

Passover

Passover (Pesach in Hebrew) is one of the most important festivals in the Jewish year. At this time Jewish people remember how the children of Israel left slavery behind them when they left Egypt. The Israelites had been under the rule of Pharaoh, the King of Egypt, until Moses led them out over 3,000 years ago. This is recounted in the Book of Exodus, Chapter 12 in the Hebrew Bible (the Torah).

Moses went to see Pharaoh many times. Each time Pharaoh refused to release the Israelites. Moses warned Pharaoh that God would send terrible plagues on Egypt if Pharaoh did not let them go. The ten plagues were: blood, frogs, gnats, flies, blight of the livestock, boils, hail, locusts, darkness and the death of the first born.

The final plague was the death of the first born. God told Moses that the Israelites should mark their doorposts with lamb's blood so that God could 'pass over' their houses and spare them from this plague. This is why the festival is called Passover.

Eventually Pharaoh gave in and told Moses and the Israelites to go at once. They left in such a rush that their bread did not have time to rise. This is why, during Passover, Jewish people eat unleavened bread called Matzah. It looks a bit like crisp bread. Some families clean their houses thoroughly to remove all crumbs of leaven and change their cutlery and plates in order to reinforce the message of Passover.

The festival lasts eight days outside Israel with the first and last two days being days on which services are held at the synagogue. On the evening before the first two days, a special service called a Seder ('Order') takes place over a meal around a table in a home.

The Seder plate on the table consists of:

- A meatbone or chicken neck
- A roasted egg
- A green vegetable to dip in salt water
- Bitter herbs made from horseradish
- Charoset (a paste of chopped apples, walnuts and wine)

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On the table, there are three Matzahs (or 'Matzot') on top of each other. At the start of the Seder, the middle Matzah is broken and the largest piece is hidden. During the Seder the children hunt for it. The one who finds it receives a small prize.

Four small glasses of wine are drunk to represent the four expressions of freedom which refer to the Israelites being brought out of slavery. The wine symbolises joy and happiness. An extra goblet is provided for Elijah, the prophet and at one point in the service, the front door is opened to greet him. Elijah is looked upon as the forerunner of the Messiah. Passover is traditionally a time when Elijah may announce the coming of the Messiah.

During the evening the story of how the Israelites fled from Egypt is retold from a book called the Haggadah ('Narration'). Everyone at the Seder each has a cushion to lean on. This is to remind them that they are now free people, no longer enslaved to Egypt. Everybody takes part in reading the Haggadah, some in Hebrew and some in English, and many songs are sung.