

Pesach

Celebrating Pesach

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Pesach is the most observed of all Jewish holidays in North America. The power of the Seder has multiple sources. It is at once a family event at home, an opportunity to absorb a central Jewish narrative, a link across generations, and a celebration of Jewish life and commitment.

The power of Seder may stem from the role of the Passover story in our self-definition as Jews. The theme of remembering that we were slaves or strangers in Egypt is among the most repeated in the Torah. Who are the Jews? We are the people who “understand the heart of the stranger,” who have the experience of otherness. We believe to our core in the possibility of liberation. —J.A.S.

History

The biblical story of the Israelites' first Pesach is a familiar one. According to the Book of Exodus, after the Egyptians enslaved the Israelites, God visited nine plagues upon Egypt, but Pharaoh refused to let the Israelites go free. On the eve of the Tenth Plague, the Israelites smeared lamb's blood on the doorposts of their homes to protect themselves from the coming plague. They ate of the lamb they had roasted and huddled in their hovels while the tenth plague, the death of the firstborn, swept across Egypt. Then Pharaoh ordered their quick departure, and they took valuables of the Egyptians with them, fleeing so

The exodus narrative itself—an enslaved people achieving liberation so that they may serve the God of freedom and justice—is deeply powerful. So too is the ethical mandate arising from the story: to remember that we were once strangers who were oppressed and so, to treat all strangers justly. This ethical theme is the most often repeated verse in the Bible, mentioned no fewer than 36 times. —D.W.

On the 14th day of Nisan, the Israelites slaughtered the paschal lamb and then placed its blood on the doorposts of their homes. Was it the blood itself that protected the Israelites, or were they protected by the act of faith itself that God would “pass over” their houses? —J.G.K.

Before the Children of Israel could set forth from Egypt, they needed to become a people. The Pesach rituals as described in the Book of Exodus (see chapter 12) provided all the elements necessary to help the slaves form a covenantal community: sharing what they had with those who had less; eating a sacred meal together with their neighbors; marking their homes in solidarity with one another and in defiance of their oppressor; and uniting, not only to fight a common enemy, but in pursuit of a common purpose. —B.P.

quickly that they did not have time to allow their bread to rise. We cannot establish the historicity of the first Pesach, but its power as a formative myth remains at the center of Jewish self-understanding.

When the Israelites settled in the Land of Israel and built the Jerusalem Temple, Pesach became one of the *sh'losh r'galim*, the three pilgrimage festivals. On these holidays, Israelites went up to the Temple from all over the country to offer sacrifices in rites carried out by the *kohanim*, the priests in the Temple. On Pesach the rites of sacrifice included that of a lamb brought by the head of the clan.

Whether or not the events of the exodus story actually occurred is secondary to the importance of how deeply the story has entered into the practical lives of Jews and, more broadly, Western civilizations. It has become the archetypal story of hope and salvation for generations of oppressed peoples, and the lack of archaeological or historical documentation has not changed that fact. —N.H.M.

How important is historicity? For some, the statement, “We cannot establish the historicity of the first Pesach” may come as a shock. This begs the question: Can we find meaning in the exodus if it didn't “really happen?” Our traditions are based on truth, which is eternal, rather than on history, which is always interpreted subjectively. The inner truth of the exodus story relates to the human condition and to our ability to rise up against oppression, confront injustice and become liberated from the chains of tyrants. That truth continues to unfold throughout history, no matter the circumstances. —B.P.

Many biblical scholars posit that originally there were two separate springtime holidays that merged into what we know as Pesach. One holiday, Pesach, was intended to keep away evil spirits by smearing blood on tents or shelters. The Festival of Matza marked the early spring harvest. While the Festival of Matza was rooted in agriculture, the early Pesach ritual may have had its origins in seminomadic life. —T.K.

Once it had been slaughtered on the altar, the family head would return to the clan gathered on the edge of Jerusalem, and they would roast the lamb, which was a long, slow undertaking. Gathered around campfires, the elders would tell the story of the exodus from Egypt, and the younger generations would listen. Eventually evening would fall, the meat would be done, and the roast lamb would be eaten with unleavened bread and *maror*, a bitter herb. While that combination of foods was probably a common meal in that time, those foods came to signify the key events of the first Pesach—the bitterness of slavery, the Israelites' protection from the tenth plague and their flight from Egypt. The Mishnah (*Pesachim* 10.5) records these three foods as the essential ones for the Pesach Seder.

Exodus states that an animal from the flock must be slaughtered, while Deuteronomy says that an animal from the flock or cattle may be used. Exodus says that the meat of the animal must be roasted, while Deuteronomy tells us that the meat must be boiled. Second Chronicles 35:13, anticipating rabbinic talmudic methodology, tells us that the animal must be boiled in fire!
—T.K.

It is easy to understand how, as the Jews began urbanizing, such Seders shifted from being typical meals to becoming exceptional ones.

When the Second Temple in Jerusalem was destroyed in 70 CE, the Pesach pilgrimage ended. So did the ritual sacrifice of a lamb and the clan meal near Jerusalem. A new ritual was needed to replace them. Some clans returned to the practice of sacrificing and roasting a lamb for themselves in the areas where they lived. The rabbis, who gradually emerged as the dominant Jewish leaders after the destruction of the Second Temple, opposed this practice because they believed that sacrifices could be properly offered only in the Temple. Eventually the rabbis were successful in eliminating the practice.

Annually offering the paschal sacrifice ended within Jewish tradition, but it continues in outlying traditions descended from Judaism. Once, I was privileged to witness the Samaritan Pesach that took place in the mountain region north of Jerusalem that was their ancestral home. We observed the modern Samaritan men of the clan drawing knives from beneath their cloaks and slitting the lambs' throats, almost in unison, in a split second. Later, they roasted the meat over very large pits and shared it with their community. It was an experience that allowed me to reimagine our own ancient tradition.
—B.P.

The early rabbis were faced with a dilemma. They needed to observe the Seder, but the inherited rituals no longer worked as they had. How were they to structure the storytelling that is the key observance of the first night of Pesach? They borrowed the structure of the Greek symposium meal, a leisurely and ceremonial feast eaten while reclining. During the symposium meal, much of the conversation was connected to the foods served at the meal.

