

WEST END SYNAGOGUE, Rhythm and Meaning of Jewish Living: Pesach

What is Matzah? What is Chametz? (Rabbi Arthur Waskow, Shalom Center)

Traditionally, there are two commands about bread and Pesach. One is to get ALL "chametz," defined as leavening or souring (e.g. yeast, regular vinegar, fermented beer & wine and liquor), and anything that has not been carefully checked to eliminate them, out of our possession. All breads that take more than 18 minutes to be baked (and thus might rise from yeast in the air or whatever) and/or have any yeast at all in them are included, and thus forbidden. Thus no flattish breads like pita.

The second commandment about this is that we DO eat matzah, at least on the night of 14 Nisan. Legal matzah is a bread baked in 18 minutes or less from flour (wheat or oats or spelt) and water -- nothing else, no flavoring, no fruit juice.

So-called "egg matzahs" are NOT chametz (since baked in less than 18 minutes with no yeast) but DO have stuff other than flour & water, and so are NOT "legal" matzohs for eating at the Seder to fulfill the commandment to eat matzoh. But they can be eaten during Pesach. Thus some people eat them on the day before Pesach when you're NOT supposed to eat chametz and are ALSO not yet supposed to eat real matzohs.

Some rabbis of Ashkenazic (Northern European) involvement ruled that rice, corn (when it came along) and beans could be too easily mistaken for grain like wheat, and so vice versa -- people might think wheat was rice and so eat it. Therefore these things should not be eaten either. Sephardic (southern European, Mediterranean) and Mizrahi (Middle Eastern, Far Eastern / Oriental) rabbis thought this was foolish.

Thus these two groups of Jews -- Ashkenazim & everybody else -- have different habits. Nowadays, some Masorti (conservative) rabbis in Israel have ruled that the prohibition was silly in the first place and now is often used by Ashkenazic Orthodox and Haredi Jews as a put-down of Sephardim, and these rabbis have encouraged Ashkenazim to drop the prohibition.

Preparation:

- ***Bedikat Chametz ("Checking/Searching for Chametz")***: All leaven and anything leavened that is in my possession, which I have neither seen nor removed, and about which I am unaware, shall be considered nullified and ownerless as the dust of the earth.
- ***Biur Chametz ("Burning/Destroying Chametz")***: "All leaven or anything leavened which is in my possession, whether I have seen it or not, whether I have observed it or not, whether I have removed it or not, shall be considered naught and ownerless as the dust of the earth."

The Seder Plate (Rabbi Jill Jacobs)

Karpas--a green vegetable, most often parsley. *Karpas* represents the initial flourishing of the Israelites during the first years in Egypt. At the end of the biblical book of Genesis, Joseph moves his family to Egypt, where he becomes the second-in-command to Pharaoh. Protected by Joseph's exalted status, the family lives safely for several generations and proliferate greatly, becoming a great nation. The size of this growing population frightens the new Pharaoh, who enslaves the Israelites, lest they make war on Egypt. Even under slave conditions, the Israelites continue to reproduce, and Pharaoh eventually decrees that all baby boys be killed. In the course of the seder, we dip the karpas in salt water (Ashkenazi custom) or vinegar (Sephardi custom) in order to taste both the hope of new birth and the tears that the Israelite slaves shed over their condition.

Karpas also symbolizes the new spring. One of the names for Passover is *Hag Ha-Aviv* or the "holiday of spring." Right around Passover the first buds emerge, and we look forward to the warmth and sense of possibility that accompany the beginning of spring.

Some Ashkenazi Jews use a potato for karpas, as green vegetables were not readily available in Eastern Europe.

Haroset--This mix of fruits, wine or honey, and nuts symbolizes the mortar that the Israelite slaves used to construct buildings for Pharaoh. The name itself comes from the Hebrew word *cheres* or clay. Ashkenazi Jews generally include apples in haroset, a nod to the midrashic tradition that the Israelite women would go into the fields and seduce their husbands under the apple trees, in defiance of the Egyptian attempts to prevent reproduction by separating men and women.

