

The Jewish Passover

A brief introduction

The Jewish Passover (Hebrew: *Pesach*) is the Jewish festival of liberation. It commemorates the biblical events of the Israelites' going out (exodus) from the slavery of Egypt into a new life of freedom. It recalls a decisive moment in salvation history when the 'mighty hand and outstretched arm' of the God of the Israelites triumphed over the cruel designs of Pharaoh. It depicts the battle between divine power and the counterfeit authority of a self-made dictator. It marks the beginnings of the emergence of Israel as a free and independent nation.

In the Jewish mindset, *Pesach* is not simply a recollection of past events but an active remembrance; one which places every Jew of each generation into the actual experience of redemption, both then and now, and thus impacting upon the future.

This sense of being present to events of the past also informs the Catholic view of sacrament.

When does *Pesach* take place?

Pesach is celebrated each year commencing the eve of the 15th day of the Hebrew month of *Nissan* (during the northern hemisphere springtime) It continues for seven days (eight days in some communities).

Where did it come from?

Historically, *Pesach* is thought to have originated from two or three separate ancient festivals (relating to cultic sacrifice, the grain harvest and the dedication of the first-born). Over time these came to converge into a festival of remembrance of the Exodus story and to mark the beginning of Israel's transformation from a tribe of people into an organised nation.

How is it celebrated?

The *Seder* held in Jewish homes on the first night of *Pesach* is the central ritual. The *Seder* is a ritual at the family meal table involving symbolic foods, prayers, readings and actions, all recalling the Exodus event and inviting participants engage with the biblical story as if they were there among the ancient Hebrews, seeing and hearing and experiencing the events.

The *Seder* involves rigorous domestic preparations such as ridding the house of leavened bread (and all related products) and cleansing or replacing cooking utensils. On the Sabbath prior to *Pesach* (*Shabbat ha-Gadol*, 'the great Sabbath') the text of the *Seder* ritual (*Haggadah*) is read.

The seventh day of *Pesach*, like the first, is a full festival day and traditionally recalls the crossing of the Red Sea. A prayer for those who have died (*Yizkor*) is prayed on this day. Jews refrain from work on the first and last (full festival) days of *Pesach*. The intermediate days of *Pesach* are marked mainly by dietary observance (e.g. replacing leavened bread with *matzah*) and the liturgy of the synagogue. The Songs of Songs is often recited on the Sabbath that falls during the festival.

Torah readings during Passover

Pesach (Day I): Exodus 12:21-51

This Torah portion includes the story of the tenth plague, instructions for the passover meal and the account of the Israelites' departure from Egypt.

Pesach (Day VII): Exodus 13:17-15:26

This portion includes the crossing of the Sea of Reeds and the celebratory *Shirah*: 'The Song at the Sea'.

The Exodus Story – paraphrased in a nutshell

The descendants of Jacob who came to live in Egypt eventually found themselves enslaved by a new ruling Pharaoh. During this time of oppression, they cried out to God who heard their suffering and intervened to save them. God sent Moses to demand of Pharaoh the liberation of the Hebrew slaves. In the face of Pharaoh's repeated refusals, God inflicted ten plagues upon Egypt, the final one being the death of first-born sons. God passed through the land, striking down the young, but 'passed over' the homes of the Israelites. On that night, the Israelites celebrated the first Passover meal and Pharaoh gave in to Moses' plea to 'let my people go' that they may worship the God of Israel.' The Israelites left in haste, taking with them unleavened bread as provisions since the dough had not had time to rise. Pharaoh's army then pursued them with deadly intent and would have surely destroyed the company of Hebrew refugees had God not intervened with a miracle: parting the Red Sea so that they could pass through on dry land, and rolling back the waters to consume their Egyptian enemies. From thereon Moses led the Israelites, under the protection and command of God, through the desert wilderness. At Mount Sinai they received the 'Ten Words' (Commandments) which further shaped their self-understanding as a people. Forty years later the Israelites would reach the promised land, profoundly shaped by their wilderness experiences and embracing their destiny as a nation people elected by God.