

Celebrating Passover



Passover, the early spring holiday that celebrates the exodus of the Jews from Egypt after 400 years of slavery, is one of the most significant Jewish celebrations. It occurs on the 15th day of the month of Nissan on the Jewish calendar. This usually falls in late March or April. The holiday is called Passover because Jewish homes were “passed over” when, during the tenth plague, the firstborn sons of Egypt were slain.

Passover begins with the Seder, or festival meal during which the story of the Exodus from Egypt is told using symbolic foods, prayers, stories, and songs. Traditionally, families and friends gather together for the Seder. Many synagogues and temples also host community Seders where all are welcome. During the eight days of Passover, bread is prohibited and replaced with crisp, cracker-like matzah or unleavened bread.

The Importance of Matzah

Today’s matzah is a reminder of the hastily prepared provisions that the Jews took with them when they left Egypt. They had to flee quickly before Pharaoh, persuaded by Moses and ten devastating plagues, changed his mind about freeing them, so the Jews didn’t have time to bake properly raised bread. They rushed to make dough and bake it so they’d have something to eat as they escaped from slavery.

In fact, the most important observance associated with Passover is abstinence from eating *chomatz* (sounds like “hum its”), which includes anything made from the five prohibited grains—wheat, rye, barley, oats, and spelt—and not completely cooked within 18 minutes of coming into contact with moisture. This is done to avoid the fermentation that naturally occurs when grain comes into prolonged contact with water. Fermentation, even without yeast, produces air bubbles and causes leavening to take place.

Many Jewish families clean their homes very thoroughly before Passover, discarding any *chomatz* products and removing all traces of prohibited foods.



Discussion Starters

- If you’re Jewish, share the way you prepare for Passover.
- If you’re not Jewish, have you ever attended a Passover Seder? What was it like?
- Have you ever tasted matzah? What would you compare it to?

The Seder

The festival meal that begins Passover is called the Seder. The word *Seder* means “order,” because there is very specific information that must be discussed in a particular order so that the story of the exodus from Egypt will be told completely and passed on correctly from one generation to the next.

The word *Haggadah* means “narrative,” and the text of the Seder—the story of the exodus from Egypt—is found in a book called the Haggadah (ha-ga-DAH). The Haggadah also explains some of the practices and symbols of the holiday.

Symbols of the Passover Seder

In addition to *matzah*, the significant symbols of Passover are found at the Seder table:

Roasted egg: This is a reminder of the festival sacrifice and a symbol of rebirth as free people.

Charoset: This is a mixture of chopped apples, nuts, spices, and sweet wine. It is reminiscent of the mortar the Jewish slaves used to build structures for the Egyptians.

Horseradish root or other bitter herb: This symbolizes the harshness and suffering of slavery.

Sharp-tasting vegetable such as onion or romaine lettuce: This is a second portion of bitterness.

Roasted lamb bone: This is a symbol of the Paschal Lamb sacrificed in the Holy Temple in Jerusalem.

Salt water: This symbolizes tears for the sadness and suffering of slavery. Usually, parsley sprigs are dipped in salt water and eaten during the Seder.

The Four Questions

The [Four Questions](#) asked at the Passover Seder by the youngest person there begin with the central question of “Why is this night different from all other nights?” The questions help explain the story of the exodus from Egypt and why Passover is such a special holiday. In part, this involves children in the story and helps keep them interested. It also illustrates that Jews can question anything because they are free people.

Discussion Starters

- Food is an important part of many celebrations, religious and secular. What foods do you consider symbolic of special holidays?
- If you're Jewish, tell about the first Seder you remember.
- Traditions are an important part of most religions. Tell about some of yours.

The Search for the *Afikomen*

Toward the end of the Seder, the children search for the *afikomen* (af-ee-ko-MAHN), or “dessert.” This is the larger half of a piece of matzah that was stealthily hidden by the grownups. What's the purpose of this fun ritual at the end of a long and sometimes solemn meal? It is partly to keep the children interested until the end and partly to illustrate a very important point. According to tradition, the larger half of a piece of matzah represents the future, and the smaller half symbolizes the past. The future is always hidden and can be found only by the children to whom it belongs.

How Much Do You Know About Passover?

Take this fun quiz and find out!

1. **Passover is just one name for this holiday. Can you name the others?** The Feast of Unleavened Bread and the Season of Our Freedom.
2. **Why is the holiday called *Passover*?** It refers to the tenth plague—the slaying of the firstborn. When the plague hit Egypt, Jewish homes were “passed over,” and their firstborn children were spared.

3. **Who have scholars determined was likely the pharaoh at the time of the exodus from Egypt?** Rameses II.
4. **Why is a cup of wine poured for the prophet Elijah at the Passover Seder?** A cup of wine is always poured for the prophet Elijah, and the front door is opened for him. It is believed that Elijah will herald the coming of the Messiah.
5. **Which figure, central to the story of the exodus from Egypt, is mentioned only once in the Haggadah?** Moses.
6. **Who searches for the afikomen?** The children or youngest adults present if there are no children.
7. **When was the first American edition of the Haggadah published?** The first American edition of the Haggadah was published in New York in 1837.
8. **Where is the world's largest Passover Seder?** Chabad hosts a Seder for over 2,000 tourists and locals in Nepal, India.
9. **Which of the Jewish holidays is most widely observed?** Passover, of course! Passover foods account for more than 40 percent of the kosher food purchased in the United States.
10. **Where was the world's largest matzah ball made?** It was made in New York City in 2009. This giant matzah ball weighed 267 pounds. It was created to raise money for charity.



Passover Foods

Because of the prohibition against leavened foods and certain grains, you might think that Passover food is meager. Nothing could be further from the truth! From matzah ball soup to a delicious array of flourless baked goods, Passover specialties are treats to be savored. Inventive cooks use the leavening power of eggs to create high, light-as-air sponge cakes and jellyrolls. Many classic recipes feature early spring vegetables and fresh fruit.

Additional Activities

1. Watch the movie [The Ten Commandments](#).
2. [Plan or attend a Passover Seder](#).
3. Make [matzah balls](#).