Sephardic Jews (descendants of the Jews of Spain) traditionally eat roast lamb at the Seder in commemoration of the first Pesach and the ancient Israelite custom, but because of concern about the appearance of engaging in the controversial sacrifice of a lamb after the destruction of the Temple, Ashkenazim (descendants of Jews from middle Europe) traditionally avoid eating roast lamb at the Seder. —D.A.T.

The interpretation of Pesach in the Mishnah, offered by the early rabbis following the destruction of the Temple, was not only an effort to establish a practice of Judaism that was not based on animal sacrifice at a centralized shrine. It was at the same time an effort to assert a Jewish interpretation of the Pesach symbols in the face of emerging Christianity, which had its own understandings of the holiday, its symbols, and, indeed, the significance of the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple. The Haggadah asserts a new, limited and polemical meaning for the paschal lamb. —D.W.

A major shift was the de-emphasis of the role of Moses in the narrative of liberation: Moses is not mentioned in the rabbinic version of events laid out in the Haggadah. This shift suited the political context in which the rabbis lived. Political revolts against oppressive empires in both the 60s of the Common Era and then again in the 130s not only led to the destruction of the Second Temple, but also forced the deportation of most Judean residents and the despoliation of Judean land. The rabbis deemed the prudent path forward to be a focus on study and religious observance, rather than on radical challenges to established authorities. —D.W.

Frequently apple dishes and greens were elements of the symposium meal, and this was reflected in the apple-based *haroset* (the variety served at most Ashkenazic Seders) and the *karpas*, a green. The rabbis restructured the telling of the exodus story so that it no longer centered on the paschal lamb. Additional foods, such as greens and *haroset*, became mandatory parts of the Seder, and the Temple sacrifices were commemorated by a roasted lamb bone (paschal sacrifice) and roasted egg (festival sacrifice), which were not eaten. All these elements were added to the Seder plate, which retained the *maror* (bitter herb) from the Israelite Seder. Why was the matza not on the Seder plate? It had its own plate because of its large size.

Before the advent of printing, few people owned Haggadot, the scrolls—and later, booklets—explaining the

I am fascinated by the multifaceted issues raised by the phenomenon of Jews, an oppressed and occupied people, borrowing the cultural forms of the Roman/Greek oppressors in order to tell the story of Israelite liberation from oppression. —J.A.S.

It has seemed strange to me throughout my entire life that even though the Haggadah says that eating the “paschal lamb” is one of the three essential elements of Pesach, I have never seen lamb served at a Pesach meal. Every year, I feel as though something is missing and that I am somehow not fulfilling one of the essential mitzvot of the festival. Perhaps if we talked about why we Ashkenazic Jews don’t eat lamb at the Seder, it would make more sense that we still read about the importance of the mitzvah itself. —S.C.R.

In 1974 I was living in French Hill in Jerusalem, and our Moroccan immigrant neighbor had a lamb tied up outside our front door in the month before Pesach. I was in pretty deep shock when I realized what that lamb’s destiny was to be. —S.P.W.

elements of the Seder ritual, because handwritten ones were too expensive. Families told the exodus story without the benefit of a written text—a practice that made for local differences and led to the evolution of an oral tradition unconstrained by a canonized text. This created another challenge for the rabbis: How could they ensure that the key elements were included in the Seder in the absence of a standardized text? Perhaps that is the origin of the ancient chant now often found near the beginning of Haggadot that consists of the elements of the Seder in

While most families would not have had access to printed Haggadot, we must also keep in mind that before the advent of printing, and even after it, memorization was a prevalent mode of engaging with Jewish text. Educated Jewish males often knew key passages of the Mishna by heart. The tenth chapter of Mishna *Pesahim* clearly outlines all the components of the Seder, including, verbatim, the Four Questions and the explanation of the Pesach, matza and *maror*. One remaining vestige of the oral preservation of the Haggadah is the memorization by the youngest child of the *Ma Nishtana*, the Four Questions. Children learned to recite the Four Questions at age 3, and they might well have learned new passages each year and recited them at the table until they memorized the entire *magid*. I see the Seder as a communal, liturgical, formal recitation, punctuated and accompanied by discussion, to be sure, but wedded to a script. I believe that since the advent of printing (and the diversification of Jewish practice through the different movements), the Seder has actually become *more* varied as different print editions have been created. For more than 1,000 years, the oral tradition actually preserved the Seder and its components in a remarkable degree of sameness. This may be evidenced by comparing the text of the Mishna to the texts of traditional Haggadot across Ashkenazic and *Mizrachi* communities and across time. —V.M.

The chant that lists the order of the Seder (referred to as “*Simaney Haseder*” (“Signs of the Seder/Order”) first appears in the 12th-century *Mahzor Vitri*. It is attributed in that work to Rabbeynu Shlomo ben Yitzhak, better known by the acronym Rashi, who lived in the 11th century. —V.M.

order. Memorizing the chant provided a way to preserve the sequence of the major Seder elements. Since “Seder” means “order,” preserving the structure is important. Over time, the story recounted at the Seder centered less on the biblical account of the exodus and more on the rabbinic midrash that interpreted it, eventually leading to the Haggadot that were produced in the early days of Hebrew printing.

The Mishna and Talmud also preserve early Seder liturgies that have become the core of the standard Haggadah. Beginning with the Four Questions and including Rabban Gamaliel’s explication of the three main Seder foods (*pesah*, or paschal lamb; matza, or unleavened bread; and *maror*, bitter herb), these passages were enshrined in Jewish text study. However, the rest of the Haggadah continued to evolve, not only through rabbinic influence but also by absorbing the practices of everyday Jews throughout history. Today’s contemporary Haggadot reflect a 2,000-year-old tradition of reinterpretation and renewal. —B.P.

