



From 1880 to 1920, three and a half million Jewish immigrants passed through Ellis Island in New York Harbor. For most of them this was their first taste of freedom—the first time that they could openly celebrate their religious holidays without fear of oppression. The holiday that is observed by more American Jews than any other is Passover. It is an opportunity for families to pass on the story of the Exodus from Egypt and to embrace their freedom.

The Journey

Passover begins on the 15th day and ends on the 21st day of the Jewish month of Nisan. During these seven days Jews celebrate the story of the Israelites' journey from Egypt to Canaan, into what became the Promised Land. But this story of Passover is one that all American immigrants can appreciate, because it is the story of a journey from oppression into freedom.



3000 years ago the Israelites were enslaved by the Egyptians under the rule of the Pharaoh Ramses II. According to the Book of Exodus, Moses was instructed by God to go to the Pharaoh and demand the freedom of the Israelites - "Let my people go."

Moses warned the Pharaoh that God would send punishments to the people of Egypt if the Israelites were not set free. The punishment came in the form of ten plagues: plague of blood by which the waters of Egypt were turned to blood; plague of frogs; plague of lice; plague of flies; plague of murrain, by which all the cattle of Egypt and none of the Israelites' cattle were killed; plague of boils; plague of hail; plague of locusts; plague of darkness, by which darkness covered Egypt for three days; and finally the plague of the firstborn, by which all the firstborns of Egypt were killed.

The Israelites were instructed before the night of the tenth plague, to make a Paschal sacrifice. The

sacrifice was one unblemished year-old lamb per household. The Israelites were to eat the meat and smear the blood of the lamb above their doorways. This mark on the doorways was the sign to spare the Israelites inside.

The Book of Exodus tells how the Pharaoh surrendered to Moses during each plague. But once it was lifted the Pharaoh took back his promise. After the tenth plague, when the Pharaoh's own son was among the dead, he finally let the people of Israel leave Egypt. But again the Pharaoh soon changed his mind and pursued the Israelites into the Red Sea. It was at the Red Sea where the story says the waters parted allowing Moses and the Israelites to pass unharmed, while the Egyptians with their chariots and heavy armor were swept under and drowned. The first Passover was observed the night of the 10th plague after the Israelites left Egypt.

The Passover Seder

On the first night of Passover, Jews hold a Seder. *Seder* is a Hebrew word meaning "structured or ordered". Families gather at the Seder meal and retell the story of Passover. The story of Passover is read from a book called a *Haggadah*, which means "book of legends".

A Seder plate is filled with foods. Each item symbolizes an aspect of the Passover story. There are three matzohs. The matzoh is the unleavened bread that did not have time to rise because the Hebrews left so quickly. A shank bone, represents the Paschal sacrifice of thanksgiving for freedom. There is moror, which is a bitter herb, usually horseradish, representing the bitterness of slavery. There is a little bit of parsley, which represents spring time. The parsley is



dipped into salt water, representing the tears of oppression. A roasted egg is the symbol of mourning. And finally there is haroset, a mixture of chopped walnuts, wine, cinnamon and apples, which symbolizes the mud brick that the Hebrews used when they had to construct buildings as slaves to the Pharaoh.



During the evening four cups of wine are poured. They represent the four divine promises of freedom, deliverance, redemption and release. Jesus Christ's Last Supper was a Passover

Seder. The central messages of Easter are the same as the promises of Passover. The Seder table also has a large cup of wine set aside for the prophet Elijah, who is expected to appear on Passover night and announce the arrival of the Messiah who will bring peace to the world. At the end of the service, the door to the house is opened, allowing the spirit of the Prophet to enter



and take a sip of the wine.

In the center of the table is a special cloth that holds three pieces of matzoh. At one point in the ceremony a piece of the matzoh is removed from the cloth and broken in half—one half remains on the table, the other is hidden somewhere in the house while the Seder continues. This hidden piece is called the Afikomen. The children then go and find the Afikomen. Whoever finds it wins a little prize. The meal is over when the children have found the Afikomen, and everyone has eaten a piece.

Old Worlds in the New World



At the moment the Hebrews got word that it was time to begin their escape from Egypt they were in the process of baking bread, but they didn't have time to let the dough rise. So they took their unleavened bread and fled Egypt. Matzoh at the Passover table symbolizes the "bread of affliction".

The major dietary rules of Passover concern themselves with avoiding any food items that might ferment. These are food items containing yeast such as bread, cake, certain grains, beer, etc. The food that replaces bread is matzoh. The people who have the most traditional approach to the making of matzoh are at the Shmurah bakery in the Hassidic community of Crown Heights in Brooklyn, New York.

Shmurah means, "guarded." From the time the wheat is harvested it is guarded from moisture. Flour and water mixed together with no other ingredients will become bread after 18 minutes. The matzoh must be made before this can happen.



To make matzoh, flour is first poured into the mixing bowl, then well water is poured into the mixing bowl. They are mixed as fast as possible. Once it is mixed thoroughly, it is taken to a table where it is rolled out as thin as possible - similar to a pancake. The matzoh comes out to about 12 or 14 inches round. It is then hung on a long rod about eight feet long. Finally it is taken to the matzoh oven, where it is laid flat and cooked on both sides at one time, for about 30 seconds. When it is then taken out of the oven it is done.

