

their beginning and their end. These are called *hol ha-moed*, “normal days of the holiday.” Work restrictions generally do not apply. However, the holiday customs still apply. Eating *matzah* during Pesah and taking meals in the *sukkah* and waving the four species during Sukkot continue being observed during these otherwise “normal” days. In addition, Sukkot has its own unique structure as a holiday. Its last day, Hoshana Rabbah, while having its own special rituals, is not a final festival day. The observance of Shemini Atzeret and Simhat Torah, which immediately follows, serves as the end of Sukkot even though it is an independent festival.

The festival calendar differs in Israel and in the Diaspora. In Second Temple times, the calculation of holiday dates depended on the testimony of eyewitnesses before the high court in Jerusalem as to when the new month began. Following the decision, a variety of methods were used to carry the official dates to the Diaspora. As the Diaspora became more far-flung, it became impossible to communicate with Diaspora communities in a timely fashion. To eliminate any doubt, the rabbis established *yom tov sheni shel galuyot*, “the second festival day of the Diaspora.” Thus, in the Diaspora, there are two festival days at the beginning and end of Pesah, making Pesah eight days rather than the seven prescribed in the Bible. Similarly, Shavuot and Shemini Atzeret/Simhat Torah are two days instead of one. Sukkot also begins with two festival days. Rosh ha-Shanah was also observed for two days in the Diaspora, but Yom Kippur remained one day because of the necessity of fasting. In Israel, the extra days of the festivals were not observed. (Rosh ha-Shanah is observed for two days in Israel for other reasons.) The institution of the “second day” continued even after the calendar was regularized for both Israel and the Diaspora. In modern times the Reform and Reconstructionist movements have mostly eliminated the second day, and some Reform congregations only observe one day of Rosh ha-Shanah. Practice varies among Conservative synagogues. For a good explanation of Conservative practice, see *Conservative Judaism* 24, no. 2 (winter 1970).

## PESAH/PASSOVER

Pesah commemorates the Exodus from Egypt and marks the real beginning of the covenant between God and the Jewish people. Over and over, the Torah reminds us that the covenant rests on the fact that God “took us out of the land of Egypt.”

Pesah’s most striking feature revolves around food. We are forbidden to eat any bread during the holiday. Instead, we are commanded to eat special bread, *matzah*, that is unleavened. Bread that is allowed to rise (leavened), which is perfectly “kosher” all during the year, may not be eaten or even owned during Pesah. This has led to intensive rules about what is permitted and forbidden during Pesah as well as requiring an extensive spring cleaning to remove any trace of *hametz*, leavened bread, from our homes.

The major ritual of Pesah is the Seder, a meal that involves symbolic foods and the reading of the Haggadah. This recital, with its accompanying rituals, is intended to enable us to “relive” the experience of the Exodus from Egypt. We are not just to remember the events of the past, we are to see this experience as though we personally were slaves in Egypt and were redeemed. It is a remarkably ambitious notion. Through the eating of foods that symbolize the bitterness of slavery and the joy of freedom, we are to ingest these experiences. Through a retelling of the story, we are to reappropriate this ancient tale not just as the experience of our people but as our own individual experience. We are provoked by the text and the rituals to question, for in questioning what is, we begin the journey to freedom. All this is in order for us to understand that the struggle against slavery and for freedom is an

eternal one, until a time when everyone in the world will reside in a vision called Jerusalem, city of peace.

### Getting Ready

Perhaps Pesah requires the most extensive preparation because so does liberation. Lest we think that slavery only comes in some obvious form of chains and Pharaohs, Pesah asks us to see the most common element of our life, bread, as enslavement. It suggests that while slavery can be found everywhere and in everything, perhaps most of all it is found in the routine of the everyday. Slavery can be found in the rote repetition of activities that leads us to sleepwalk through existence. Instead, Pesah calls us to reexamine our daily routine by making us change our most basic element, bread, the staff of life. Nothing is to be accepted as is; rather, all is to be held up for examination and reflection. This process is not meant as a rejection of who we are and what we do; rather it is to lead to a renewal of our daily lives. After all, once Pesah is over, we go back to eating bread. Our goal is not to reject bread but to renew our priorities, to provide a greater appreciation for what we have and to remind us of all that we have yet to accomplish. We begin the cycle of the festival year with a holiday that comes to shake us out of our smugness and to remind us that the God of Israel calls us to work for the liberation of all people, including ourselves.

