

## THE FESTIVAL OF PESACH (PASSOVER)

Pesach is one of Judaism's major festivals. Also known as Passover, it is essentially a freedom festival. The story behind Pesach is linked to the rescue of the Jews from slavery in Egypt, around 1200 BCE, but it also celebrates all the other times that God has saved the Jews from their enemies.

### THE STORY

Having been reunited with his son Joseph, Jacob and his family settled in Egypt. Many other Jews followed and went to live in Egypt and as the years passed the Jews in Egypt grew into a sizeable nation.



Some years later, Egypt suffered poverty and unemployment and when a new Pharaoh came to the throne he blamed all of these economic setbacks on the Jews (or Israelites). The Pharaoh maintained that the Israelites were a threat to Egypt's national security and ordered that they should become slaves. The Jewish slaves were put to work either in the mines or in building the pyramids. In addition, the Pharaoh decreed that all Jewish boys aged two years and under should be killed.



## MOSES

It was during this time that a Jewish woman gave birth to a baby boy. Rather than have him killed, the mother placed her baby in a basket and put the basket amongst the reeds of the River Nile. Keeping watch with her daughter, the mother saw the Egyptian princess come to the river to bathe. The princess found the baby and decided to adopt him. The baby was Moses. Moses' mother asked the princess if she could work as Moses' nanny.

Moses soon grew up and when he was a young man he saw a slave driver beating a Jewish slave. Moses lost his temper and killed the slave driver. Unfortunately for Moses his actions had been witnessed and he had to flee for his life. Moses went to live in Midian.

## THE BURNING BUSH



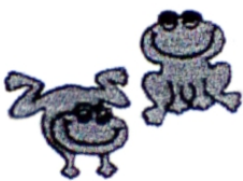
One day when Moses was about eighty years old, he saw a strange sight as he was working as a shepherd in the fields. Moses saw a bush that was burning, but did not burn away into



ashes. A voice spoke from the bush. It was the voice of God. God told Moses to return to Egypt and rescue the slaves.

### THE 10 PLAGUES

The Pharaoh refused to grant Moses' request to let the slaves go free. God then tormented the Egyptians with 10 plagues. Each time a plague occurred the Pharaoh promised to release the slaves but as soon as the plague ended Pharaoh did not keep his word. This happened nine times. The last plague was the worst of all. God warned Moses that on a certain night he would kill all the firstborn sons of the Egyptians. The Jews were to sacrifice lambs and smear their doorposts with the lamb's blood. In this way those who wanted to identify themselves as Jewish would be known and their children would be spared. The Angel of Death would "pass over" their homes. That night there was crying all over Egypt. The Pharaoh's own son died and the Pharaoh begged Moses and the slaves to leave Egypt.



## THE EXODUS FROM EGYPT

Moses and the Israelites made haste to escape from Egypt. They would travel across the desert and head for the land of Canaan. During the days that followed, Pharaoh and his advisors changed their minds. They missed having the slaves to do all the work. Finally, Pharaoh decided to bring back the slaves. He took a huge army headed by 600 chariots and raced across the desert in pursuit. By this time Moses and the Israelites were approaching the shores of the Sea of Reeds (also known as the Red Sea). God parted the sea to allow the Israelites to pass through safely. When the Egyptians followed, God closed the sea, drowning the Egyptians.



## WHY DO JEWS CELEBRATE PESACH?

1. Jews are commanded to observe this festival in the Torah. *"You must celebrate this day as a religious festival to remind you of what I, the Lord, have done. Celebrate it for all time to come"*. (Exodus 12:14).
2. Without the events behind Pesach, there would be no Judaism today. It celebrates the birth of the Jewish nation.
3. It is the ultimate freedom festival and it is still relevant for Jews today. There have always been Jewish persecutions and this festival offers hope to those Jews who are suffering discrimination. During the Holocaust, Jews in the camp observed (as best they could) Pesach.



## CELEBRATING PESACH

Pesach occurs in the **spring** and **lasts for eight days** but the **first night of Pesach is the most important one**. It is celebrated by a special **SEDER meal**. Seder means "order" and the meal has many elements to it, which must be followed in the **correct order**.

### PREPARATIONS

One of the commands in Exodus is that Jews **should not eat or even possess any leaven** during Pesach. Leaven means any food that contains a raising agent, such as yeast, baking powder or self-raising powder. The Hebrew word for leaven is **CHAMETZ**. Exodus states *"On the first day you are to get rid of all the yeast in your houses, for if anyone during those seven days eats bread made with yeast, he shall no longer be considered one of my people"* (12:15).

Jews regard chametz as a **symbol of pride**, since it swells as it bakes. **Pride can lead people to rely on themselves** and exclude God from their lives. Pesach **remembers the Israelites' total reliance on God's help**, as it was God and not human power that rescued the slaves. In addition, removing all chametz from the home **reminds Jews that their ancestors had no time to wait for their bread to rise before they escaped from Egypt**.

