

Passover: God's Gift of Freedom By Belle Jarniewski

The ancient festival of Passover is a celebration of liberty and redemption. It commemorates the Exodus from Egypt, the narrative in the Hebrew Bible that tells the story of Moses and his calling by God to lead the Israelites out of the house of slavery in Egypt to freedom. The name Passover is a translation of the verb Hebrew verb פסח, “to pass over”; the Israelites marked their doorposts with the blood of the first ever paschal lamb and the Lord passed over them when he inflicted the tenth and most deadly of his plagues on the Egyptians.

The holiday is the first of the three major festivals in Judaism, the other two being Shavuot and Sukkot, which during the existence of the Temple required pilgrimage and sacrificial offerings. All three are significant in both an agricultural and a religious sense. Passover represents the beginning of the harvest season and in ancient times, the month of Nissan in which it falls (the holiday begins on the 15th and lasts seven days) marked the beginning of the Jewish New Year. It is thought that the change to marking the New Year in autumn began during the Mishnaic period around the 1st century CE.¹ While Christianity has taken a new path from the mother religion, Jesus lived and died as a Torah observant Jew and Passover is mentioned in the New Testament; the Last Supper is generally accepted as having been an early Passover meal for Jesus and his Disciples on the 14th of Nissan, in anticipation of his crucifixion the following day.

Different Jewish communities, the Ashkenazim originating mostly from Eastern Europe, the Sephardim from Spain and Portugal, and the Mizrachim (those Jews who never left the Middle East/North Africa), have different Passover practices. In essence,

¹ For more on this, see Michele Alperin, “How Rosh Hashanah Became New Year’s Day,” *My Jewish Learning*,” Accessed February 23, 2015,

rabbinic law bans the consumption or even possession of *chametz* during Passover — any food made from wheat, oats, rye, barley and spelt that has been allowed to ferment and rise. This is to commemorate the haste in which the Israelites had to leave Egypt; they had no time to allow their bread to rise. However, Ashkenazi tradition has broadened the interpretation to proscribe *kitniyot*, foods thought to resemble grains, such as rice and lentils.

The Passover *Seder* takes place after a thorough spring-cleaning where all *chametz* is removed and if necessary, temporarily sold. The *Haggadah* is a book which sets out the order of the Passover *Seder*, including all the ritual and prayers as well as the story itself, found in the *magid* section. Reading the story of the Exodus fulfils the commandment in Exodus 13:8: “You shall tell your child on that day, saying, it is because of that which the Lord did for *me*, when *I* came out of Egypt.” The *Haggadah* is often written in both Hebrew and the vernacular. Often beautifully illustrated, some modern *Haggadot* even add commentary about social justice or feminism. The *Seder* or order is divided into 15 sections and includes 4 cups of wine. Many texts in the *Haggadah* are set to music. Some of these melodies are very old and are common to communities all over the world. Everyone around the table participates in singing these traditional songs: *Ma Nishtana*, opens the *Seder*; it consists of four questions and is sung by the youngest child present. The opening line and first question is “why is this night different from all other nights?” The last song in the *Haggadah*, *Chad Gadya*, closes the *Seder*; it is sung in Aramaic. Although it is a lively and fun repetitive song, it has been interpreted by many

scholars who have found it to be a reinterpretation of the Exodus, a *midrash*, an apocalyptic tale, an allegory and more.²

Some of the traditional ritual foods are set on the *Seder* plate, which is often beautifully ornate and handed down from one generation to the next. Among the special foods are the *Karpas* — parsley or celery to dip into salt water recalling the hard work of the Israelites as slaves, *maror* — bitter herbs to remind us of the bitterness of our enslavement, and the *koreich* — a little sandwich made of *matzah* (unleavened bread) and bitter herbs and often also with *charoset*, a sweet paste (made from a different recipe in every community, but containing fresh fruit, dried fruit, nuts, and spice) to resemble mortar. This is a tradition begun by Rabbi Hillel to replace the paschal sacrifice after the destruction of the Temple. Also on the plate but not consumed are a shank bone representing the paschal lamb, and an egg representing the offering brought during the days of the Temple.

As I write, I am struck that this holiday of Passover is one celebrated by practising Jews but also those who identify by ethnicity alone and who join together once a year with family and friends. They may enjoy the sense of conviviality or they may be moved by the thousands of years of history associated with the holiday. Yet sadly, we cannot forget that this holiday, evocative of joy, of family, of tradition, of warmth, is also associated with a horrific antisemitic accusation that has resulted in the deaths of many Jews throughout history; that Jews require the blood of a Christian child to prepare the Passover *matzah*. Originating in 12th century Europe, I must observe with sorrow, that in

² Laura Durhan Kaplan, “Chad Gadya: Spritual, Ethical, Political Masterpiece,” *Rabbis Without Borders/My Jewish Learning*, March 31, 2014, Accessed February 21, 2015, <http://www.myjewishlearning.com/blog/rabbis-without-borders/2014/03/31/chad-gadya-spiritual-ethical-political-masterpiece/>.

the Arab world today, there has been a resurgence of the blood libel. From depictions on soap operas to declarations by extremist religious leaders and spokesmen for groups like Hamas, the Middle East is rife with reports that Jews use the blood of Christian and Muslim children to prepare the Passover *matzah*³. Similarly, white supremacist websites such as First Light Forum promote the same libel and other virulently antisemitic hate.

Finally, I would like to end with a few words about the Shoah. Even during the darkest chapter of my people's history, the Jews continued to find a way to try to mark this important holiday. In April of 1943, as the Warsaw Ghetto was rife with rumours of deportation, *Seders* took place while all around, bursts of machine gunfire and explosions punctuated the night. The participants dreamed of a new Exodus, of miracles. Most would not live to see freedom. Yet I will never forget an interview with a French survivor who did survive with her family intact. She described a *Seder* during their hiding: "Our father, tears streaming down his face, started to narrate the story of the Exodus from Egypt. He made the blessings over the four cups. We did not know what the day would bring. We knew only that each day was a reprieve and that at any moment we could be caught. This night is forever imprinted in our minds and every Passover that story is told to our children at our *Seders*. We thank God for protecting us all these years."⁴ Perhaps this is the most important message of Passover: We thank God for granting us freedom and the precious gift of hope for those who have not yet attained it.

³ Justin Jalil, "Ex-Jordan MP Says Jews Use Christian Blood to Make Matzah," *The times of Israel*, September 8, 2014, Accessed February 21, 2015, <http://www.timesofisrael.com/ex-jordan-mp-says-jews-use-christian-blood-to-make-matzah/>.

⁴ Belle Millo (Jarniewski), *Voices of Winnipeg Holocaust Survivors*, (Winnipeg: Jewish Heritage Centre of Western Canada, 2010), 303.