The first stage of Pesah preparation involves the removal of *hametz*, “leaven.” Traditionally, all leavened bread (grain) and leavening agents (yeast) are strictly forbidden on Pesah. This prohibition involves even owning *hametz*, thereby necessitating the removal of all *hametz* from the household. As in other aspects of our spiritual lives, we need to develop a personal practice in regard to removing *hametz*. I have found it helpful to begin with the idea that removing *hametz* should help us focus on the themes of slavery and liberation. Since *hametz* is the food we eat all year long, it is strange to turn it into a great evil for one week a year.

There are two strands of thinking regarding the evil of *hametz*. One sees something intrinsically wrong with *hametz* and focuses on the difference between *hametz* and *matzah*. *Hametz* is dough that has been

allowed to rise, that has been “puffed up.” *Hametz* then is seen as symbolic of pride, that which leads to an exaggerated sense of self. Passover is a call to return to a simpler sense of self, one that is not artificially inflated. In the context of the Passover story, it reminds us that Pharaoh was filled with a hubris that led to destruction. Instead of being like Pharaoh, who thought of himself as a god, we are to remember that there are things more powerful than any Pharaoh or than ourselves. The force of nature represented by the plagues is one. The power of resistance to injustice as represented by the midwives is another. Finally, God as redeemer represents all that is beyond us that brings about positive change in the world. Thus, in this view, the purpose of the removal of *hametz* is to bring us to a clearer sense of self and place in the world. We can be significant players in the world—as were the midwives and Moses—but we should always remember our limitations and our mortality and not become Pharaohs.

Another strand focuses on the fermenting nature of yeast. *Hametz* is that which stirs things up. In traditional terms, *hametz* is symbolic of the *yetzer ha-ra*, “the evil inclination.” The evil inclination is what encourages the worst aspects of ourselves—our fears, our hardheartedness, and our lust. It is that which makes us act less generously and openheartedly toward others as well as that which makes us think negatively about ourselves. Those moments when we look deep inside and see only flaws and failures are the times when the evil inclination is at its most powerful. Getting rid of *hametz* then is an attempt to quiet the evil inclination and to see with clarity who we really are. Of course, we are deeply flawed, but we also try to be good people. The Passover story demonstrates how the evil inclination can lead to a dead end. We can see how every bad step took Pharaoh deeper toward destruction. His life is an example of the self-destructiveness of the evil inclination unchecked. By contrast, Moses grows up in the palace, yet discovers his place with the oppressed. He fashions a life of growing awareness. He turns aside to notice the burning bush and sees that it remains unconsumed. Though he yearns to flee from responsibility, in the end he accepts the burden of leadership.

Most of all, the Pesah story is a story of change. The mighty power of Egypt is humbled. An enslaved people are freed. Once a year,

we remember that real change is possible. Having reached that understanding during Passover, we can return to the regular world by eating *hametz*. Hopefully we will emerge with a clearer sense of self, a vision of purpose, and the knowledge that change is within our grasp.

There is another strand in the tradition that does not consider *hametz* as evil. It asks, Why is something permissible fifty-one weeks a year suddenly prohibited? Why are we not only forbidden to eat *hametz* but even to possess it? The answer may be that we are prohibited from owning *hametz* to remind us that slavery lies among our possessions. The things we possess often possess us. *Hametz* may represent the way possessions lead to servitude. Are we working in order to acquire the necessities we need to live or in order to support ourselves in a style we covet? Is acquiring the only way we can measure our success? What do we really want, and is it reflected in or distorted by what we have? The prohibition of *hametz* asks us to reexamine not only our expensive electronic equipment, summer homes, and mammoth gas-guzzling vehicles, but our most basic possession, our food. By asking that we not just refrain from eating *hametz* but also diligently remove it from our homes, the tradition tells us that slavery cannot be successfully put aside for a week. It is too easy just to hide it away; rather we must remove it from our homes, from our lives. We must be freed from all the things that we think we possess, but which in fact possess us.

