes the spring and represents the themes of rebirth and rejuvenation. *Karpas* is any green vegetable, like celery or parsley. The sixth place on some *seder* plates is for a second type of *karpas*.

Marror—Bitter Herbs

Marror gives us a taste of how bitter slavery and lack of freedom is. Many people use Romaine lettuce and horseradish for *marror*.

Charoset—A Sweet Mixture of Apples, Nuts & Wine

Charoset resembles the mortar the Israelites used to lay bricks as slaves. The Talmud says that it is also there to dilute the harshness of the *marror*. *Charoset* is a pasty mixture of nuts, dates, apples, wine, and cinnamon.

None who have always been free can understand the terrible fascinating power of the hope of freedom to those who are not free.

- Pearl S. Buck



Zero'ah—The Shankbone

We place a roasted bone on the Seder plate to commemorate the sacrificial lamb offering brought during the Temple period. Any roasted bone, or a roasted beet – as some vegetarians use – is fine.

Beitzah—The Egg

The round egg also symbolizes themes of cycles and rebirth, as well as the other Temple offerings. Instead of a second piece of meat, we use a roasted egg – which is traditionally a symbol of mourning – to remind us of the Temple's destruction.

The Omer

The 50-day period between Passover and the next Jewish holiday, Shavuot, is known as the *Omer*. The word *omer* means barley in Hebrew, and refers to the spring barley festival, as well as the measure of barley that was offered as a sacrifice on the second day of Passover in the Temple. Some people count the 49 days between Passover and Shavuot, which commemorates the giving of the Torah: this countdown to the *omer* symbolizes the Israelite's excitement about receiving the Torah.



The Other “Faces” of Passover

Passover has other names that speak to the varied moods and meanings the holiday evokes, as well as to some core beliefs that emerge from the Jewish tradition.

Chag Ha'aviv—The Holiday of Spring

Passover is in the spring, making it a holiday of beginnings, of fertile potential. Its mood reflects the time of year in which it takes place, and reminds us of a critical theme in Jewish tradition: we have the potential to start anew. Like the world that renews itself each year, so too we can renew ourselves, and relationships, and realities.

Passover also has roots in Canaanite springtime harvest festivals, with remnant rituals like the prayer for dew, and the counting of the *omer* that bridges two different spring harvest periods.

Chag Hacherut—The Holiday of Freedom

Freedom is another central theme of Passover. Leaving the bondage of slavery behind, the Israelites set forth to discover what it means to be liberated. Paradoxically, it is as an emancipated people that they become a community bound by certain laws. As Jews, an unorthodox concept of freedom is defined by this moment; it becomes clear that Judaism is not governed by individualistic ideas of independence, but rather by a commitment to laws that are somewhat restrictive. These restrictions enable individual achievements and communal potential.

Chag Hamatzot—The Holiday of Matzah

We eat *matzah* to remember the Israelites' haste to leave Egypt. This aspect of *matzah* reminds us to trust our instincts, and to be present in our actions. *Matzah* also symbolizes humility. Unlike *challah*, which has richness in presentation and texture, *matzah* is quite humble-looking (and tasting). *Matzah* is a reminder for us to appreciate the richness of our daily existences, and the freedoms and luxuries that we normally take for granted.

Matzah Brei Recipe

3 pieces of matzah
3 eggs
Warm water
1 tbsp butter or margarine

Crumble the *matzah* with your hands into a bowl of warm water. Let this sit for a minute, and then drain and squeeze out the remaining water.

Beat the eggs lightly and mix in the wet *matzah* pieces. Season with salt and pepper.

Heat up a skillet on medium high heat with the butter or margarine and pour in the *matzah* mixture. Spread it out in the pan. Wait a few minutes for the underside to cook and brown. Then, flip carefully with a spatula. You may have to turn down the heat and leave it in the pan for a few minutes to cook the center.

Serve with jam, maple syrup, fruit, or whatever you like.