Telling the Pesach story through the recitation of rabbinic midrash is an integral component of the *magid* as it is described in the Mishna. Mishna *Pesahim* 10.4 says, “Explain ‘*Arami Oved Avi*’—‘My father was a wandering Aramean.’” This passage (Deuteronomy 26:5–9) was originally a formulaic narration of our history offered in thanksgiving as part of bringing the first fruits to the Holy Temple in Jerusalem. Once the Temple was destroyed, the sacrificial rites of blood, grain, wine and oil became nonoperational, but the liturgical rites, being purely words, were still somehow salvageable. It was an act of conscious reconstruction to lift the text of “*Arami Oved Avi*” from its place in the defunct ceremony and reassign it to a prominent place at the Seder table. Reciting and learning these particular verses is as much about redeeming their ritual context as it is about learning their narrative content. —V.M.

In the Orthodox world in which I was raised, every word of the inherited text of the Haggadah is meticulously read as if it is as immutable as the Torah or the traditional liturgy. It is always startling for me to be reminded that the Haggadah text has evolved fluidly like all other aspects of Jewish civilization. —J.J.S.

Passover Preparation

One of the mitzvot that is undertaken well in advance of Pesach is giving *tzedaka* to enable those who might not otherwise be able to do so to make sufficient provision for the holiday for themselves and their families. This mitzvah is known as *ma'ot hitin*, money for wheat (i.e., matza). Many cities have *ma'ot hitin* funds that collect money to help the poor in their vicinity. Rabbis often collect money for this purpose and disburse it through their discretionary funds. Pesach is a holiday marked by many special food and holiday celebrations. Providing *ma'ot hitin* money helps to provide the means for joyous celebration to those who might not otherwise be able to fully enjoy the holiday.

Ma'ot hitin can be a powerful teaching tool for families by connecting familial celebration to shared communal responsibility. —N.C.M.

Preparation for Pesach and the month of Nisan, which is considered the New Year, takes place throughout the month of Adar. Just as the month of Elul at the end of summer prepares us for the Days of Awe (that other Jewish New Year) through self-reflection and repentance, the month of Adar prepares us for the season of love and spring through practices of generosity. These include the gifts of food to friends during Purim, gifts for the poor on Purim, the collection of food for the needy for Pesach (*ma'ot hitin*), and the invitations to the Seder—"Let all who are hungry come and make Pesach with us." While the month of Elul asks us to examine how much we have to grow, the month of Adar reminds us how much we have to give. Thus, the Jewish year is balanced between awe, *yir'a*, and love, *ahava*, at these temporal poles that are six months apart. —V.M.

More observant Jews begin their preparations far in advance of Pesach because they want to rid their households of all *hametz*, leavened foods. The first step in this process is consuming such foods that are already in the pantry or freezer, a process that can take a month or more. Closer to the start of Pesach, a process of meticulous spring cleaning is undertaken to get rid of crumbs wherever they might have ended up. For a full description

I like to think of hamantashan baking as the first step in getting ready for Pesach. It is the perfect opportunity to use up any flour and other baking ingredients on my shelves. —N.H.M.

The period of time when we use up the food in our homes can be one of spiritual reflection on scarcity and abundance. How long could we eat comfortably just from the groceries in our homes at this moment? What would it be like not to have the luxury of a choice of foods? An "empty cupboard" challenge—to buy nothing or only essentials in the lead-up to Pesach could put us in touch with those still oppressed by global food insecurity. How much sweeter would our own liberation be if we forced ourselves to experience some degree of scarcity? —N.H.M.

The first day of Nisan is mentioned in the Mishna as one of four new years—the New Year for Kings. A new year of a king's reign in ancient Israel would begin on the first day of Nisan, regardless of when he ascended to the throne. We can thus see the cleaning in honor of Pesach as being similar to preparing for the arrival of a king. Over the cold winter, we tend to stay in the house, to sleep more, to eat more, and to accumulate more unnecessary stuff. Clearing away physical clutter also allows us to be spiritually present and light for the beginning of our spiritual journey from winter and narrowness (Mitzrayim, Egypt, has the same root as *tzar*, narrow) to the wide-open space of the wilderness and the Land of Israel, represented by the spring and summer. Again in late summer, many people clean before Pesach's calendric opposite, Rosh Hashana, readying themselves for the next seasonal shift to fall. —J.M.S.

of Pesach kashrut, see the separate section that follows “Celebrating Pesach.” Some Jews do modified versions of these two processes. Some give their sealed containers of *ḥametz* to food banks, soup kitchens or other organizations serving the needy. Some Jews remove any *ḥametz* that they consider edible without becoming concerned about inedible crumbs. Others just remove bread, crackers, cake and the like. Those who take the more arduous approach sometimes find it a helpful way to focus on the upcoming holiday, while others see it as a huge task from which they feel liberated only once the house is clean and the food prepared.

Regardless of the form of this observance, on the night before the first Seder, it is customary to do a symbolic search for *ḥametz* while carrying a candle for light and a feather and wooden spoon for sweeping up the *ḥametz*. This search, called *b’dikat ḥametz*, is a wonderful experience for children regardless of the degree to which *ḥametz*

Men have long been involved in Pesach cleaning, since the commandment around eliminating *ḥametz* is binding on both men and women. However, in both Jewish and majority societies, housekeeping and cooking traditionally have been within the province of women, and Pesach has been famously taxing on them. At least until recent times, much of the chore of cooking has fallen on women, and both published literature and family stories illustrate how exhausting those last 24 hours leading up to the holiday can be. —D.W.

Some follow the custom of using the dried-up *lulav* branches (palm fronds) from Sukkot instead of a feather for *b’dikat ḥametz*. This is, perhaps, an early form of reuse and recycle! —B.P.

One can’t overstate the cathartic nature of deep cleaning! Jewish legal tradition places such an importance on *b’dikat ḥametz* that it says that one should interrupt one’s meal and even Torah study to do this process. (*Shulḥan Arukh* 431) —N.C.M.

is removed from the house. When children are going to take part in the search, family members place a few pieces of *ḥametz* (such as hard crackers) somewhere that the children can find them and sweep them up. Of course, the adults will want to keep careful track of where they have placed the *ḥametz* so that they can make sure it is all collected. The ritual begins with a blessing that ends, “*v’tzivanu al bi’ur ḥametz*”—“commands us to remove *ḥametz*.” After the *ḥametz* has been gathered, the ceremony ends with a pronouncement that any leaven that has been missed is to be considered “null and ownerless, like the dust of the earth.” The complete text of this formula can be found in *A Night of Questions: A Passover Haggadah*, page 7, as well as in most other Haggadot.