Taking something like *hametz* that is normally permitted, making it evil, and prohibiting it, causes us to question our basic assumptions about the certainties in our lives. Passover's symbols are complex. The *haroset*, the dip for the bitter herbs, reminds us of the mortar that joined the bricks of slavery, yet its purpose is to sweeten the bitterness of *maror*. *Matzah*, the central symbol of Passover, is both the bread of freedom eaten by the Israelites rushing to leave Egypt and also the "bread of affliction," the cheap but filling food given to slaves in Egypt. The rabbis remarked that the Hebrew words *hametz* and *matzah* were very similar. Closing a little space in the letter *heh* in *matzah* would make the letters identical. Pesah shows us that little separates the prohibited from the permitted, the slave from the free. From this we are to understand how easy it is to slip from freedom to slavery, and how important it is for us to seek freedom and guard it vigilantly.

We are to strive for freedom not only for ourselves but for all people everywhere. The Torah states, "You shall not oppress a stranger, for you know the feelings of the stranger, having yourself been strangers in the land of Egypt" (Exod. 23:9). And "You shall not abhor an Egyptian because you were a stranger in his land" (Deut. 23:8). We are exhorted to remember the experience of slavery in Egypt. That remembering is freedom's permanent clarion call. We are not to treat anyone as a stranger, for we ourselves were strangers. We know how easy it is to de-personalize the stranger, to be tempted to treat the stranger as less than us. Even the Egyptians who enslaved us are created in the image of God. Nevertheless, the Egyptian is not to be oppressed. Why not? Are we supposed to forgive and forget? It is rather that to continue to hate the Egyptian would mean to be enslaved by that hatred. We would be stuck to each other in a way that allows neither of us to move on. We need to move on without hate, a sense of martyrdom, or moral superiority. Pesah reminds us to use our lesson of freedom wisely: by ensuring freedom for all. From Egypt, we go forth carrying only *matzah* and a desire for freedom.

### Physical Preparation

Traditional Jews prepare for Passover by disposing of all *hametz*. This includes bread, pasta, crackers, etc. Even products that contain such ingredients, such as liquor and many processed foods, are forbidden. This usually means getting rid of most regular food, so it requires a thorough cleaning of the home. The laws of *kasbrut* require special Passover dishes, silverware, pots and pans, and so on. Some people use Pesah as an opportunity to bring unopened boxes of *hametz* to a local food pantry. Many people wind down their purchases of *hametz* a few weeks before the holiday. If you have too much *hametz* to get rid of, there is a practice called *mehirat hametz*, "the selling of *hametz*," in which *hametz* is sold to a non-Jew (usually only for the period of the holiday). This "sale" is often arranged through a rabbi. Whether sold or not, it is a good idea to put away *hametz* in order to prevent any accidental eating of non-Pesah food. I put masking tape on any kitchen cabinet that contains either non-Pesah foods or ordinary dishes.

Foods that are specifically kosher for Passover usually contain a note on their label. Some foods—including coffee, tea, sugar, eggs, meat, fish, fresh fruits, and vegetables—do not require such a label. Some people also abstain from eating *kitniyot*, “legumes”—this category includes beans, peas, lentils, rice, millet, sesame and sunflower seeds, and corn.

In addition to special dishes and utensils, those who keep the laws of *kashrut* can kasher (make kosher) some ordinary utensils for use on Passover. Refrigerators are washed. Ovens are rendered usable by allowing them to sit unused for twenty-four hours, by thoroughly cleaning them with oven cleaner, or by setting them to their highest temperature for an hour (self-cleaning ovens can simply be set to their cleaning cycle). Oven racks are cleaned with steel wool. The stovetop is kashered by turning the burners on (fifteen minutes on a gas stove, five minutes on an electric stove). Microwave ovens are kashered by leaving them unused, washing them, and boiling water inside them until the oven fills with steam. According to liberal opinion, dishwashers (after twenty-four hours of nonuse) are kashered simply by cycling them empty of dishes. Metal sinks are kashered by pouring boiling water on them (porcelain or enamel sinks require the same treatment but can be used during Pesah only with a sink liner at the bottom).