Dayeinu

(It would have been enough)

Dayeinu is an upbeat song that celebrates the Israelite's gratitude to God for redeeming them from Egypt.

Il hotzi, hotzi anu
Hotzi anu me-mitzrayim
Hotzi anu me-mitzrayim
Dayeinu!

Ilu natan, natan lanu
Natan lanu et hatorah
Natan lanu et hatorah
Dayeinu!

Dai Dai-yeinu,
Dai Dai-yeinu.
Dai Dai-yeinu
Dayeinu Dayeinu

(If you had only saved us, it
would have been enough.

If you had only given us the
Torah, it would have been
enough.)



What You Can Do?

1. Organize a Seder

Your school can be helpful in providing you with space and food. Put together a menu that includes all of the traditional Seder foods (*matzah*, wine, *charoset*, green vegetables, bitter herbs, eggs) and foods that you would want to eat during your meal, and schedule a meeting with the head of dining services and with a faculty member. Download a *haggadah* from the www.thecurriculum.org, and use this guide to explain some of the customs and rituals of the holiday.

2. *Bedikat Chametz*

Give your room a good spring cleaning, and search through all of your clothes, shelves, under your bed... and get rid of the old candy wrappers and stale cookies!

3. Talk about Freedom

Gather students from different ethnic, racial, and religious backgrounds, and talk about different notions of freedom. Describe your various cultures' stories of redemption, and then share your individual story of freedom and redemption. Introduce the paradoxical Jewish notion of freedom as intertwined with restrictions.

Eliyahu Hanavi / Miriam Haneviah

(Elijah the Prophet / Miriam the Prophetess)

Elijah and Miriam are both prophets who play different roles in the Passover story. In the story of Exodus, it is Miriam who finds drinking water for the Israelites, and it is she who leads the people in song and revelry once they passed through the Red Sea. Elijah, on the other hand, is considered a guest at the *seder* table. There is even a glass of wine for him, and a part in the *haggadah* where it is mentioned to open and shut the door of the house for him.

Eliyahu Ha-navi, Eliyahu Ha-tishbi,
Eliyahu, Eliyahu, Eliyahu ha-giladi
Bim heyrah bi-yameinu, ya'avo eleinu
Im mashiach ben david, im mashiach ben david

(Elijah the prophet, the Tishbite,
the Giladite. Come soon to us and
be our redemption.)

Miriam Ha-neviah, oz ve-zimra ve-yadah
Miriam tir-kodutanu le-takeyn et ha-olam
Miriam tir-kodutanu le-takeyn et ha-olam

(Miriam the prophetess, strength
and vision. Miriam, dance with us
let's fix the world.)

Passover Resources

Very detailed information on traditional Passover food restrictions. Also recipes and *haggadot*.
<http://www.kashrut.com/Passover/>

Excellent information on understanding the holiday.
<http://www.jewfaq.org/holidaya.htm>

Terrific and thought-provoking guide to Passover for different levels of learning.
<http://www.myjewishlearning.com/holidays/Passover.htm>

Traditional and innovation Passover songs to enliven any seder!
<http://www.kosher4passover.com/songs.htm>

Two Vegetarian Food Blog's Guide to Passover. Guides available from years' past.
<http://inmolaraan.blogspot.com/2006/01/chocolate-ladys-2001-vegetarian.html>
http://sabbathmeals.typepad.com/sabbath_meals/passover/index.html

A Passover Guide from Hillel: The Foundation for Jewish Campus Life
[http://www.hillel.org/Hillel/NewHille.nsf/fcb8259ca861ae57852567d30043ba26/136f364ca84dc00385256b80006aa562/\\$FILE/passover_guide_b_lerner.pdf](http://www.hillel.org/Hillel/NewHille.nsf/fcb8259ca861ae57852567d30043ba26/136f364ca84dc00385256b80006aa562/$FILE/passover_guide_b_lerner.pdf)

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