

245: Passover

EXODUS 11-12

The Passover Meal

The Passover meal that the Israelites held in Egypt was unique from all the Passover meals held since. Before the first one, they were to sprinkle the blood of the lamb on their doorposts and lintel, and they were to eat it in haste. It has since evolved, maintaining many of the same customs, as well as adding a few. You are familiar with the one in Exodus 11-12. Let's look at how it is usually done today.

Every year before the Passover, an Orthodox Jewish family will eat up as much as possible all the foods in their house not processed or packaged for the Passover. This is to remove all the leaven from the house - any fermented grain product, starter dough, breads, cakes, cookies, yeast, (baking soda and baking powder). What cannot be eaten is sold to a non-Jew. Not only can a Jew not eat any leaven during Passover week, he can't have it in his house or even own any leaven. They do usually go and buy back their products after the festival. Leaven is an emblem of sin, corruption. Paul refers to it as that in 1 Corinthians 5:6-8.

The final search for leaven is made the night before the Passover (PESAH). Traditionally a candle, feather and bag are used for this final search. Every member of the family is to participate in this search. Every nook and cranny of every floor, shelf, cupboard is inspected for the minutest grain of bread crumbs or leavening. Any dust found is swept up with the feather (like a broom) into the bag for fear it might contain a grain of leavening. Traditionally, 10 pieces of leavened bread are hidden throughout the house and the ritual is not complete until the family has found the 10 pieces. All that was found is burnt the next morning before the Passover begins.

Cooking for the Passover meal is an extremely complicated procedure. Everything used during the preparation - refrigerator, stove, counter, sink, etc., is thoroughly scoured before beginning. Because some minute speck of leaven might be left unnoticed on some utensil, some Jews find the easiest way to prepare their meal is to have a special set of dishes, silverware and cooking utensils reserved only for use during the Passover. Some cover their burners so that no Passover pot touches the parts of the stove used every other day.

The SEDER (SADER) - the Passover meal - is the central celebration of the Passover. It's origin stems from our text today. The entire extended family is to come together. They go through the meal and the retelling of the story in first person as if they had been one of the slaves freed from Pharaoh's bondage.

This book, the *HAGGADAH*, is the text for the SEDER. Everyone present would have a copy of it. It contains all the blessings, order for eating, telling of the Exodus story from slavery through the plagues, crossing of the Red Sea, giving of the Law, and to the giving of the land of Canaan. There are also songs and psalms to be read, etc.

Seder Table

(Assemble around table -- don't eat yet.) All recline around the SEDER table, because reclining around the table was a sign of a free man. Everything on the table has a significance.

On the SEDER plate there is:

Hard boiled egg - symbol of the suffering and oppression in Egypt. Everything else in boiling water becomes soft or disintegrates. But an egg becomes hard, like the Israelites. The more it is boiled, the harder it becomes. An egg also symbolizes New Life.

Roasted shankbone of lamb - reminds them there had to be blood sacrificed to save their lives.

Bitter herbs - horseradish - reminds them they were servants to slavery.

Greens - parsley, celery - symbol of coming of Spring which brings hope.

Salt water - reminds them of the tears they cried in Egypt.

Haroset - nut, apple, cinnamon, wine mixture which has the appearance of straw in remembrance of the mortar used to build the Treasure Cities for Pharaoh. It is symbolic of the hope of freedom that enabled their ancestors to withstand the bitterness of slavery.

Matzah - the unleavened bread that reminds them of the haste with which they left Egypt.

After the drinking of wine and washing of the hands the greens are dipped into the salt water and eaten.

Then the bread on the SEDER plate is broken. Half remains on the plate, half is hidden for the dessert. This is to keep the interest of the children. Children are to find it and keep it till the end of the meal when the leader redeems it in exchange for the promise of gifts. Throughout the service many things are incorporated to keep the interest of the children. The most important thing is the telling of the story of the Exodus to the children.

The telling of the story of the Exodus includes everyone's favorite part - the 4 questions, asked by the youngest child present.

1. *Why on this night do we eat only mazzah, which is unleavened bread?*
2. *Why on this night do we eat bitter herbs especially?*
3. *Why on this night do we dip the parsley in salt water and the bitter herbs in haroset?*
4. *Why on this night do we all recline at the table?*

The leader replies to the child:

Indeed, this night is very different from all the other nights of the year, for on this night we celebrate one of the most important moments in the history of our people. On this night we celebrate their going forth in triumph from slavery into freedom.

I am glad you asked the questions you did, for the story of this night was just what I wanted you to know. Although the Haggadah we are reading tells this whole story, and if you listen carefully you will surely learn it, I should like to tell you here, in a few words, the answers to your questions.

~ Why do we eat only mazzah tonight?

When Pharaoh let our forefathers go from Egypt, they were forced to flee in great haste. Now, they had prepared dough for bread to take on their journey, but the Egyptians pressed them to hasten out of the land. So they snatched up their dough, and fled, and had no time to bake it. But the hot sun, beating down on the dough as they carried it along with them, baked it into a flat, unleavened bread which they called mazzah. That is why we eat only mazzah on Pesah.

~ Why do we eat bitter herbs on Pesah night?

Because our forefathers were slaves in Egypt, and their lives were made bitter. That is why we eat bitter herbs on Pesah night.

~ Why do we dip herbs twice tonight?

You have already heard that we dip the parsley in salt water because it reminds us of the green that comes to life again in the springtime. We dip the maror, or bitter herbs, in the sweet haroset as a sign of hope; our forefathers were able to withstand the bitterness of slavery, because it was sweetened by the hope of freedom.

~ Why do we recline at the table?

Because reclining at the table was a sign of a free man in olden times; and since our forefathers were freed on this night, we recline at the table.

After the symbolism is explained the story of the Exodus is told. It can be read straight from this book, but more than likely the leader will go around the room asking everyone to reconstruct a part of the story. [*What do you remember about your leaving Egypt?*] Each person will tell a part as if he had been a slave and as if he had actually witnessed the plagues and as if he had actually crossed the Red Sea on dry ground and then watched Pharaoh's army drown.

The hands are washed again, a double blessing is given on the matzah, and it is eaten. Then the horseradish is eaten straight or is dipped into the sweet haroset.

Or, a sandwich is made with matzah and horseradish and haroset, or perhaps a little bit of lamb is included with the sandwich.

[A Passover style meal is served and eaten at this point

Mrs. Needham and the Metro Jr. High girls made our matzah bread for us this morning. Listen while I read to you some of the restrictions on making this bread in order for it to be kosher for a real Jewish Passover.

The wheat is watched from the time of harvesting until the final baking to insure that no water, heat, or other natural processes cause it to begin fermentation. . . . The utensils used for making it are washed every eighteen minutes. . . . The flour must be absolutely dry, and stored in a cool, dark place. . . . The water must be drawn from a spring and allowed to settle overnight in a cool, dark place. . . .

Then the matzah bread for dessert is redeemed from the children with presents and eaten.

The meal ends and Psalm 126 is read. [Read.] The ceremony goes on with more reading, singing and praising God.