

Pesach

This is Matzo. It is unleavened bread, that is it is bread made out of dough that has no yeast in it and has been made and cooked quickly so that it has not been able to rise. During the seven day festival of Pesach, or Passover, Jewish people eat this instead of ordinary bread.

Pesach is in a little less than 2 weeks time - this year it is at the same time as the Christian festival of Easter. In fact the Passover festival begins this year on the evening of the day Christians call Good Friday. Easter and Passover always fall close to each other but they are not always at exactly the same time.

Pesach is about freedom. It is the time of year when Jews remember the Exodus from Egypt. The word Exodus is connected to the word Exit and means "going out". It is the name of the second of the Five Books of Moses, which are the first five sections of the book which is known as the Bible. The book of Exodus tells the story of how the Children of Israel, which is what the Bible calls the Jews, escaped from slavery in the land of Egypt, which Jews call Mitzruiyim, to freedom in a land of their own. More than three thousand years ago The Children of Israel were slaves and were made to work very hard, building cities and great buildings in Egypt.

Eventually a great leader came on the scene who, under God's instructions, led the Children of Israel to freedom. This leader was Moshe (or Moses to give him the English version of his name). You may know the story of how God sent Moses' to Pharaoh to ask for his people's freedom, Of Pharaoh's refusal and of the ten plagues that were necessary to make him change his mind.

Pesach is the time when Jews everywhere remember the story of the Exodus. For the seven days of the festival no leavened bread is eaten, but instead we eat unleavened bread, which we call Matzo. We eat it to remember that when our ancestors hurried out of Egypt in the dead of night there was no time to bake bread properly (and because it tastes good).

How do Jewish people celebrate this festival of Passover? Like many Jewish festivals an important part of the religious ceremony is celebrated, not in the synagogue but in the home. It is a meal, which commemorates that first meal. The Pesach meal is called the Seder and it takes all evening. The word seder means order and the seder is a ritual where everything has to be done just right and, especially, in the right order. Special prayers are said and special foods are eaten. There is a special book which we use which tells us what to do and when to do it. The book is called the Haggadah, which means The Telling because an important part of the evening is to tell the story of the escape from Egypt. Although the seder may vary slightly in different families and in different countries the ritual has changed very little for hundreds of years. The Seder is a very old ceremony. Jews have been celebrating Passover for thousands of years, For example, the Last Supper that Jesus ate with his disciples was a seder meal, which is why Easter is always at around the same time as passover, and why the Communion Host in many churches is made of unleavened bread.

When I was a child I used to think that Seder night was one of the best times of the year (and I still do). The whole family got together, there was a big meal, there were all sorts of strange ceremonies, a prize to be won and best of all I got to stay up really late.

This year we shall be having the seder at our house. As well as my family and my parents, we have invited two families of friends and a couple of other people - there will probably be 17 of us. We'll have spent a lot of time getting ready..

The seder table will be laid and various special foods, such as bitter herbs (in most families this is horseradish - which is very bitter), some roast meat to represent the passover lamb, an egg for new life, a paste called Charoset which is made of ground nuts, apple and wine, which represents the mud bricks that our ancestors were forced to make, and three matzot, are displayed on a special plate. We will begin the meal by saying

Kiddush, which is a blessing over wine, and we'll drink the first of four cups of wine. Then everyone will eat a little bitter vegetable, such as parsley, dipped in salt water. This is to remind us of the bitterness of slavery and the tears which our ancestors shed. In my family we always combine the parsey with a piece of boiled potato (It keeps us going until dinner, which is quite a long time away). Next I shall take one of the three matzot and breaks off part of it which is then hidden away. This piece of matzo, which is called the Afikoman, will be eaten at the end of the seder. Indeed the seder cannot end until it is eaten. Of course this is too much of a temptation! The Afikoman is certain to be found and taken hostage by at least one of the children, who will not release it until a ransom has been promised!

Then the youngest child present which will probably be my son, Leo, will stand up and ask four questions beginning. Mah nishtanah halaylah hazeh? The language is Hebrew and means Why is this night different to all other nights? The other questions ask about the reasons for some of the customs of the festival such as eating only unleavened bread.

Between us the grown ups will then tell the story whilst everyone follows it in their own haggadah. The story begins with the words "We were slaves to Pharaoh in Egypt" and there is a great deal of emphasis on how much it matters today. It is not just a story about something that happened to some people long ago.

You see Egypt, or Mitzruyim, is still there. All over the world there are people who are slaves of bad political systems, of poverty and of famine and escape from this slavery is as important today as it ever was for the Children of Israel three and a half thousand years ago.

The story takes quite a long time but eventually we will get to dinner time. But first there are some ritual foods to be eaten. For each one we say a special blessing. The first thing to eat is some matzo, then some bitter herbs (some families use lettuce, we use horseradish). We dip the bitter herbs in the Charoset paste. Next comes a sandwich of matzo and bitter herbs. This time the bitter herb is grated horseradish. If you have never had it it is very hot - a bit like eating fire!

Then we'll eat the meal, which traditionally begins with hard boiled egg in salt water (yummy!) followed by a roast dinner.

After dinner we'll say Grace. During grace there is one special moment when a large cup of wine is filled right up to the very top and the door is opened. This is another job for the youngest child and I can tell you, it is quite scary standing at the open door on a dark night while everyone else is inside. This cup of wine is called Elijah's Cup. The door is opened to welcome the prophet Elijah should he come to announce the messiah. It is also a sign of welcome to any stranger.

The meal will end with the eating of the Afikoman (once it has been released from its slavery) and the traditional wish "Next Year In Jerusalem". We'll finish the evening with a good sing song of traditional passover songs.

Like Christmas for Christians, Pesach for Jews is a family festival. It is a time when people get together with their own families or with friends to celebrate not just the release of our ancestors from slavery over 3 thousand years ago but to celebrate the importance of freedom.

A short prayer to finish ..

May we all be free from whatever or whoever enslaves us;  
May we be free to choose our own paths;  
And may we be wise enough to choose them well.