

Passover

Of all the Jewish holidays, Pesach is the one most commonly observed, even by otherwise non-observant Jews. According to the 1990 National Jewish Population Survey (NJPS), more than 80% of Jews have attended a Pesach Seder.

Pesach begins on the 15th day of the Jewish month of Nisan. It is the first of the three major festivals with both historical and agricultural significance (the other two are Shavu'ot and Sukkot). Agriculturally, it represents the beginning of the harvest season in Israel, but little attention is paid to this aspect of the holiday. The primary observances of Pesach are related to the Exodus from Egypt after generations of slavery. This story is told in Exodus, Ch. 1-15. Many of the Pesach observances are instituted in Chs. 12-15.

The name "Pesach" (PAY-sahch, with a "ch" as in the Scottish "loch") comes from the Hebrew root Peh-Samech-Chet meaning to pass through, to pass over, to exempt or to spare. It refers to the fact that God "passed over" the houses of the Jews when he was slaying the firstborn of Egypt. In English, the holiday is known as Passover. "Pesach" is also the name of the sacrificial offering (a lamb) that was made in the Temple on this holiday. The holiday is also referred to as Chag he-Aviv (the Spring Festival), Chag ha-Matzoth (the Festival of Matzahs), and Z'man Cherutenu (the Time of Our Freedom) (again, all with those Scottish "ch"s).

Probably the most significant observance related to Pesach involves the removal of chametz (leaven; sounds like "chum it's") from our homes. This commemorates the fact that the Jews leaving Egypt were in a hurry, and did not have time to let their bread rise. It is also a symbolic way of removing the "puffiness" (arrogance, pride) from our souls.

Chametz includes anything made from the five major grains (wheat, rye, barley, oats and spelt) that has not been completely cooked within 18 minutes after coming into contact with water. Orthodox Jews of Ashkenazic background also avoid rice, corn, peanuts, and legumes (beans) as if they were chametz. All of these items are commonly used to make bread, thus use of them was prohibited to avoid any confusion. Such additional items are referred to as "kitniyot."

We may not eat chametz during Pesach; we may not even own it or derive benefit from it. According to Orthodox tradition, we may not even feed it to our pets or cattle! All chametz, including utensils used to cook chametz, must either be disposed of or sold to a non-Jew (they can be repurchased after the holiday).

The process of cleaning the home of all chametz in preparation for Pesach is an enormous task. To do it via Orthodox tradition, you must prepare for several weeks and spend several days scrubbing everything down, going over the edges of your stove and fridge with a toothpick and a Q-Tip, covering all surfaces that come in contact with foil or shelf-liner, etc., etc., etc. Reform Jews take a more pragmatic approach and just get rid of it. After the cleaning is completed, the morning before the Seder, a formal search of the house for chametz is undertaken and any remaining chametz is burned.

The grain product we eat during Pesach is called matzah. Matzah is unleavened bread, made simply from flour and water and cooked very quickly. This is the bread that the Jews made for their flight from Egypt. We have come up with many inventive ways to use matzah; it is available in a variety of textures for cooking: matzah flour (finely ground for cakes and cookies), matzah meal (coarsely ground, used as a bread crumb substitute), matzah farfel (little chunks, a noodle or bread cube substitute), and full-sized matzahs (about 10 inches square, a bread substitute).