The whole process is repeated for the next batch of matzoh. Before the next batch is started, every

THE SEDER PLATE

THE SEDER PLATE CONTAINS FOODS THAT HAVE SPECIAL MEANING FOR THE HOLIDAY.

- 1. HAROSETH** - (A MIXTURE OF CHOPPED WALNUTS, WINE, CINNAMON AND APPLES)
REPRESENTS THE MORTAR THE JEWISH SLAVES USED TO BUILD BUILDINGS FOR THE PHARAOH.
- 2. PARSLEY (DIPPED IN SALT WATER)**- SYMBOLIZING SPRING TIME AND THE OF THE TEARS OF OPPRESSION.
- 3. ROASTED EGG** - SYMBOLIZING MOURNING.
- 4. SHANK BONE** - SYMBOLIZING THE SACRIFICE.
- 5. BITTER HERBS** - (USUALLY HORSERADISH)
REPRESENTING THE BITTERNESS OF SLAVERY.

THE GLASSES OF WINE

DURING THE SEDER FOUR GLASSES OF WINE ARE POURED TO REPRESENT THE FOUR STAGES OF THE EXODUS

- 1. FREEDOM**
- 2. DELIVERANCE**
- 3. REDEMPTION**
- 4. RELEASE**

THE CUP OF ELIJAH. A FIFTH CUP OF WINE IS POURED AND PLACED ON THE SEDER TABLE. THIS IS THE CUP OF ELIJAH, AN OFFERING FOR THE PROPHET ELIJAH. DURING THE SEDER THE DOOR OF THE HOME IS OPENED TO INVITE THE PROPHET ELIJAH IN.

tablecloth and mixing bowl is changed. Every 18 minutes a new matzoh bakery is essentially created. Anything from the previous 18-minute matzohs would otherwise contaminate the next batch. It is a meticulous process. Shmurah matzoh is worked by dedicated people who love the mitzvah, and who want other people to love the mitzvah. "Mitzvah," actually means, "Commandment" But it also means, "connection."

The Macaroons of Passover

Another traditional food served at Passover is the Macaroon. The sweetened ground nuts, coconut or a combination of both, are leavened by egg whites - therefore they meet the dietary requirements of Passover.



Although it is a staple to the Passover table, the macaroon has a Christian beginning. Almond macaroons originated in an Italian monastery during the Renaissance. The name macaroon comes from an Italian word that means "paste". And it was Italian Jews that first introduced the flourless cookie to the Passover menu.

The Changing Seder Experience

When Jewish immigrants came to America, they were motivated by the American idea of freedom for all people. As the Jews began to assimilate, their culture became very much a part of the fabric of America. Many Jews came to believe that once they became free, it was their duty to extend those freedoms to others,



and to make the generic aspects of America their own. The result was that many Seders became interfaith Seders, interracial Seders, and more. A Passover Seder is usually a family affair held in someone's home, but it can also be a more public event held at a school, community center, or in a restaurant. The Passover feast offered by Famous Sammy's Romanian Steakhouse in New York is a unique example of an open and eclectic Seder.

The Passover crowd at Sammy's is made up of people from many different countries, religions and races. As different as this crowd can be, they all have at least one thing in common - they won't leave hungry.

At Sammy's, each table is set with a bowl of pickles and roasted peppers and a syrup dispenser filled with liquid chicken fat. Butter and meat can not be in the



same dish or at the same meal. The traditional dietary laws that govern Jewish cooking forbid the mixing of meat and milk or milk-based

products. The substitute for butter is the chicken fat known as schmaltz. To start, guests enjoy chopped liver mixed with schmaltz, fried onion, radishes and a little salt and pepper.

Just as if they were in a home, the story of Passover is told as someone reads from the Haggadah. After the service more food is served—matzoh ball soup, steak, potato pancakes, mashed potatoes mixed with schmaltz, and macaroons for dessert. To wash it all down guests have a choice of vodka, Manischewitz wine or seltzer.

The Paths to Freedom

One can celebrate Passover at home with only close family, or at a public Seder with



hundreds of strangers. Although the atmosphere can change, the story remains the same. The Pilgrims who came to America to escape oppression in England compared their flight to the Exodus. In the American South, slaves sang about the Exodus as they dreamed of winning their own freedom. Whenever and wherever the story of the Exodus is retold at a Passover Seder the objective is always to highlight the parallels between the story of Passover, the people present at the Seder, and our modern struggle for justice and freedom from oppression. The story of Passover is retold to insure those listening will appreciate their own taste of freedom.

TO LEARN MORE . . .

THE HASSIDIC DISCOVERY WELCOME CENTER
PHONE: 1-718-953-5244
WWW.JEWISHTOURS.COM

SARABETH'S BAKERY AND RESTAURANTS
TOLL-FREE: 1-800-PRESERVE
WWW.SARABETH.COM

SAMMY'S ROUMANIAN STEAKHOUSE
TOLL-FREE: 1-212-673-0330
157 CHRYSTIE STREET
NEW YORK, NY 10002-2836