

Chag Pesach Kasher v'Sameach! Happy Passover Holiday!

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The Jewish Community Center

INSPIRING JEWISH JOURNEYS



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Passover: Festival of Freedom

The eight day holiday of Passover (seven days in Israel) begins on the fifteenth day of the Hebrew month of Nissan. It is a celebration of freedom commemorating the redemption of the Jewish community from slavery in Egypt in ancient times.



The story of the exodus begins with the enslavement of the Israelites in Egypt by the Egyptian King, the Pharaoh. Fearing the growth of the Israelite population, Pharaoh decreed that all Jewish males born should be thrown into the Nile river and drowned. One mother, Yocheved, saved her son, Moses, by hiding him in a basket and placing it among the reeds of the river. Moses is discovered by Pharaoh's daughter who raises him in the royal household.

After growing up, one day Moses noticed an Israelite being beaten by an Egyptian taskmaster, and killed the taskmaster. He fled to the desert and lived as a shepherd. God spoke from a burning bush, and asked Moses to go back to Egypt to lead the Israelites to freedom. With his brother Aaron at his side, Moses asked Pharaoh to let the Israelites go. Pharaoh continually refused as God sent a series of ten plagues culminating with the death of the firstborn. The Israelite firstborn were spared from death because the Israelites marked their homes and the angel of death passed them over. Pharaoh then allows the Israelites release, but soon after sends his army after them. God performs the miracle of the splitting of the Sea of Reeds so that the Israelites could pass through. When the Egyptian army followed, the seas closed and they are drowned.

Each Passover, Jews retell and embellish this story of the exodus at a festive meal called a "seder." Using a special book called a "Haggadah," people eat symbolic foods, sing songs, and recite blessings as they reflect on the meaning of freedom.

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The Seder Plate

At the seder meal, it is tradition to have a plate with different foods that symbolize different aspects of the Passover story. Maror (bitter herb), karpas (greens), z'roah (shankbone), charoset (mixture of nuts, fruits, wine and cinnamon), and beitzah (egg) are some of the typical items found on the seder plate that symbolize different aspects of the Passover story.



Matzah—The Bread of Affliction

During the entire eight days of Passover, the Jewish tradition is to refrain from eating or owning any leavened baking products known as “chametz.” Matzah is unleavened bread, a staple that is eaten at the festive meal and throughout the eight days. One explanation for eating matzah and only unleavened foods is that when the Israelites were fleeing Egypt they left in haste and there was not enough time for the dough to rise.



The Number Four



The number four is a theme in the Seder ritual. Tradition is to drink four cups of wine, sing the “Four Questions,” and discuss how to tell the exodus story to four different types of children (wise, wicked, simple and the one who does not know how to ask). One explanation to the significance of the number four is that the biblical text, in describing how God redeemed the Israelites, uses four different words: redeemed, rescued, delivered, and saved.

Family Activities

■ The Search for Chametz

The night preceding Passover, the tradition is to search for any last pieces of chametz that have not already been cleaned up. You will need a candle, feather, wooden spoon and paper bag to do this fun activity. Someone should hide several pieces to make sure that something is found. A special formula is chanted and then the bag is kept until the next morning when it is burned with another recitation that appears in most Haggadah.



■ Seder Fun

The festive seder meal can be geared to families with young children in several ways. One way is to have the children dress in costume and prepare a skit enacting the story of the exodus. Another fun idea is to purchase small plastic toys representing some of the plagues to play with during the meal. There are also many Passover story and coloring books for children to use during the seder. For those who like building blocks you can use legos or other materials to recreate the ancient cities of Egypt for centerpieces.

■ Afikomen

After eating the main meal, it is customary for children to search for a piece of matzah that is hidden by an adult at some point during the seder. This piece of matzah is known as the afikomen, which literally means dessert. In some households, the children ransom it for prizes since the seder cannot be officially concluded until after the afikomen is eaten.