

# The history and symbolism of the festival of pesach

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Pesach is the Passover meal, in spring, which commemorates an event that occurred 3,300 years ago. By celebrating Pesach, Jews are reminded of the past event where their ancestors, called Israelites, escaped from Egypt. At the time, Israelites had been made to work as slaves for the Pharaoh, in Egypt. Therefore God sent Moses to free His people, the Israelites, from slavery. The Pharaoh refused Moses' appeal to let his people go and ignored the idea of God punishing him, so God sent ten terrifying plagues to convince the Pharaoh to change his mind.

These were the plagues of: blood, frogs, gnats, flies, plague on the livestock, boils, hail, locusts, darkness and finally the death of all the first born sons. The tenth plague was the worst of the deadly plagues. This was where the Angel of Death was sent over all the houses to kill the first born sons, except those with lamb's blood painted on the posts of the doorframes. That night the slaves and the Jews had a meal, which was called Pesach (Passover meal) because it was the night the Angel would pass over their houses.

This was because the slaves knew to paint their door frames with lamb's blood so their children were spared, however the Pharaoh's son was not, so he finally gave in and set the Israelites free. However, the Pharaoh and his men had soon followed them on their journey to the Sea of Reeds where it appeared that the Israelites could not escape. To aid them in their escape, God parted the sea for Moses and his people to safely cross. When the Pharaoh's men entered the sea, God closed the partition of the sea so that they eventually drowned.

God commanded the Israelites to mark their freedom with an annual festival, Pesach. Pesach is now a spring festival, which marks a time of new hope and new life, because those 3,300 years ago when the Israelites escaped they were given a new life and hope for the future. Pesach usually lasts for 7 or 8 days, during the barley harvest. Pesach is sometimes called 'the Festival of Unleavened bread'. The reason for this is that the Torah states that no leaven foods (grain foods which contain anything to make dough rise - self-raising flour, yeast) 'chametz' should be eaten or in the house at the time.

This is because Jews regard chametz as a symbol of pride because it 'puffs up' as it bakes. Jews believe that pride leads people to exclude God from their lives, so in order to commemorate the Israelites' reliance on God's help they do not eat it during Passover, as a symbol to their thanks to God.

Therefore the house is thoroughly rid of chametz. In a traditional Jewish house, before Passover the whole house is spring cleaned so there aren't any leaven foods left in the house.

These foods are either locked up in a cupboard or sold, for a small amount, to a non-Jewish friend and bought again after Passover is over. This means that the family doesn't own any leaven food during Passover and no food is wasted as a result. Jews also change the cutlery, crockery and saucepans for Pesach, as well as cover the work surfaces and sink, so that the kitchen is clean and fresh to give a new beginning for the preparation of the Pesach meal. During Passover, Jews eat a 'Seder meal' in their home, which means 'order'. They also read from the Hebrew book, Haggadah, which means story.

During the meal there are several things which are done in memory of Moses and his people, as well as several symbols to remind them, which are on the Seder plate. First the lady of the house lights candles, which is followed by a blessing. In the duration of the meal, each person has four cups of wine which symbolises the four promises God made to free his people. (Jews also believe 'there is no joyful occasion without the drinking of wine'. ) To represent this, four times the Jews take a sip of wine and say four different statements after, which are: 1. " To life", to thank God for the life He has given them.

" To freedom", to thank God for the freedom He has given them. 3. " To peace", to thank God for the peace they now have, due to Him helping their ancestors to escape from slavery. 4. " Next Year in Jerusalem", which is the final statement after the meal to show their hope for their future. During the meal, several blessings and toasts are said, as well as a song for Passover. There are also several handwashings, where the Jews wash their hands to be purified and clean. On the Seder plate there are different types of food which all symbolise an event during Passover.

The bowl of salt water, which the parsley is dipped in, symbolises the tears that were shed by the Jews during their time as slaves. This also represents the Sea of Reeds that Moses and the Israelites passed through in their escape. \* There are also 3 pieces of matzah, in a pile, which are pieces of unrisen bread that symbolise the Hebrews having to leave Egypt quickly, so they were unable to wait for their bread to rise. This also represents lack of being proud, in the arrogant sense, which was explained earlier. During the

Seder meal the leader removes the middle matzah and breaks it into two pieces.

He replaces the smaller portion but wraps the larger piece in cloth and hides it for the children to find later. Further on during the meal the leader takes the lowest matzah and breaks it in half to make a horseradish sandwich. He will pass this to a person of his choice. \* The 'Z'roah' is a roasted bone of lamb, placed on the Seder plate, which symbolises the lamb's blood on the posts that the Angel of Death passed over. \* The 'Betzah' is a roasted egg that symbolises new life, as Passover is a festival of new life. This also represents the Jews giving sacrifices, or a burnt offering, in the Temple.

It has also taken the meaning for the Temple, or even Jerusalem itself, as their new life in their Promised Land. \* The 'maror' is the bitter herbs that symbolise slavery. This is because slavery is a bitter and cruel idea and so are bitter herbs. \* The 'charoset' is a paste mixture containing raisins, apples, almonds and cinnamon. This symbolises the cement between the bricks of the buildings the Jews were forced to make, during slavery. \* There is also lettuce and 'karpas' left on the Seder plate. During the meal the karpas (parsley) is dipped into the salt water.

It symbolises fresh green, which is for new hope because the festival of Passover means new hope for the future. During the meal the youngest child asks three questions about Passover and why it is different from every other night. The leader replies by telling the story. There is also a goblet for 'Elijah', which is filled with wine. The youngest child is also sent to the door

to see if Elijah has arrived. A statement about hope for the next Passover completes the whole meal, which is a toast to " Next Year in Jerusalem. "