### Spiritual Preparation

I begin preparing for Passover by focusing on using up as much food as possible. Here is an opportunity to get rid of things I am never going to eat. The gradual emptying of the freezer, the food cabinets, and the refrigerator constantly reminds me of the approach of the holiday. It also makes me aware of my consumption of food in a different way than the rest of the year does. During the year I want to make sure I have enough to eat for my family without making frequent runs to the supermarket. Before Pesah, it feels like I am playing a card game. In order to win I have to get rid of all my cards, but only at the right moment. As my food supplies dwindle, I realize that this is an opportunity to begin again. At times, I realize that various kinds of products are unnecessary

and I can get by with fewer boxes in my cabinets. It reminds me to strive for a simpler though not spartan lifestyle.

Other vital preparations include deciding whom to invite for the Seder (or deciding whose Seder invitation to accept) and planning meals for the Passover holiday. Both of these have spiritual dimensions, as well. For example, the number of products available for Passover have so expanded in variety in the last few years that almost all ordinary foods can be duplicated on Passover. But there should remain some special food dimension to the holiday, and I find myself struggling with how to maintain that special quality. My children, however, hate restrictions on food and dislike the poor quality of many kosher-for-Passover products. How to juggle my spiritual needs without depriving them is an ongoing challenge.

Of course, many people complain about feeling burdened by all the cleaning and changing of food and dishes that Passover entails. It is easy to maintain that Passover/freedom is not supposed to come easily, but it seems wrong that people should dread the holiday of freedom as a burden. I deal with this tension by sticking to the vital essentials and not viewing Passover as a time for spring cleaning. It is probably not necessary to clear out the mess in your garage (at least not now).

### *Bedikat Hametz*

The night before the Seder is the traditional time for the ceremony of *bedikat hametz*, the “search for *hametz*.” Since this is a final symbolic check, there should be little *hametz* to be found. Many people hide bread crumbs or pieces of bread around the house and challenge the children to find them. In the old days, the search was conducted by the light of a candle, using a feather to brush the stray *hametz* into a wooden spoon. To replicate the feel of the “old days,” *bedikat hametz* kits (candle, feather, and spoon) are available in many Jewish bookstores and on the Internet. Of course, flashlights and mini-vacuums work equally well. Any *hametz* collected is set aside to be burned the next morning. A formula is then recited in which we declare the *hametz* null and void and renounce any ownership of it. (The text for the bless-

ing before the search and the nullification after is found in almost any Haggadah.)

The time of *bedikat hametz* is also an opportunity to become aware of the *hametz* in your life. If *hametz* is that which puffs you up or is more broadly the evil inclination, then we should spend some time this night reflecting on the *hametz* that lies hidden inside us. If *hametz* is a symbol of the ways we have enslaved ourselves, then pondering its removal might help us see ways to free ourselves. The search for *hametz* is traditionally done in silence, allowing for this kind of reflection to take place.

The next morning we burn whatever *hametz* we discovered and whatever remains after breakfast. The burning is followed by a version of the formula of nullification (*bittul hametz*) as recited the previous night. The rest of the day is spent preparing for the Seder. The tradition is not to eat *matzah* on the day before Pesah in order to make its eating at the Seder special. For the same reason, some people will not eat *matzah* for a week or more before Pesah.

### The Seder

Passover officially begins with the Seder. *Seder* means “order,” for the evening has an order of rituals and text. This order is found at the beginning of the Haggadah, the “telling.” The central focus is, of course, the story of the Exodus. This the Haggadah asks us not just to remember, but to experience as our own story. As the Haggadah says, “In every generation, each individual should feel personally redeemed from Egypt.” The Haggadah creates that experience in two ways: The first way is through taste. We consume the experience by eating foods like the bitter herbs that remind us of slavery or the *matzah* that reminds us of freedom. The second way is through the raising of questions. We are not simply to recount the events of the Exodus. We are provoked to question the story anew each year—by wondering at the strange customs of the Seder, by contemplating the four classic questions of the Haggadah, and by studying the text itself. The text purposely makes puzzling statements. For example, near the beginning of the Seder, in the paragraph that starts *ha lahma anya*, “this is the bread of afflic-

tion,” we recite: “This year we are slaves, next year we will be free.” If Passover is a celebration of our liberation, why then do we begin with a statement that denies that liberation?

