

BACKGROUND: PASSOVER

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Passover celebrates Israel's deliverance from Egyptian bondage. The festival lasts eight days during which *matzot*¹ are eaten in place of leavened bread. On the first and second nights of the festival, the traditional *Seder* is held in the home, at which the historical ideal of freedom is reaffirmed.

“Remember this day, on which you went free from Egypt, the house of bondage, how God freed you from it with a mighty hand; no leavened bread shall be eaten.” (*Exodus* 13:3)

The first and second days as well as the last two days are holy days; i.e., no work can be performed on these days².

The two most visible signs of Passover are:

- **The *Seder***, which is the reenactment of the symbolic dinner of the night of the tenth plague before the dawn of the Exodus, as it is described in Chapter 12 of *Exodus*. The *Seder* is usually the opportunity for large family or communal gatherings. More information on the *Seder* can be found on the reverse side of this sheet.

- **“Kosher-for-Passover”**: Besides foods usually forbidden, such as pork, Jews do not eat *leavened* food during the festival. This interdiction is widely observed.

Forbidden food obviously includes bread but also the following items:

- *Hametz* (Hebrew for *leavened*), i.e., any product prepared from grain, for there is always some naturally-occurring yeast on grains. (*Matzah* flour has been specially watched and prepared that it not leaven.)
- Anything having any admixture of *hametz*.
- Leavened bread, cakes, biscuits and crackers; and substances derived from cereals—wheat, barley, oats, rice, corn, peas and beans; and all liquids which contain ingredients or flavors made from grain alcohol, including beer, whiskey, etc.
- Cereals and other vegetables resembling *hametz*-producing grain such as rice, peas, beans, lentils, corn, legumes, millet. Ashkenazic Jews (of Northern European descent), observe this, but many Sefardic Jews (of Spanish/Portuguese descent) have a different tradition. Middle Eastern Jews vary by community.

Permitted food has a “*kosher l’Pesach*” (Kosher for Passover) label and bears rabbinical signature. They include *matzot*, Passover noodles, candies, cakes, beverages, canned and processed foods, jams and jellies, vinegar, wines and liquors. Butter, cottage cheese and cream cheese are allowed with no label if purchased before the festival.

Also allowed with no label: oil made of legumes, fresh fruits and vegetables, as well as natural coffee, sugar, tea, salt and pepper, left in unopened packages or containers.

¹ An explanation of the italicized words can be found on the reverse side.

² There is a wide variation of practice among Jews. Therefore some students, faculty and staff members will be absent for religious purposes more than others. The first two holy days are more widely observed. Reform Jews only observe the first, and sometimes last, days as holy.

A GUIDE TO THE PESACH (PASSOVER) SEDER

***Pesach* (Passover) is a holiday traditionally set aside for thinking about the meaning of freedom. It is a period in which we probe our minds and our souls for the inspiration to make contemporary the Biblical Exodus from Egypt, to apply within our own lives the concepts and the ideals that directed our people as they fled from slavery to freedom.**

Seder *Seder* is a Hebrew word that means “order.” It is the order of prayers and activities for the evening of Passover. It derives from the experience of the Israelites in Egypt during the night of the tenth plague, just before the dawn of the Exodus, as recounted in Chapter 12 of *Exodus*.

On the Seder Table:

Haggadah *Haggadah* is a Hebrew word derived from the verb meaning “to explain” or “to narrate.” In *Exodus* 13:8 the Israelites are instructed to “Tell your child on that day, saying: It is because of that which God did for me when I came forth out of Egypt.” On the basis of this passage, it is considered a duty to narrate the story of the Exodus on the eve of Passover. This narration is the text of the *Haggadah*. Reading a *Haggadah* is not enough; one must talk about one’s own needs and experiences of liberation.

Candles Candles are lit to inaugurate Passover, just as on any Sabbath or Festival.

Wine Wine is a symbol of festivity, joy and thanksgiving: “And wine that gladdens the human heart” (*Psalms* 104:15). The sanctification of the holiday (*kiddush*) is pronounced over the first cup. Three additional cups are drunk during the course of the *Seder*, making a total of four: *Arba Kosot* (Four Cups). We drink four cups of wine because of the four promises made to our ancestors when they were freed from Egyptian slavery (*Exodus* 6:6-7). “I will take you out” of the land of bondage. “And I will save” you. “And I will free” you from slavery. “And I will take” you to be a Chosen People.

Elijah’s Cup The Cup of Elijah, filled with wine, is kept on the table untasted throughout the *Seder* in the hope that the Prophet Elijah may appear as a messenger of the Almighty and announce the coming of the Messiah. Thus, in the midst of memories of the past, Jews look forward to a day of universal peace.

On the Seder Plate:

Beitzah The *Beitzah* (roasted egg) symbolizes both springtime (the egg) and the required offering (roasted) brought on all festivals in the Temple. In addition to the roasted egg on the *Seder* plate, there is a custom of serving hard-boiled eggs in salt water as the first course of the meal. The egg is a symbol of redemption and rebirth. Our ancestors were about to break the shell of slavery and enter the period of liberation.

Haroset The *Haroset* is a mixture of chopped apple, nuts, cinnamon, and wine (or dates, raisins, sesame seeds and wine) designed to look like the mortar used by the Jews in building the palaces and pyramids of Egypt during centuries of forced labor. Before the *Maror* is eaten, it is dipped into the *Haroset*.

Hazeret The *Hazeret* (lettuce) on some plates is a symbol of how the rich freeborn began their meals — with salad instead of bread. That is why the *Seder* begins with a green vegetable (the parsley/*Karpas*). *Hazeret* is frequently omitted, in favor of the *Karpas*.

Karpas The *Karpas*, a piece of parsley or lettuce (or any “fruit of the ground”), symbolizes the meager diet of the Jews in Egyptian bondage. It is dipped into salt water in remembrance of the tears they shared in their misery. The *Karpas* also signifies springtime, the season of Passover.

Maror The *Maror*, or “bitter herb” (often horseradish), symbolizes the bitter suffering of the Jews under Egyptian rule.

Matzah/ Matzah (plural : *matzot*) is unleavened and unfermented bread. It is the bread that had to

Matzot(pl) be baked during the Israelites’ hasty flight when there was no time for leavening. Three *matzot* are placed in the *Seder* tray. Half of the middle *matzah*, saved for the *Afikomen* (dessert), is playfully “stolen” by a child and ransomed for a prize. A fourth *matzah*, the “*Matzah* of Hope,” is nowadays added for Jewish communities in need of rescue, especially Soviet and Ethiopian Jewry.

Salt Water The *Karpas* is dipped into salt water to make it palatable. Salt water has been interpreted as salty tears to remind us of the tears shed by the oppressed Israelites.

Z’ro’a Z’ro’a (the roasted shank bone) represents the ancient sacrifice of the Paschal lamb (*Pesach*) which had to be eaten roasted.