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PESAH—PASSOVER

Beginning on the 14th of Nisan and lasting eight days (seven in Israel), it usually falls in April

PASSOVER CELEBRATES one of the most important events in Jewish history: the Exodus from Egypt, which led to the birth of the Jewish nation. In memory of the Jews who fled in such a hurry that their dough did not have time to rise, and following the injunction in the Torah that "Seven days shall there be no leaven found in your home," foods considered leaven (*hametz*) are forbidden. Fermenting agents such as yeast are forbidden, as is the fermentation of five types of grain—wheat, barley, rye, oats, and spelt—which are named in the Torah and can ferment. Bread, cakes, biscuits—all foods that contain ingredients made from these grains—are *hametz*.

The Ashkenazim also forbid rice and dried corn, dried beans, peas, and lentils, because of their similarity to the grains mentioned and because of their capacity to ferment, but the Sephardim allow them. Fermentation per se is not forbidden (Passover wine is fermented), and the grains are forbidden only when there is a possibility that they may ferment. Indeed, matzos—the unleavened bread of Passover, called "matzah" in Israel and by the Sephardim, is made with flour. Flour that has been milled with new millstones from wheat that has been guarded from the time of growing to the time of cutting, through storage, so that it could not get wet, is allowed.

The rituals of ridding the home of *hametz* involve weeks of cleaning extensively, and "selling" forbidden *hametz* to non-Jewish neighbors

and buying it back when the fast is over. In Orthodox homes, only after total cleansing can the special Passover silverware, dishes, and utensils be taken out of storage and the "kosher for Pesah" provisions, including matzos, be brought into the home. Part of my father's happy childhood memories was the "search for *hametz*" the night before Pesah, when, armed with a candle, a feather, a wooden spoon, and a paper bag, he looked with his older sisters for pieces of bread hidden by his father, and the whole thing was hurred.

The most important event of Passover is the Seder meal, which can occur twice, over two nights, at the beginning of the festival. Food plays an all-important part in the rituals by in-

carinating, with its symbolism, episodes of the Exodus epic. Every year at the Seder table, Jews retell the story of the Israelites' fantastic and miraculous escape from slavery in Egypt more than three thousand years ago. It is told in great detail, and the unfolding events are relived with great passion and ceremony.

In Egypt, with our extended family, we celebrated our ancestors' flight from Egypt, but we were still there. As children bunched together at the end of the table, we found this a matter of hilarity. For the Muslim cooks sitting in the kitchen, it was also a laughing matter, even when my father poured the wine enumerating the ten plagues on the Egyptians. (They could vaguely understand, because the Hebrew



Seder in Tbilisi, Georgia, 1924. All over the world, in every Jewish community, the Seder meal of Passover, which recalls the story of the Exodus from Egypt, brings extended families together.

for Egyptians—al Miztraim—and many other words are similar to the Arabic.) But after the first war against the new State of Israel, the celebration of Passover in Egypt became tense.

The large Seder tray was one of the few things my parents brought with them to England. Every year we placed it in front of my father on a pile of telephone books and covered it with a small embroidered tablecloth. On it were placed six little dishes, containing three matzos under a napkin, to remind us of the Jews who had no time to let their dough rise when they fled, and five symbolic foods.

In Europe, a decorative ceramic Seder plate, which is divided into sections, carries the ritual foods: karpas, a green vegetable such as parsley or little Bibb lettuce, representing new growth, which is dipped in salt water, symbolizing the tears of the slaves; maror, bitter herbs, which can be chicory, cress, or grated horseradish, to remind us of the bitter times of slavery; betza, a roasted egg, representing the sacrificial offering of a roasted animal to God in the Temple on each holiday (in my family we had one hamine egg for every member of the family); zeroa, a lamb-shank bone, representing the lamb sacrificed by the slaves on the eve of the Exodus and the sacrificial paschal offering in the Temple (in my family we had a boiled shoulder, which we ate); haroset, a fruit-and-nut paste recalling the color of the mortar made with Nile silt that the Jews used when they built the pyramids for the Pharaohs.

Reading from the Haggadah—the book that recounts the story of the liberation and gives the order of procedure—my father chanted in the old Egyptian style, and broke up and passed around the symbolic foods and the wine. He

broke off half of the middle matzos and rolled it in a cloth so that it could be hidden away as the *afikomen*. His voice became exalted when he got to the crossing of the Red Sea, the manna from heaven, the giving of the Torah to Moses on Mount Sinai, and the ten plagues. We averted our eyes as he poured the wine symbolizing the plagues from a glass into a bowl held by my youngest niece. As he grew older and more tired, he shortened the readings, muttering, "*Ma asa, casa, casa*" (etc., etc., etc.). We always left the door open for Elijah's expected visit and set a chair and a glass of wine for him.

The demands of cooking without grain or leaven have produced a whole range of distinctive Jewish variants of dishes making use of ground almonds, potato flour, ground rice, matzo meal, and sheets of matzos to make all kinds of cakes, pancakes, pies, dumplings, and fritters. For instance, in the Arab world, kibbeh, usually made with cracked wheat and lamb, was prepared with ground rice. In Eastern Europe, matzo-ball or egg-drop soup replaced vermicelli. Stuffed neck was filled with mashed potato instead of the flour-based filling: sponge cake was made with ground almonds or potato starch. One of the gastronomic highlights was the splendid cakes made with ground almonds, hazelnuts, or walnuts. One of the most affectionately remembered is matzo-meal fritters.

In Morocco at Passover, it was the tradition to barbecue foods, because when the Hebrews left Egypt they ate in a hurry and grilled their foods on a wood fire. One of the Passover specialties is a fresh fava-bean soup, because fava beans were eaten by the Hebrew slaves in Egypt.

SHAVUOT—THE GIVING OF THE TORAH

On the 6th of Sivan, usually falls in late May or June

SHAVUOT CELEBRATES the giving of the Torah, the book that holds the Ten Commandments, by God to the Jews at Mount Sinai, and their becoming a nation by accepting his commandments and pledging to be "a kingdom of priests and a holy nation." By ancient tradition, a dairy meal is eaten on the first day.

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