

The Four Cups of Wine:  
Why We Drink Them

Four cups of wine (or grape juice) drunk during the course of the seder are “toasts” to the four stages of redemption, each a divine promise made to Moses: “I will take you out from under the burdens of Egypt... and I will save you... I will redeem you... and I will take you unto me as a people.” Exodus 6:6-7

The Fifth Cup:  
The Cup of Elijah

A fifth cup of wine, called the Cup of Elijah, is also present on the seder table. At one point, the door is opened to let the prophet enter. It is Elijah, according to tradition, who will herald the coming of the messiah and the final redemption of humanity from bondage.

Afikomen: Hide-and-Seek

*Afikomen*, which means dessert, is the piece of matzah eaten at the end of the meal. It also symbolizes the Paschal lamb, the last food eaten on the original Passover eve. Taken from a matzah broken earlier in the evening and hidden away, it is the object of an intensive search by all the children and has to be ransomed by an elder. Children gleefully withhold it until they have extracted a suitable gift from the seder host.

The Four Questions

The Four Questions—all variations on the basic “Why is the night different from all the other nights?”—are traditionally asked by the youngest child present at the seder. The Haggadah never answers them directly; the telling of the Exodus story is in itself an indirect answer.

Hametz (Leaven):  
Why We Do Not Eat It

Exodus 12:20 mandates: “Seven days you shall eat (only) unleavened bread... Whatsoever contains leaven you shall not eat.”

**Hametz**, with its power of raising dough, is a symbol of inflated human pride of the king that led the Egyptians to enslave our people. Removing it from our homes and refraining from it during Passover reminds us of our need to remove overweening pride from our lives.

**Intermediate Sabbath:** On a Sabbath falling within the span of Passover, the Song of Songs is read. Interpreted as the love song of Israel and God, this book is appropriate reading for Passover.

**Commemoration:** Synagogue worship on the seventh day marks the crossing of the Red Sea... *Yizkor*, a memorial service, is read on the final day of the festival.


**Counting the omer:** Since the Temple was destroyed in 70 C.E., an omer (measure of wheat) is no longer offered. However, the day when it was offered, the second day of Passover, begins the 49 days of the Counting of the Omer. This period ends with **Shavuot** (The Feast of Weeks).

During these weeks, it is customary not to schedule weddings or secular celebrations. This tradition commemorates the slaughter of Rabbi Akiba’s students by the Roman Emperor Hadrian in the 2<sup>nd</sup> Century C.E. There are varying customs regarding exceptions for weddings during this period. Consult your rabbi for further guidance.



**JWB Jewish  
Chaplains Council**  
Serving Jews Who Serve

a signature program of




**JCC Association  
of North America**

520 Eighth Avenue, 4<sup>th</sup> Floor  
New York, NY 10018

**Connect with Us**

For more information contact  
jwb@jcca.org or visit [jcca.org/jwb](http://jcca.org/jwb)



JWB Jewish  
Chaplains Council

© 2011-2019 JWB Jewish Chaplains Council

A Guide to  
Passover





# The Essence

Passover is the festival of redemption and freedom commemorating the Exodus of the Israelites from Egypt.

It marks the beginning of the covenant between God the liberator and the Jews as a people redeemed.

It celebrates the birth of the Jewish people as a free nation under the leadership of its greatest teacher and prophet, Moses.

## Passover Is the Holiday of Spring

It illuminates the possibility of renewal—as intrinsic to human nature as blossoming trees to the natural world.

## Passover Is the Feast of Unleavened Bread

Matzah allows free people to experience, through food, the privations of slavery. Matzah is the most central symbol of the Passover festival.

Telling the story of Israel’s liberation through the Haggadah is the heart of the Passover celebration.

The manner of telling and means of celebrating, in the seder, touch the heart of what Jewish living is all about.



# The Story

The Israelite community was in Egypt for four centuries and enslaved under the Pharaohs for more than two centuries. Moses, the son of a Levite who was raised as a prince of Egypt, fled to the wilderness after killing an Egyptian taskmaster. He received a divine “call” at the burning bush and returned to Egypt, with his brother Aaron as spokesman.

During Moses’ confrontations with Pharaoh, 10 plagues were visited on the Egyptians. The Israelites ate roasted lamb with unleavened bread and bitter herbs in the first observance of Passover, and put lambs’ blood on their doorposts before the final plague—death of firstborn sons as God “passed over” the Jewish homes—was unleashed on the night of 15 Nisan. Pharaoh agreed to Moses’ persistent demand to “Let my people go.”

With no time to wait for leavened bread to rise, the Israelites took unleavened bread with them and followed Moses on a perilous journey toward the promised land of Canaan.

Passover as a symbol of freedom, deliverance, and defiance of restrictive regimes has always captured the American imagination. The story of Passover inspired Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Jefferson, and John Adams when they proposed “Rebellion against tyrants is obedience to God” as the motto for the seal of the United States. Almost a century later, the refrain of the spiritual calling for freedom from slavery began with “Go down, Moses,” and ended with “Let my people go.” Throughout the ages, Jews have responded to the command to see themselves as the slaves liberated from Egypt by identifying Passover with hope for oppressed Jews, as well as for others suffering from oppression.



# The Seder

Passover begins with a **seder** on the eve of 15 Nisan, and continues for seven days in Israel, and seven or eight days in the Diaspora, depending on family custom. The first two and last two days are sacred holy days. The seder is the quintessential Jewish family event, a sacred family meal conveying tradition directly from one generation to the next and encompassing games, ceremony, song, food and drink, praise of God and high drama. Its components are unique: specially baked **matzah**, four cups of wine, eating bitter herbs, and the all important asking of the **four questions** by the children.

The evening is highlighted by the reading of the **Haggadah**, a special prayer book for the occasion. Haggadah means “retelling” and is derived from Exodus 13:8, which calls for a reliving of the Passover experience: “You shall

tell your child in that day, saying: “It is because of what the Lord did for me when I went out of Egypt.”

Each seder participant symbolically experiences the bitterness of slavery (by eating the bitter herbs) and feels the joy of being redeemed by eating the other symbolic foods, drinking four cups of wine, eating a sumptuous meal, and singing traditional family songs.

## Matzah: Why We Eat It

Matzah is called the “bread of affliction” because it symbolizes the hardship and deprivation experienced by our ancestors who were slaves in Egypt. When eaten during the seder, matzah allows us to relive and remember our ancestral Egyptian experience.