When we swept up the last piece of bread in the candlelit darkness, my father recited the Aramaic formula as if it were a magical incantation. He was declaring all remaining *ḥametz* null and void, and it felt as if his voice were disintegrating any remaining crumbs. —J.J.S.

The following morning, the remaining *hametz* is burned in an open fire, usually outdoors, and another nullification formula is recited. If children are present, using the fire to roast marshmallows after the *hametz* has been burned will make this an unforgettable experience for them. When the

I have developed the practice of buying a new wooden kitchen spoon at Pesach, using it throughout the year and then burning it when I do *bi'ur hametz* (burning the *hametz*) as a way of making a fresh start. —N.H.M.

After days and weeks of cleaning out all of the *hametz*, the nullification of any remaining, overlooked crumbs affirms that we have done the best we can, and that it is good enough. We work hard, but we need not achieve perfection. —J.J.S.

I experience a definite psychological benefit from the rituals of *bitul hametz* and *bi'ur hametz* (nullification and burning of the *hametz*). I see the ritual as a psychological throwing up of one's hands. Each year, I reach the point where the Pesach preparation I've done will just have to be good enough because I've reached my limit. And each year, *bitul hametz* is there to affirm that it really is enough. —M.F.

My father and I would place the bundle of bread pieces into my mother's metal wash pail and take it down to the Bronx sidewalk to burn it. We lived in a Jewish neighborhood, but few of our neighbors were ritually observant, and this annual practice felt like a rite of passage in which I joined my father in a public act of Jewish pride. Afterward, we would walk around the corner to the grocery store to buy a kosher-for-Pesach bar of Israeli Elite bittersweet chocolate. Might that be why I have a strong preference for semisweet chocolate to this day? —J.J.S.

B'dikat hametz also provides a great opportunity for children to learn about fire safety. Some synagogues have firemen available to teach basic fire safety skills while the *hametz* burns. —J.M.S.

Seder takes place on a Saturday night, *b'dikat hametz* is traditionally carried out on the preceding Thursday night, and the burning takes place on Friday morning, with Shabbat meals consisting of foods that are kosher for Passover so that Seder food can be prepared on Friday. In this way, the restful atmosphere of Shabbat is not disturbed by Pesach preparations. Why the search and burning rituals?

Some Jews may not do the regular burning at all when Pesach begins on a Saturday night. They choose to eat year-round food Friday night and early Saturday morning, particularly so that they can eat regular bread as a centerpiece for their Shabbat meals and eat their first matza at the Seder. —J.G.K.

My mother would set up a bridge table in the hallway outside the kitchen on which I could eat Rice Krispies and milk if I could finish by 8:45 a.m., after which we carried out any leftover *hametz* to be burned. If I overslept, I could eat neither *hametz* nor matza until the Seder in the evening. Fruit, cheese and gefilte fish were the stuff of lunch. —J.J.S.

When I was growing up, my parents created a symbolic hunt for *hametz* on the morning before the Pesach Seder using a feather and a spoon and finding crumbs that they had placed conspicuously around the house. We then took the *hametz* to our back yard and burned it in the family barbecue grill. To this day, this ritual is a highlight of Pesach for every young child in our extended family. —S.C.R.

The plain matza that is used at the Pesach Seder is not eaten on a Shabbat that immediately precedes Pesach in order to keep the experience of its taste fresh for the Seder. —J.A.S.

Common traditional practice is to eat hallah on a Shabbat immediately preceding Pesach, but to do so over a towel or in the bathroom so that the crumbs can easily be cleaned up. In order to avoid this uncomfortable situation, communities may choose to host a kosher Shabbat meal at an offsite location. —J.M.S.

When I was a child, we did *b'dikat hametz* in the religious school wing of the synagogue building, and it was a memorable annual ritual. —J.G.K.

There are several possible reasons. These rituals have great pedagogical value. They create a ritualized end to the process of ridding the house of *hametz*. And, since it is possible to become obsessive about the process of house-cleaning, the ritualized pronouncement that nullifies any remaining *hametz* can be comforting, as even careful people are bound to miss something somewhere.

Traditional Jews “sell” their *hametz* through a contracted installment sale that is canceled immediately after the end of Pesach. They designate their rabbi or someone else skilled in this transaction who then sells their *hametz* to a non-Jew in a sale that is effective hours before the start of the Seder.

Selling *hametz* is a great model for those with perfectionist tendencies because it limits our compulsiveness. I wonder why such measures are reserved only for Pesach.
—S.P.W.

We have found it more meaningful to draw up our own contract and sell it to a non-Jewish friend or neighbor than to ask our congregational rabbi to do it for us. This provides an opportunity to share a bit of Jewish life that is usually hidden from view. It also provides a counterbalance to the heavy Pesach emphasis on Jewish insularity. Kashering your house for Pesach can be an exercise in expunging all non-kosher-for-Pesach “contaminants,” a category into which non-Jews tend to fall if we are not careful.
—J.J.S.

The disposal of *hametz* poses a three-way conflict: I don’t want to own *hametz* on Pesach; I’m unable to donate opened or perishable items to my local food bank; and throwing away food is costly, and it violates *bal tash’hit*, the prohibition against waste. One recent Pesach, I arranged to “sell” our community’s *hametz* to a local pastor in exchange for a donation to the local kosher food bank. When the holiday ended, I “bought back” the community’s *hametz* with a donation to her church’s food pantry.
—M.F.

Those whose lives are connected to the larger Jewish world may also be aware that there is a separate prohibition against eating *hametz* after Pesach if it was owned by a Jew during the holiday, so the fact that the sale of *hametz* took place may remain relevant for weeks after the holiday concludes.
—J.G.K.

Since traditional Jews are not supposed to own *hametz* on Pesach, the selling allows them to avoid giving up valuable possessions (anything from a fine collection of scotch to a large cookie factory) and to have another guarantee that they do not possess *hametz*. Some argue that this is a halakhic (Jewish legal) nicety and that those not committed to *halakha* need not bother with it. But liberal Jews who take the “do not possess *hametz*” rule seriously may find this a meaningful way of fulfilling that commitment. The contract of sale does legally change who possesses the *hametz*, so it is not simply a legal fiction.