Children are particularly encouraged to ask questions, because, as the Haggadah states, we are fulfilling the *mitzvah* of telling the story to the next generation, the next link of the chain of the Jewish people. However, we are all meant to question. Why? Because questioning reflects an engagement with the story, even when, like the “wicked child,” you express some skepticism or critique. More important, questioning in and of itself is a mark of freedom. Maimonides says: “If he has no child, then let his wife ask him [the Four Questions]; if he has no wife, then let one person ask the other even if they are all sages. If he is alone, then he asks himself ‘Why is this night different?’ ”

The elements of the Seder and all its essentials—*matzah*, wine or grape juice, vegetables for *karpas* (a symbol of spring), salt water (a symbol of the bitter tears of slavery), *maror* (bitter herbs—horseradish or romaine lettuce), *haroset* (a mixture of apples, nuts, and wine, symbolizing the mortar we used as slaves in Egypt), *beytzah* (the roasted egg, symbolizing the festival sacrifice), and *zeroa* (the roasted shankbone of a lamb, symbolizing the Pesah sacrifice)—are spelled out in the Haggadah, along with instructions on how to organize them on the Seder plate. Each person at the Seder should receive a copy of the Haggadah. Sometimes, pillows are provided for reclining (reclining while eating was a mark of a free person in ancient times; slaves ate while standing).

In addition to the Seder plate and its symbols, a cup of wine is poured for Elijah. According to legend, Elijah—the prophet who has become a symbol of hope for our messianic future—visits every Seder on Passover. Toward the end of the Seder we open the door for Elijah. More recently, some Jews have added a Miriam’s cup, a cup of water to symbolize the well of water that, according to the Midrash, accompanied the Israelites through the desert because of the merit of Miriam. While Elijah is a symbol of the future redemption, Miriam is a symbol of the ongoing hope and striving for that redemption.

*Matzah* is a special focus. Though many varieties are available, it is traditional to use plain *matzah* at the Seder. Some people use *shemurah*

*matzah*, “guarded *matzah*,” that is, *matzah* that is watched from the moment of harvest to ensure there is no contact with water. (Regular *matzah* is watched only from when the grain is ground.) The *matzah* is displayed covered on the table alongside the Seder plate.

There are a number of elements to balance at a Seder.

1. *Who is present?* Are there a lot of children? Of what age? No children? Do the participants have similar Jewish backgrounds? Are non-Jews participating? If the population is diverse, you can either seek to satisfy everyone or else focus on particular groups at certain points in the evening. For instance, you might focus on the children before the meal and on the adults after the meal.

2. *Leadership and involvement* You may wish to have someone leading or pacing the evening. It is also important to involve as many people as you can. At some Seders, everyone takes turns reading the text. At others, people are asked ahead of time to prepare one particular section. Planning ahead is especially important if the Haggadah you have chosen offers supplementary readings or commentary.

3. *Choosing a Haggadah* There are many Haggadot available, with more being published each year. Some have a particular orientation—for children, for feminists, for secular Jews, etc. Each of the liberal denominations has produced a Haggadah (Joy Levitt and I edited one entitled *A Night of Questions*, published by the Jewish Reconstructionist Federation). In choosing a Haggadah for your Seder, consider: Should everyone at your Seder have the same version? If so, do you want a Haggadah with a particular orientation? Do you want a simple, straightforward Haggadah, or one that has lots of commentary and optional readings? Do you want one that contains only the traditional text or a mixture of traditional and contemporary? One way to choose is to compare the Haggadot in a bookstore. If a lot of reading will be done in English, make sure the translation is appealing. Also, reading the introduction will generally tell you the orientation of a particular Haggadah.