Sephardic recipes for *haroset* allude to this fertility symbolism by including fruits, such as dates and figs, mentioned in Song of Songs, the biblical book that is most infused with images of love and sexuality.

Maror--This bitter herb allows us to taste the bitterness of slavery. Today, most Jews use horseradish as *maror*. Originally, though, maror was probably a bitter lettuce, such as romaine, or a root, such as chicory. Like life in Egypt, these lettuces and roots taste sweet when one first bites into them, but then become bitter as one eats more. We dip maror into haroset in order to associate the bitterness of slavery with the work that caused so much of this bitterness.

Hazeret--A second bitter herb, used in *korech* or the Hillel sandwich, which consists of matzah and bitter herbs (some add haroset as well). Many Jews use horseradish for maror and romaine lettuce or another bitter green for *hazeret*. Others use the same vegetable for both parts of the seder, and do not include hazeret on the seder plate at all.

Z'roa--A roasted lamb shank bone that symbolizes the lamb that Jews sacrificed as the special Passover offering when the Temple stood in Jerusalem. The *z'roa* does not play an active role in the seder, but serves as a visual reminder of the sacrifice that the Israelites offered immediately before leaving Egypt and that Jews continued to offer until the destruction of the Temple. Vegetarians often substitute a roasted beet, both because the red of the beet resembles the blood of the sacrifice and because the Talmud mentions beets as one of the vegetables sometimes dipped during the seder.

Beitzah (Egg) --A roasted egg that symbolizes the *hagigah* sacrifice, which would be offered on every holiday (including Passover) when the Temple stood. The roundness of the egg also represents the cycle of life--even in the most painful of times, there is always hope for a new beginning.

On the Table

In addition to the items on the seder plate, the seder table should also have three pieces of matzah wrapped or covered in a cloth and a container of salt water or vinegar in which to dip the karpas. Some seder plates have a compartment for matzah underneath, or include space for salt water among the other symbols. In most cases, though, matzah and salt water or vinegar sit near, but not on, the seder plate.

Many contemporary Jews add additional items to the seder plate to symbolize modern liberation struggles. The most common new item is an orange, which honors the role of women and/or gays and lesbians in Jewish life. The orange symbolizes the fruitfulness that these previously marginalized communities bring to Jewish life. Some Jews place an olive on the seder plate to signal hope for eventual peace between Israelis and Palestinians.

One way to encourage participation in the seder is to ask each guest to bring one item that, for him or her, represents liberation. Participants might bring family heirlooms that remind them of their family's immigration story, newspaper stories about current liberation struggles, or other symbolic objects. Each guest should place this item near the seder plate and, at an appropriate time in the seder, explain its significance.

Seder of the Seder:

- **Kadesh:** [Blessing] Drink the *first cup of wine* while reclining in a comfortable position.
- **Urchatz (“Wash”):** Hand washing (without blessing); it is customary to do this before dipping food.
- **Karpas (from Greek *karpos*, “raw vegetable”):** [Blessing] Greens dipped in salt water; the greens symbolize Spring and the salt water reminds us of the tears of our ancestors who endured slavery.
- **Yachatz (“Breaking”):** There are *three* ritual matzot on the table. Break the middle matzah and one half becomes the *afikomen* (which is then hidden to be found later in the seder).
- **Maggid (“Telling”):** This section includes the main part of the seder and is comprised of the following sections.
 - Four Questions; traditionally recited by the youngest child at the table
 - Four Children; commentary on the four types of approaches to the questions
 - Telling of the Exodus story including our ancestors slavery in Egypt

Version 1: **We were slaves in Egypt** and the Holy One freed us from Egypt with a mighty hand. Had not the holy one liberated our people from Egypt, then we, our children and our children's children would still be enslaved. And even if all of us were wise, all of us were discerning, all of us were aged, all of us experts in Torah, we are obligated to retell the story of leaving Mitzrayim. And all who expand upon the story of leaving Mitzrayim is to be praised.