Another custom is to stop eating matza a month before the Seder so that eating matza at the Seder is a fresh and meaningful experience. People who *kasher* their homes for Pesach do not eat bread after the burning of the *hametz*, making it less likely that *hametz* will get near the food being prepared for Pesach.

Those who do not *kasher* their homes for Pesach can start cooking and freezing food far in advance of the holiday. Some observant people who have two kitchens available to them *kasher* one of them for Pesach a few weeks in

Hasidic interpretations around the removal of *hametz* focus on removing the behaviors, thoughts and practices in our lives that inflate us (and our egos) with an expanded sense of self-importance.
—N.C.M.

The selling of *hametz* is undertaken by people who have not physically emptied their houses or apartments of *hametz*.
—J.A.S.

It is customary to stop eating *hametz* and not to possess it a few hours after sunrise on *erev* Pesach.
—J.G.K.

advance of the holiday so that they can start cooking for the Seder there. But most people who *kasher* their homes for Pesach cannot begin cooking until their kitchens are kosher for Pesach and their Pesach dishes are unpacked. That typically happens the evening before the Seder, making the last 24 hours before the holiday an intense period of preparation and cooking in homes that host Seders.

Some firstborn adults observe the Fast of the Firstborn on the day leading up to the Seder. It commemorates the Torah's account of the Egyptians' loss of life due to the tenth plague, the plague of death of the firstborn, and the sparing of the Israelites' firstborn. If someone who would observe this fast attends a *siyum*, a celebration marking the end of study of a book when the eating of a celebratory meal is expected, this takes precedence over the obligation to fast, which is why many congregations arrange a *siyum* on that occasion.

A *siyum* is usually conducted after morning services, before the latest time for *bi'ur hametz*, usually around 10 a.m., so that one last taste of *hametz* can be eaten before we enter into full Pesach mode. —J.M.S.

My older brother is the firstborn male in our household and the first male grandchild on both sides of our family. Though not particularly observant, he takes the responsibilities of being the eldest male very seriously, including attending the *siyum* for firstborns most years. For him, it is the rare occasion that acknowledges and crystallizes his status in the family. —D.W.

Preparing for the Seder

The Seder ritual has several elements that must be prepared for in advance. Perhaps the most basic is ensuring that enough copies of the Haggadah are available for everyone to use. The choice of Haggadot is amazingly large. Traditional Haggadot come with different kinds of commentary, illustrations and translations. And the variety of contemporary Haggadot is almost endless—including feminist, family and abbreviated Haggadot, Haggadot emphasizing social justice, and Haggadot with commentary. Visiting a good Jewish bookstore should provide more than a dozen choices, and new ones come out every year. When selecting a Haggadah, it helps to think about the people who will be present at one's Seder. How traditional are they? How knowledgeable? Are their concerns

It is ironic that there might be a Haggadah specifically focused on social justice when this holiday, beyond any other, is about speaking truth to power and about liberation from oppression. I hope that every Haggadah is inherently a social justice text. —J.G.K.

Though contemporary Jews take the great range of available Haggadot for granted, the diverse reinterpretations of content—as opposed to illustrations and creative translations—is a relatively new phenomenon. —D.W.

primarily spiritual? Or are they focused on social justice or on Jewish learning? Will they care about illustrations or the quality of the translation? What about egalitarianism or theology? It is very helpful to find a good match between the Haggadah and the group.

Once the choice of a Haggadah is made, it can be useful to think about what is missing. Additional readings are available online and through many Jewish organizations; some publish a new Haggadah supplement every year. Some additions deal with issues in current events. Others

deal with perennial challenges. Some, such as ones that include a fifth cup of wine, interpret particular aspects of Jewish tradition. Others connect loosely to one of the themes of the Seder. It is also possible to add poetry not originally designed for a Seder, to write new material, or to read selected sections aloud from Haggadot other than the one that has been distributed at the table. *A Night of Questions* and some other Haggadot offer many ways to use the same Haggadah.

The purchase of Haggadot, especially if one is inclined to take the mandate of hospitality seriously and to invite a lot of people to one's Seder, can be a significant and sometimes burdensome investment. It is a relief to find a Haggadah that feels like a good fit.
—D.W.

When I was in college, we used to create a Seder for our friends in which every person had a different Haggadah so that each part of the Seder could be shared with a different emphasis. It helped keep everyone's interest and made for very lively discussions throughout the evening. Some families with young children like to use the Haggadah that their children use in their religious school or early childhood center to make sure that the Haggadah is age-appropriate.
—S.C.R.

With so many choices of Haggadot, the leader may decide to incorporate selections from a variety of publications. Some families give everyone different books, while others select a very basic text for everyone to use and then share different Haggadot around the table. Many families have a tradition of creating their own photocopied version of the Haggadah, collecting favorite readings and songs over the years. If we are to take seriously the notion that we should feel as if we ourselves were taken out of Egypt, then the version we choose ought to be renewed in some way to make the experience unique each year.
—B.P.

Creating your own Haggadah (perhaps by excerpting from various ones) can be an empowering process. It can result in a Haggadah that matches your taste and approach.
—N.C.M.

Another way to engage all the participants is to invite different individuals or families to prepare a section of the Haggadah in advance. Like a potluck meal, this kind of Seder builds on the special talents and interests of everyone involved. It can also lead to surprises for everyone. Be sure to state expectations and limits clearly, indicating how much time the section should take, and the ages and backgrounds of other participants.
—B.P.

Some people choose to make their own family Haggadot year after year. Such Haggadot can include traditional Seder texts, pictures, poetry, essays and personal writings. Sometimes participants are allowed to take these creations with them as year-books of sorts.
—J.G.K.

When Seder leaders prepare, they should think through how the evening should go, what questions should be asked, and what themes highlighted. What objects on the table need to be explained? If children will be present, how will they be involved in the Seder? How long should the Seder last? Where should discussions take place? A

A hearty yes to truly planning the Seder! Inclusivity does take more thought than domination. —S.P.W.