Running a Seder can be a challenge. The Seder is the one time of the

year that we recite a major piece of liturgy without the benefit of clergy. After all, it takes place in our homes rather than in the synagogue. So decide on your goals for the evening and prepare ahead of time. Know the Haggadah text you will be using. Read its introduction. Familiarize yourself with the flow of the evening. Have some idea of timing. Know that you cannot possibly accommodate everyone all the time at a Seder.

To forestall the proverbial question “When do we eat?” you may wish to serve vegetable crudités with dips for *karpas*—this takes the edge off everyone’s hunger.

One important thing to remember: you really cannot “do it wrong.” The goal of the Seder is to engage the participants in telling the story of and reexperiencing the slavery and freedom. So if you tell the story and perform the major rituals, you will have fulfilled the traditional requirements for the night.

*Why is this night different?* Why is this night different? How can it be different, if each year we observe the same rituals of Passover? It’s all a question of attitude and awareness.

Pesah is the beginning. Its place at the start of the festival cycle represents the place it is to hold in our lives. It is a moment of liberation, of starting over. We go back to the basics—just flour and water. *Matzah* is a life unadorned. During the year, we become distracted by desires, by pain, by defeats, and even by victories. We become *hametztesized*. Pesah brings us back to the starting point and says you are only *matzah*, plain and simple. You are neither great nor terrible. Just when you might think that your choices have become narrow or nonexistent, Pesah proclaims the possibility of freedom. We begin by returning to our simplest selves to prepare for the journey of the year to come. For the rest of the year, our choices and our deeds should be infused with the experience of the Exodus—a striving for freedom for everyone.

---

#### A KAVANAH FOR THE FESTIVAL CYCLE

The famous four children of the Seder show us how we can come to appreciate what we have without ignoring the pain and loss

that is part of life. The Haggadah starts with the wise child, seeing each of the types of children as simpler. In this *kavanah*, I propose a somewhat different model, growing ever deeper as we move from wise to wicked to simple, until we finally reach the child who does not ask. This may be a good *kavanah* to focus us as Passover comes to an end.

When we are the wise child, we know what is. We look at the world and see it as teeming with blessings, a garden filled with delights for the senses. We see humans created not to be alone but rather blessed with relationships of friendship and love, with the gift of eternity and *naches* (gratification) through children. We are wise enough not to take the blessings of the world for granted.

When we are the wicked child, we have a critical view of the world. Without denying the blessings, we see that all of life is not blessings. God is both *oseh shalom u-borei et ha-ra*, “the maker of peace and the creator of evil” (or, as in the version we have in the *Siddur*, *borei et ha-kol*, “the creator of all things”). All of it is part of life, both peace and discord, both wholeness and shattering.

When we are the simple child, we see both the good and the evil. We respond neither with anger nor with despair to human fate. Instead, we affirm all of life by saying amen to the world. A sense of blessing comes from accepting the world in all its parts. We do not seek to deny human experience with all its complexities. We understand that the key to life and feeling blessed is to be aware of all that life has to offer. It is in an aware response that life is fully lived.

When we are the child who does not know how to ask, we remain silent. We are silent first of all because in that silence we can hear the rhythm of the world, the beating of the heart, and the voice that goes forth every day from Sinai calling to all those lost and wandering in the deserts of our own creation.

However, we are also silent because we understand the limits of what can be known. Bernie Glassman, a Zen teacher, writes:

Yet, we still want to know. In some way we can't help it—we're human. As part of being human, we believe that the

reason we're not happy or not successful is that somewhere in the world there is a piece of knowledge we haven't acquired yet. If we can find it with the help of the right book, the right religion, the right teacher, or the right job, we'll be happy and successful. [Bernie Glassman, *Bearing Witness*]

Instead, we have come to a place where the questions no longer matter. Coming to a place of unknowing, we are freed from a striving for that which cannot be attained. Instead, we can focus on living a life that is fully alive to every moment—whatever that moment may bring. Freed from striving for “wisdom,” we can focus on bringing peace and healing to the world. This is a life aware of all the blessings filling the world and most of all aware of *the* blessing—the gift of life itself.

---

God says: I will pour out for you blessings without end,  
Until your lips tire from saying: Enough! [Mal. 3:10]