

INTRODUCTION

In every generation, each person should feel personally redeemed from Egypt, as it is said, "You shall tell your children on that day saying, 'It is because of what the Eternal One did for me when I went free out of Egypt.' For the Eternal One redeemed not only our ancestors; we were redeemed with them." (From the Haggadah)

The uniqueness of Pesah is found in the notion, expressed in the Torah, that Jewish history is also a timeless present. Pesah is not simply a commemoration of an important event in our past but an event in which *we* participated and in which we *continue* to participate. We are meant to re-experience the slavery and redemption that occurs each day of our lives. It is our own story, not just some ancient history that we retell at Pesah.

To relive the experience, we are commanded to tell the story of the Exodus. As the Torah states: "Remember this day, on which you went free from Egypt, the house of bondage, how the Eternal One freed you from it with a mighty hand . . ." (Exodus 13:3). The focus for this reliving is the seder, when we gather together in families or groups to celebrate this ritual meal. The Hebrew word "seder" means "order," and the meal has a very carefully constructed order to it. The seder includes many rituals, such as eating matzah and *maror* (the bitter herbs), drinking four cups of wine, and eating a sumptuous feast. Its many symbols are meant to remind us, on the one hand, of the bitterness of slavery and, on the other hand, of the great joy of liberation.

In the midst of these rituals, we recite a special pedagogic and liturgical text—the Haggadah. Haggadah comes from the root meaning "to tell" and reflects the purpose of the evening—the retelling of the story of the Exodus. Celebrating the seder by reading the Haggadah is one of the most widely observed practices among Jewish people today. But underlying the fun and warmth of families and friends gathered together is an important religious drama in which the props are the symbols, the script is the Haggadah, and the actors are our families and friends.

Pesah is the quintessential family holiday because of the importance it places in conveying the story and meaning of the Exodus to the next generation. It is the children's role to ask the Four Questions; it is our role to impress upon them the significance of the answers, for we understand fully what our children do not: that the future of the Jewish people lies with them. For that people to continue its 3,000-year history, each of us and each of our children must feel as though we ourselves were slaves in Egypt and were redeemed. In this way, each new generation can take its place in the chain of the Jewish people leading down from the Exodus to the present.

PREPARING THE SEDER TABLE

All of the objects on the seder plate are found in nature but also have a symbolic meaning. This illustration portrays the seder plate as if it were a vine, a living plant connecting the generations. Jeffrey Schrier

The preparation should involve the whole group or family if possible. Children can help set the table, color place cards, make matzah covers, and take charge of the salt water. The more people participate, the greater the sense of their involvement—and the lighter the burden on those doing the planning and cooking. In honor of the festival, and in celebration of freedom, many people set the table with their finest dishes. In honor of spring and the festival, some buy or pick flowers for the table.

In addition to copies of the Haggadah and whatever food will be served at the meal, the main items needed for the seder are the seder plate, *matzot*, wine or grape juice, salt water, and the cups for Miriam and Elijah. You will also need extra bowls of *haroset*, *karpas*, and *maror*.

THE SEDER PLATE

THE SEDER PLATE CONTAINS all the symbols of the seder. While any dish can be used, many people own special seder plates with places marked for each item. One seder plate is enough, though some people provide more if the seder is very large. The items on the seder plate include:

1. *Karpas*—a vegetable, usually green such as parsley, symbolizing spring and rebirth. It is dipped in salt water near the beginning of the seder.
2. *Haroset*—a mixture of chopped apples, nuts, wine or grape juice, and spices. The *haroset* symbolizes the mortar that the slaves made for bricks in Egypt and is used to offset the taste of the bitter herbs. Recipes vary widely among Jews, though the above list is the most common among Ashkenazic Jews. Sephardic recipes often include figs, dates, raisins, and bananas as well.
3. *Maror*—the bitter herbs. Either romaine lettuce or freshly ground or sliced horseradish is used as a symbol of the bitterness of slavery.
4. *Beitzah*—roasted egg, symbol of the festival sacrifice. The egg should be hard-boiled and then, still in its shell, placed on a stove burner or in the oven until part of it is scorched.
5. *Zeroa*—roasted shank bone, symbol of the Pesah sacrifice. The rabbis of the Talmud also allow a broiled beet, which is helpful for vegetarians.

Some seder plates have a sixth symbol, *hazeret*, additional *maror* to be used for Hillel's sandwich.

MATZOT

THREE MATZOT placed one atop the other, are used during the seder. They are customarily covered with a napkin or matzah cover and placed next to the seder plate. Use plain flour-and-water matzah for the seder, symbolizing *lehem oni*—the plain bread of affliction.

WINE OR GRAPE JUICE

FOUR CUPS OF WINE or grape juice are drunk during the course of the seder. The drinking of the four cups is a mitzvah, not an endurance test. Since it is important to be fully conscious at the seder, rather than sleepy or tipsy, you can alternate wine and juice or use only juice. If for reasons of health you cannot drink grape juice or wine, any other drink can be used.

SALT WATER

BOWLS OF SALT WATER are placed on the table as a symbol of the tears of slavery. The *karpas* or green vegetable is dipped into the salt water early in the seder.

MIRIAM'S CUP AND ELIJAH'S CUP

A LARGE GOBLET is set in the center of the table at the beginning of the seder, symbolizing the well of Miriam that sustained the Israelites during their journey in the desert. It should be filled with spring water. A large goblet is set aside for Elijah, who represents the longing for messianic days, which according to legend will be heralded by Elijah. Some legends hold that the prophet visits every home on Pesah and drinks from his cup. Elijah's cup is filled by seder participants toward the end of the seder.

OTHER ITEMS FOR THE SEDER TABLE

Pillows People use pillows to lean on whenever we are called upon to recline during the seder. The custom of reclining goes back to ancient times, when slaves ate standing up while free people ate while reclining.

Shemurah Matzah Some people use a special kind of matzah made from wheat that is "watched" (*shamor*) from the time it is harvested to prevent any contact with water that might cause leavening to ensue. Regular matzah is watched only from the time the grain is ground.

THE ORDER

- קדש קדש *KADESH blessing over wine or grape juice*
- ורחצ *UREHATZ hand washing*
- כרפס *KARPAS dipping a vegetable in salt water*
- רחצ *YAHATZ breaking the middle matzah*
- מגיד *MAGID telling the story*
- ורחצ *ROHTZAH hand washing*
- מוציא מצה *MOTZI MATZAH eating matzah*
- מרור *MAROR eating bitter herbs*
- כורח *KOREH eating matzah and maror sandwich*
- עורח שלחן עורח *SHULHAN OREH the meal*
- צפון *TZAFUN eating the afikoman*
- ברח *BAREH blessings after the meal*
- הלל *HALLEL reciting Psalms*
- נרצה *NIRTZAH the conclusion*

The enduring reality of the Exodus has been apparent in our own time by the rescue of thousands of Ethiopian Jews who were flown to Israel in Israeli jets, finally safe from the danger of annihilation in Ethiopia. For the Ethiopians, lining up to board the planes was like stepping into the Sea of Reeds. Danger was at their backs, while both the promise of freedom and the fear of the unknown lay ahead. What other people have faced such choices? Jeffrey Schrier