The house is therefore thoroughly **spring cleaned** in the week before Pesach, with particular attention paid to the kitchen.



Orthodox Jews will ensure that all foods containing leaven, including bread, flour, cakes, pasta, biscuits, cereal and even drinks such as whiskey and beer are packed away; indeed these items are often "sold" to a non-Jewish neighbour and bought back again after Pesach. Reform Jews are more likely to box these items up and put them in a cupboard or a garage until the end of Pesach. Special "kosher for Passover" are bought.

## foods

Young children learn about removing chametz by playing a game. The mother will hide 10 pieces of chametz around the home and the children, with their father will search for the pieces. This game involves using a wooden spoon, candle and feather. The chametz is then collected and put into a paper bag and afterwards it is burned.



All cooking utensils and crockery that have been in contact with yeast during the year are put away for Pesach. Another set of crockery and utensils, kept exclusively for Pesach, is brought out.





## THE SEDER MEAL

As with all Jewish festivals, Pesach begins in the evening. About an hour before sunset, the Jewish wife will light two candles and welcome the festival into the home. The males of the family will visit the synagogue where they thank God for freeing their ancestors from slavery.

The Seder meal is the family event of the year. The table is carefully laid and cushions are placed on everyone's chair so that they can eat their meal in comfort. This is a sign of freedom which slaves were not permitted. A small booklet called the **HAGGADAH** is put by everyone's place so that they can all follow the traditions or order of the Seder meal.

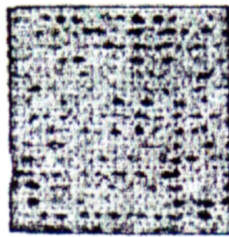
It is traditional for the youngest child present to ask 4 questions, which the eldest person will answer during the meal. The 4 questions are -

1. On all nights we may eat chametz or matzah. Tonight, why do we only eat matzah?
2. On all other nights we may eat any kind of herbs. Tonight, why do we eat bitter herbs?
3. On all other nights we do not dip our food at all. Tonight, why do we dip twice?
4. On all other nights we eat sitting or leaning. Tonight, why do we all lean?



During the Seder meal, these questions will be answered and the Haggadah will be read. The Passover story is also told through the symbolic foods that are on the table and the Seder plate.

1. **MATZAH** - this is the flat bread that the slaves ate. Matzah contains no yeast and it reminds Jews of the haste that the slaves had to make to escape Egypt. Three pieces of matzot are put under a cover on the table. The first two pieces are blessed and eaten. Pieces of the third one, called afikomen, are hidden for the children to find. Each person eats a small piece of afikomen at the end of the meal as the very last food of the seder meal.



2. **WINE** - during the seder everyone drinks 4 cups of wine. These stand for the 4 promises that God made to the Jews. The promises are - "I will bring you out, I will deliver you, I will redeem you and I will take you to Me". Red wine is used as that is the colour of blood. It recalls the blood of the slaves who were beaten without mercy. It also represents the blood of freedom. The slaves smeared blood on their doorposts to avoid the last plague. During the meal 10 drips of wine are poured onto the table napkin, representing the ten plagues God imposed on the Egyptians.



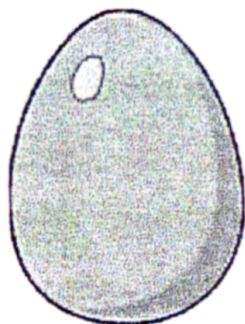


3. **ELIJAH'S CUP** - An extra glass is also placed on the table. It is known as Elijah's cup. Elijah was a prophet and it is said that he will return to herald the coming of the Messiah. It is also customary for the door to be left open for Elijah.

4. **SALT WATER** - some of the food is dipped in salt water. Salt water symbolises the tears and sweat of the slaves. It also represents freedom because the slaves reached freedom after crossing the Red Sea.

5. **CHAROSET** - this is a mixture of apple, wine, nuts and cinnamon. It has the texture of river mud. It represents the mud that the slaves were forced to make the bricks to build the pyramids.

6. **ROASTED EGG** - This is not eaten but it symbolises the burnt offering once made in the Temple. Eggs are also a symbol of the slaves new life of freedom.



7. **GREEN VEGETABLE (KARPAS)** - usually **lettuce or parsley**. The greenness is a reminder that this is a spring festival. It is **dipped in salt water**.



8. **BITTER HERBS** - usually horseradish. It is a reminder of the **bitterness of slavery**.

9. **SHANKBONE OF LAMB** - this is **not eaten**. This is a reminder of the lamb killed so that its blood could be **smearred on the doorposts of the Israelite houses**. Also linked to Temple offerings.



Not all the foods eaten at Pesach are symbolic. About half way through the seder, a Jewish family will **eat a proper dinner**. They will also sing **songs about the exodus** from Egypt and about how God helped the Jewish people.