As a child growing up in Argentina, I hated the Pesach Seder. My uncle would read the Haggadah in Hebrew, which we did not understand, and he never paused to give an explanation. As the evening went by, we became tired and fidgety, which made my uncle angry with us, and the evening unfolded as a very unhappy event for all the cousins present. That might be why I carefully prepare to lead the Seder in my home every year. I plan for weeks, carefully choosing readings, explanations, and a major theme for discussion, doing my best to have not only a meaningful evening but a joyous one as well. —L.K.

Since the goal of the Seder is to experience the redemption of the Exodus, it is a great idea to utilize some experiential education tactics to enhance the Seder. A few of my favorites are: giving everyone a question to ask related to a step of the Seder, to be revealed and discussed when the Seder arrives at that step, and asking a few people to pick a character in the Exodus story, and then having them retell the story in that character's voice. Another approach is to assign roles that accord with "the four children" for people to take on during the telling of the story: 1. Critical Thinker (*Hakham*)—What are the assumptions built into this text? How does each of these connect to the experience of redemption? 2. Agitator (*Rasha*)—Why bother? What is in these texts for me? What assumptions underlie these texts that I question? 3. Simplifier/Reductionist (*Tam*)—Summarize this in a one-page report. What does it all boil down to? 4. Non-Questioner (*She'eyno Yode'a Lish'ot*)—one who attempts to formulate answers to others' questions rather than adding a personal voice to the questioning. —J.M.S.

One of the smartest suggestions anyone ever gave me is to feed young children who are present at a Seder before the Seder starts. That way, they will be able to sit through the Seder itself without the constant nudging that comes from hunger. —S.C.R.

well-planned Seder will encourage everyone's participation; the Seder leader will guide the group rather than dominate it.

Over time, the number of ceremonial objects at the Seder has expanded. Many Seder plates have places for five objects:

- *beytza*, the roasted egg, signifying the festival offering in the ancient Jerusalem Temple;
- *z'ro'a*, the roasted lamb bone (or a roasted chicken bone if a lamb bone is unavailable, or, for vegetarians, a roasted beet or roasted sweet potato), signifying the protection of the Israelites during the Tenth Plague in Egypt and the paschal sacrifice in the Temple;

Sometimes no amount of planning can guarantee a participatory ritual. My late uncle reveled in asking: "When do we get to eat the festive meal?" right up until the chopped liver was brought out from the kitchen. For him, the point of the Seder was family and food; he could not tolerate a discussion of the themes of slavery, redemption, activism or springtime renewal. —D.W.

"Z'ro'a" literally means "arm" and so is associated with the biblical metaphor of God saving the Israelites with the outstretched arm of redemption. —J.A.S./J.G.K.

The sweet potato is better known as the "Paschal Yam," of course! —M.F.

There is another story regarding the use of the beet. In Buchenwald concentration camp in 1945, a woman recorded: "It hit me suddenly that the Haggadah could have been written for us. If I only changed the tense from past to present, it was written about us ... At this time, the scene in the barracks was bad, there was fighting, cursing and yelling ... so when I asked the women to be quiet, it was like a miracle, this absolute silence in the barracks. I started the Seder by asking why is this night different. And I said that every night we quarrel and we fight and tonight we remember. There were close to a thousand women there. I picked up the slice of sugar beet, and I said, 'This is the bread of our suffering ...' And then we made a vow that if we survived, a beet was going to be on our Seder table." So some homes add a roasted beet to the Seder plate each year. —T.K./L.K.

- *maror*, bitter herb, which is most commonly horseradish, signifying the bitterness of slavery; horseradish continues to spread in the garden under adverse conditions, as the Israelites did in Egypt;
- *haroset*, a mixture of fruit, which might include apples, dates, nuts, figs, wine, sugar and cinnamon, depending upon which tradition Jews follow, that signifies the mortar used by Israelite slaves in Egypt; and
- *karpas*, greens—usually parsley, but whatever is available can be used—signifying the beginning of spring and the rebirth of the Israelite people after their crushing experience of being enslaved in Egypt.

The Lurianic kabbalists of Tzfat considered the five-ingredient Seder plate to be incomplete. They added *hazeret*, an additional kind of bitter herb (sometimes sliced horseradish, sometimes romaine lettuce or another bitter

Jewish cookbooks have many wonderful *haroset* recipes. I make a *haroset* that includes all the foods mentioned in the Song of Songs, the biblical book of love songs traditionally recited on the Shabbat that falls during Pesach. —J.A.S.

When my family makes *haroset* from figs or dates or other sticky fruits, we serve it shaped into pyramids, drawing the connection between *haroset* and mortar in a very concrete way. —B.P.

My family—on both the Hungarian and Russian sides—used boiled potatoes for *karpas*. Potatoes aren't green, but they were available locally in early April, when green vegetables were hard to come by. —J.J.S.

One kind of bitter herb—like romaine lettuce or endive—can be dipped into *haroset* for the *maror*, while a second kind—like grated horseradish—can easily make up the filling of Hillel's sandwich for *korekh*. —J.G.K.

vegetable). The six ingredients can be laid out as the points of a six-pointed star composed of two triangles, with one representing creation, revelation and redemption, and the other representing God, Torah and Israel. Both five-ingredient and six-ingredient Seder plates are available. Many are beautifully designed, aiding in *hidur mitzvah*, making more attractive the mitzvah of the Seder as we re-experience the going forth from Egypt.

The text's interpretation of the six points corresponds to the points of the "Star of Redemption" expounded by the 20th-century philosopher Franz Rosenzweig. My understanding is that the Seder plate of Isaac Luria (who lived in 16th-century Tzfat) associated the six points with six of the lower *s'firot* (aspects of divinity): *Z'ro'a* for *hesed*/caring, egg for *g'vura* /fortitude, *maror* for *rahamim*/compassion, *haroset* for *netzah*/endurance, *karpas* for *hod*/majesty, and *hazeret* for *brit*/covenant (more often called *y'sod*/foundation). The seventh lower *s'fira*, *Malkhut/Shekhina*, is symbolized by the plate itself. *Shekhina* is God's presence that dwells with us, even in exile. We ask for the presence of the *Shekhina* in our daily prayers. The three matzot represent the upper three *s'firot*—*Eyn Sof*/infinity, *hokhma*/wisdom, and *bina*/understanding. I like to imagine that ten items on the table can also be related to the journey from ten plagues in Egypt to ten utterances at Sinai. —J.G.K./J.A.S.