Version 2: At first **our ancestors worshiped idols**, but then the Omnipresent brought us near to divine service, as it is written: "Joshua said to all the people: so says the Holy One God of Israel--your fathers have always lived beyond the Euphrates River, Terah the father of Abraham and Nahor; they worshipped other gods. I took your father Abraham from the other side of the river and led him through all the land of Canaan. I multiplied his family and gave him Isaac. To Isaac I gave Jacob and Esau; to Esau I gave Mount Seir to inherit, however Jacob and his children went down to Egypt."

Praised be the One who keeps the promise to Israel. The Holy One predetermined the time for our final deliverance in order to fulfill what God had pledged to our father Abraham in a covenant, as it is written: "God said to Abram, your descendants will surely sojourn in a land that is not their own, and they will be enslaved and afflicted for four hundred years; however, I will punish the nation that enslaved them, and afterwards they shall leave with great wealth."

This covenant that remained constant for our ancestors and for us has saved us against any who arose to destroy us **in every generation**, and throughout history when any stood against us to annihilate us, the Kadosh Barukh Hu kept saving us from them.

Go out and learn what Laban the Aramean sought to do to our father Jacob. For Pharaoh decreed only against the males, but Laban sought to uproot all, as it is written (26:5), 'An Aramean sought to destroy my father, and he went down to Egypt.'¹

Deuteronomy 26: [1 And it shall be, when you have come into the land which the the Holy One your God gives you for an inheritance, and you possess it, and dwell therein; 2 that you shall take of the first of all the fruit of the ground, which you shall bring in from your land that the Holy One your God gives you; and you shall put it in a basket and go to the place which the Holy One your God shall choose to cause God's name to dwell

¹ Among the classical commentators, **Rashi** supports the Haggadah's reading, while others, including **Ibn Ezra** adhere to the conventional interpretation. **Rashbam** accepts the "wandering Aramean" interpretation as well, but identifies the wanderer as Abraham rather than Jacob.

there. 3 And you shall come to the priest that shall be in those days, and say unto him: 'I profess this day unto the Holy One my God, that I have come unto the land which the Holy One swore to our ancestors to give us.' 4 And the priest shall take the basket from your hand, and set it down before the altar of the Holy One your God. 5 And you shall speak and say before the Holy One your God:] **'A wandering Aramean was my father, and he went down into Egypt, and sojourned there, few in number; and he became there a nation, great, mighty, and populous. 6 And the Egyptians dealt ill with us, and afflicted us, and laid upon us hard bondage. 7 And we cried unto the Holy One, the God of our ancestors, and the Holy One heard our voice, and saw our affliction, and our toil, and our oppression. 8 And the Holy One brought us forth out of Egypt with a mighty hand, and with an outstretched arm, and with great terribleness, and with signs, and with wonders. [9 And God has brought us to this place, and has given us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey. 10 And now, behold, I have brought the first of the fruit of the land, which You, God, have given me.]'**

- Ten Plagues; a highlighted part of the Exodus story
 - Drink the **second cup of wine** and sing Dayeinu
- **Rachtzah (“Washing”)**: [Blessing] Hand washing before the meal, this time with the traditional blessing.
 - **Motzi-Matzah**: [Blessing] Matzah is shared and eaten (traditionally this is taken from the top and remaining half of the middle of the ritual matzot).
 - **Maror (“Bitterness”)**: [Blessing] Horseradish (bitter herb) is eaten.
 - **Korech (“Wrapping”)**: “Hillel Sandwich” is eaten; a bite made with *matzah*, *maror*, and *charoset*
 - **Shulchan Orech (“Set Table”)**: Haggadaot are put aside while eating the festive meal!
 - **Tzafun (“Hidden”)**: The hidden *afikomen* (from ritual matzah at begging of seder) must be found (or ransomed), then shared and eaten; this is traditionally the last thing eaten for the remainder of the night.
 - **Barech (“Bless”)**: *Birkat Hamazon*, grace after meals, is recited and includes the **third cup of wine**.
 - **Hallel (“Praise”)**: Includes psalms to be sung, the **fourth cup of wine**, and the filling Elijah’s cup.
 - **Nirtzah (“Accepted”)**: This concludes the Seder with songs and wishes for next year (in Jerusalem!).