What is Passover?

Pesach or Passover is a spring Jewish holiday commemorating the Exodus, the liberation of the Hebrews from slavery in Egypt in the time of Moses (circa 13th century BCE). Many of its observances are instituted in chapters 12 to 15 of the book of Exodus.

Passover's name comes from the last of the Ten Plagues visited on the Egyptians by Yahweh before the Exodus. All firstborn male children were killed, but those Hebrew households that had slaughtered a lamb and marked their doorposts with its blood were "passed over." It is also an agricultural holiday commemorating the beginning of the harvest season, but this aspect of Passover is not emphasized.

When is Passover?

On sunset March 25, 2013 to sunset April 2, 2013 (Jewish Year 5772) It is a joyful time of family togetherness, but also one of prescribed ritual and strict rules. In addition to the special dietary laws described above, work is prohibited on the first two and last two days of Passover (first and last day in Israel and Reform Judaism). The day before Passover is the Fast of the Firstborn, a minor fast undertaken by all firstborn males.

The degree of work that is forbidden on major holidays like Passover is less strict than on the Sabbath. Leviticus 23:3 commands the Jews to "do no manner of work" on the Sabbath, whereas Leviticus 23:7 requires them to "do no manner of servile work" on the festivals. The general interpretation of the latter commandment is that work can be done on the festivals if it contributes to the enjoyment of the festival and could not have been done beforehand. Thus baking bread or grinding fresh coffee, for example, is allowed on holidays but not on the Sabbath.
Passover Food

To commemorate the suffering of the Hebrews while in Egypt and their departure in haste at the Exodus (no time for the bread to rise), no leaven may be eaten during Passover. Matzah (or matzo) - unleavened bread - is therefore a central feature of the festival. In addition, all leaven (chametz) must also be completely removed from the house during Passover, a symbolic way of removing the "puffiness" (arrogance, pride) from one's soul.

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; for Ashkenazic Orthodox Jews, chametz also includes rice, corn, peanuts, and beans (all of which are used to make bread). The morning before Passover, a formal search of the house is undertaken, and any remaining chametz is burned. Because of this observance, Passover is also known as "The Feast of Unleavened Bread."

The Passover Seder

The central observance of Passover is a ritual meal shared by Jewish families on the first and second nights (Jews in Israel and Reform Judaism omit the second night), called the seder (Hebrew for "order"). The seder meal consists of recited benedictions and explanations, ritual handwashing, four
cups of wine, and symbolic foods including matzah, bitter herbs, and crushed fruits. Eating, drinking, and other rituals occur at specified intervals. The recitations are set out in the Haggadah, a special book that tells the story of the Exodus for the purpose of the Passover celebration.

Prior to eating the Passover meal, the youngest member of the family asks the following four questions:

*The Four Questions of Passover*

1. Why does this night differ from all other nights? For on all other nights we eat either leavened or unleavened bread; why on this night only unleavened bread?

2. On all other nights we eat all kinds of herbs; why on this night only bitter herbs?

3. On all other nights we need not dip our herbs even once; why on this night must we dip them twice?

4. On all other nights we eat either sitting up or reclining; why on this night do we all recline?

The prepared answers, supplied in the Haggadah, are recited in unison by all present, ensuring the spiritual meaning of the ritual is preserved for future generations.

Sources