Other kabbalistic representations have the *z'ro'a*, *beytza*, and *maror* representing the *s'firot* (kabbalistic emanations) of *hesed* (loving kindness), *g'vura* (strict judgment) and *tiferet* (the balance point between them), respectively. The *haroset*, *karpas*, and *hazeret* represent the *s'firot* of *netzah* (eternity), *hod* (wonder) and *y'sod* (foundation) respectively. The three matzot represent the three upper *s'firot* of *hokhma* (wisdom), *bina* (discernment) and *da'at* (knowledge). Thus the orange, in the center of the Seder plate, could represent *malkhut*, God's immanent and feminine presence in the world. —J.M.S.

I have found that the three most common Jewish ritual objects people collect are Hanukah menorahs, mezuzot and Seder plates. Some people put out several different kinds of Seder plates on their tables both to serve as ritual objects and to add ritual beauty to the festival table. —S.C.R.

Starting in the 1980s, the custom arose of placing an orange on the Seder plate as a gesture of solidarity with Jewish gay men and lesbians. The orange is, on some level about overcoming alienation. Whether this is about the need to include women fully in Jewish life, about the importance of equality for gay men and lesbians or about the fruitfulness of women is a matter about which people who observe this custom differ. Whatever the original reason, the meaning of the orange on the Seder plate is likely

Rabbi Rebecca Alpert's book, *Like Bread on the Seder Plate*, points out that the custom of putting an orange on the Seder plate originated when someone observed that being lesbian and Jewish was as incongruous as placing bread on a Seder plate. In one response to this outrageous comment, lesbians and their allies began putting bread on their Seder plates. In time, the custom shifted to putting an orange on the Seder plate instead, since oranges are neither traditional nor forbidden. —J.G.K.

An orange is a symbol without meaning in traditional Pesach liturgy, whether it is the original biblical or the renegotiated rabbinic holiday. As a new symbol, the orange can signify ideas about inclusion that are easily incorporated into the Seder. Rebecca Alpert suggests that the origins of this practice are far more transgressive, and that the original phrase was directed at lesbians, who were judged as belonging to the Jewish community as much as bread belongs on a Seder plate. Enacting that challenge radically alters boundaries rather than gently expanding them. The many symbols of Pesach provide an excellent opportunity to discuss who and what make up the Jewish community, and how commitments are translated into action. —D.W.

Susannah Heschel says that she was the first to put an orange on the Seder plate after seeing a crust of bread on a Seder plate at Oberlin College. The story that developed later is that the original incident took place in response to someone who said, "They belong on the *bima* as much as bread belongs on a Seder plate." She used an orange because using bread during Pesach is transgressive. Of course, other contemporary midrashim carry different versions of the tale. —D.A.T.

to evolve. The origin of any innovation is less important than how it comes to be understood over time. When a new issue regarding freedom or justice arises, the symbols and rituals of the Seder can be expanded to make room for it.

Also on the Seder table are three matzot, sometimes under a special, three-layered matza cover that is often graced by beautiful embroidery. A midrash suggests that the three matzot represent *kohen, levi, and Yisrael*—priests, levites and Israelites—brought together to show the unity of the Jewish people. A more technical explanation is that two complete pieces of matza (the equivalent of the two loaves of bread on the Shabbat table during the rest of the year) are needed for the recitation of the *motzi*, the blessing beginning the Seder meal, when the Seder falls on Shabbat. Since the third matza is broken early in the Seder to be set aside for the *afikoman*, three matzot are needed in order for there to be two whole matzot at the beginning of the meal. With three matzot needed when the Seder occurs on Shabbat, the rabbis made three matzot the standard for every Seder night so that people would not have to remember to prepare the matzot differently on Shabbat.

Adding components to the Seder plate can be a way of both personalizing and contextualizing Pesach in the spirit of identifying with the struggles of the ancients. Another recent addition to the Seder plate is a dish of olives to symbolize a hope for peace between the people of Israel and Palestine. —N.H.M.

The Seder table also holds a container of salt water, signifying tears and historically evoking the dipping of food into salt water at the symposium meal. We dip the *karpas* into the salt water before eating it, reminding us that new life can follow a period of tears and loss.

The cup of Elijah is the fifth cup, the cup of redemption and a reminder of messianic hope. It is filled with wine at the beginning of the Seder. In recent years, many Jews have begun including on the table a water-filled cup of

The saltwater and the water for Miriam's cup signify the waters that burst forth as new life emerges. Just as women figure prominently in the birth story described in the first few chapters of the Book of Exodus, so at the Seder, women are heroes of resistance as well as midwives, nurturers and witnesses to the birth of this people. —S.P.W.

The Pesach drama both begins and ends with saltwater. We start with saltwater tears and end as the Israelites pass through the split sea and the Egyptian army is drowned in saltwater. —J.A.S.

The tradition at our Seder is to start with the cup of Elijah empty and then to pass it around the table so that each of the participants can add a little of their own wine until the cup is full. This reminds us that for redemption to come, all of us must do our part. All of us have a role—men and women, young and old. Similarly, an empty Miriam's cup can be passed and filled while recalling the names of those for whom we pray for healing. —N.H.M./S.C.R.

A medieval custom of having fish on the Seder table was associated with Miriam. Just as the Seder plate's egg is associated with Aaron (the priest making the holiday sacrifice) and the bone with Moses (who affirmed that God would reach out to redeem the people), a third kind of cooked food is associated with Miriam. In just one verse of the Hebrew Bible, the three siblings are named one after the other: "And I will set before you Moses, Aaron and Miriam." (Micah 6:4) The word "*eshlah*," translated as "set" here, has the same root as "*shulhan*," which means "table." The three siblings, co-equal in this verse alone, can be set before us at the Seder table. —J.G.K.

Miriam as a reminder of the aspect of redemption present in everyday life, for water sustains our lives daily. Each of these cups is available in artistic designs. Family heirlooms can also be used for the cups.

Each person at the Seder traditionally drinks four cups of wine or grape juice. The wine or juice may be sweet or dry, red or rosé or white, but many insist that it be certi-

Bringing Miriam into the Seder is, on the one hand, natural. Miriam played a role in the exodus narrative, nurturing her younger brother Moses in his early years and partnering with him in leading the Israelites in the years of desert wanderings, including drawing forth a wellspring out of which this ritual arises. On the other hand, what makes it slightly odd is the notable absence of Moses and their elder brother Aaron from the traditional Haggadah. The rabbis omitted their roles in order to shape the postbiblical ritual in the wake of the Bar Kochba revolt in a way that plays down political activism. For the rabbis, the individual to make more visible was Elijah, harbinger of the ultimate redemption. If Miriam is to be introduced into the Seder, Moses and Aaron should be acknowledged as well, as they are in *A Night of Questions*. —D.W.

I was 11 years old when I was actually permitted to drink wine, and I became intoxicated. With all that wine available, someone should be the designated driver, even if it is a religious ritual. —J.J.S.

fied as kosher for Passover, an issue dealt with in the section on Pesach kashrut that follows. Some say the four cups represent the four freedoms. The first cup is drunk after reciting the holiday Kiddush near the beginning of the Seder, so it sanctifies the day. The second cup is drunk at the end of the telling of the story of redemption from Egypt, so it is linked to past redemption. The third cup is drunk at the end of the *Birkat Hamazon*, the Grace after Meals; it marks the redemption of the present that is embodied in the food we eat. The fourth cup is drunk near the end of the Seder, which focuses on future redemption.

The four cups can also signify the four worlds in the mystical tradition. The structure of the Seder then moves through the worlds of body, heart, mind and spirit. This reminds us of the mystical notion that the deepest level of exile was the exile of awareness. As we bring attention and awareness to the various levels of human experience, we are also liberating awareness itself. —S.P.W.

I have structured the four cups so that the first represents sacred time; the second, personal liberation from bad habits or desires; the third, communal freedoms and obligations to tackle challenging issues where we live; and the fourth, planetary liberation—what we need to do locally and globally to create a more healthy, sustainable, and just world. —N.C.M.

The drinking of the four cups can model responsible alcohol consumption. Drinking wine recalls the template of the Greek symposium upon which the Seder is based. The four cups put us at ease with those around us, creating a social and convivial atmosphere. But with two of the cups to be consumed toward the end of the gathering when people are getting ready to leave, there is a danger of traveling while intoxicated. It may be advisable to use dessert wine of a low alcohol content or grape juice for the last two cups to avoid this problem. It is also helpful to include plenty of singing after the fourth cup. —J.M.S.

The wine and grape juice we consume during the meal are not counted toward the four ritual cups. A considerable amount of wine and grape juice is needed for the Seder.

The Seder is designed to stimulate curiosity, invite inquiry and encourage participation. When children are to be present at the Seder, collecting objects related to the Seder that they can play with at the table will help to keep them engaged. Children's songs for the Seder can be rehearsed in advance. Somewhat older children can learn to recite the Four Questions. The exodus story should be told in a way that children will understand. A Sephardic

In fourth grade at yeshiva, I was required to memorize the Four Questions in Yiddish, to the delight of my Yiddish-speaking *bubby*, with whom I could not otherwise communicate. Alas, to this day, the *Fir Kashes* (Four Questions) and the Yiddish lullaby "*Rojnkes mit Mandeln*" ("Roses and Almonds") constitute the entirety of my Yiddish repertoire. —J.J.S.

I do a yoga-based *magid* for children that grownups can also enjoy. It can be a real energy boost during all that sitting time. It is not hard to find poses that link to the story, and it is great fun. —S.P.W.

When our children were young, we held the first part of the Seder on couches in the basement or living room, allowing them to move around freely. This custom also echoes the ancient origins of the Greek symposium. After the storytelling of the *magid*, we would come to the formal table for the meal and conclude the Seder there. —B.P.

custom is to keep nuts and raisins handy so that they can periodically be thrown to the children. An adult can be asked in advance to work on a skit with the children in another room and then bring them back so that they can present the skit.

For young people, one of the Seder's most engaging elements is the hiding of the *afikoman*. The Mishnah states, "*Eyn maftirin aharey hapesah afikoman,*" which was taken by later rabbis to mean, "Don't eat anything after eating the Pesach Seder's *afikoman* matza." We now know that "*afikoman*" is a word borrowed from Greek that means "late-night parties," so a better translation would be, "After eating the paschal sacrifice, don't go out partying." But the custom of eating the *afikoman* is a long-standing one. Traditionally the person who "stole"

In our family, we send the children off to prepare a skit in order to give them time to move around and play, and also to provide an opportunity for adult conversation regarding some of the darker sides of the Pesach story. —T.K.

the *afikoman* could bargain for a prize for its return because the *afikoman* is the final food eaten at the Seder. Sometimes the Seder leader turns the *afikoman* over to someone else to safeguard. If the *afikoman* is captured, the person in charge of the *afikoman* must redeem it. Many families have an agreement that the ransom will take the form of giving *tzedaka*, with the amount and the beneficiary to be negotiated. Some Seder leaders hide the *afikoman* and then give a prize to the person who finds it. Some families hide one "*afikoman*" matza piece for each child present at the Seder, preparing one prize or gift for each child in advance.

I remember going to my grandfather's house for Seder every year as a child and the excitement of knowing that regardless of who found the *afikoman*, each child would receive a shiny silver dollar as a prize (with a double portion for the one who actually found it). Over the years, inflation has caused the amount of the prize to go up in our family, but the excitement remains the same for every child who hunts for the prized matza. —S.C.R.

While the text of the traditional Haggadah emphasizes divine rather than human agency in liberation, real liberations usually come about through organized human effort. In that spirit, in my family the children form a "union" and bargain collectively for a generous *afikoman* ransom. —J.A.S.

Like the ancient disagreement between the House of Hillel and the House of Shammai, in our day we have the disagreement between the *afikoman* stealers and the *afikoman* finders. —J.A.S.

Before the Seder, we prepare an envelope for each child who will be present with a piece of matza inside, and we hide most of the envelopes at age-appropriate levels before the Seder. When it is time to find the *afikoman*, older children who have already located their envelopes are drafted to help the younger children find theirs. —D.W.