

Passover

A Biblical Festival Quick Reference Sheet

Passover: The term Passover comes from the Hebrew, “Pesach,” which means “passing over” (referring to the Angel of Death who passed over the homes that had applied the blood of the lamb to the doorposts. See Exodus 12:23). “Pesach” is the term for the Festival sacrifice that was offered in the Temple. Leviticus 23:5 refers to the 14th of Nissan, at twilight, as the Lord’s Passover. Passover is the night on which a Seder is conducted. However, today, the entire seven day Festival of Unleavened Bread that Leviticus 23:6 refers to is commonly referred to simply as Passover.

Also Known As:

• **Festival of Unleavened Bread (Chag Ha-matzot):** Leviticus 23:6 refers to the seven days of this Festival as Unleavened Bread because during the seven days one eats only unleavened bread (matzah).

Time of Year:

Spring: March or April. Passover begins on the 15th day of the 1st Biblical month, Nissan, and lasts for seven days. On the 14th of Nissan, in the evening, it is customary to hold a Seder (meaning “order”) in one’s home to tell the story of the Exodus from Egypt.

Scripture References: (The following references are just a sampling of the many found in Scripture.)

Exodus 12, Leviticus 23:4-8, Numbers 9:1-14, Deuteronomy 16:1-8, Matthew 26:17, Luke 22, 1 Corinthians 5:7, Hebrews 11:28

Themes:

A celebration of spring, of birth and rebirth, and firsts

- The month of Nissan signals the reawakening of the physical world which speaks to the human spirit of renewed hope and new beginnings.
- It is said that Passover is the time when God judges whether or not the world’s crops will be successful. The ripening of crops is comparable to freedom in that crops lie hidden in the ground, imprisoned until the ripening process releases them and gives them freedom. The first day of Passover is traditionally a time to pray for dew to fall (as opposed to rain which would cause the sheaves of grain in the fields to rot).
- We are on a journey through life, and Passover is a time each year to see if we have progressed or stayed in the same place. Each Passover should bring new interpretations and new understandings. We know we haven’t grown if we say, “We’ve already heard this story; there is nothing new.”
- The month of Nissan is the first month in the Biblical calendar (See Exodus 12:2) even though the new year begins in the fall at Rosh Hashanah (Feast of Trumpets). Why? Possibly because Passover, the Day of Redemption, is greater than any other event. The Hebrew, Biblical calendar and all other Festivals are determined from the month of Nissan.

A journey from slavery to freedom: The Passover Seder

- The story of the Exodus occurred more than 3,300 years ago, yet the Scriptures say to personalize the story as if you had been redeemed (See Exodus 13:8). Traditionally, the Passover Seder has been the means to this end. The Seder helps everyone present to feel the feelings and experience the sensations of that journey from slavery to freedom. The Seder is infamous for using symbols to tell the Exodus story: matzah, 4 cups of wine and the Seder plate which holds six ritual items (bitter herbs [2], a roasted lamb shank bone, charoset [an apple mixture made to look like the mortar of bricks], a roasted egg, and karpas [a green vegetable like parsley]).
- Passover is a time to consider that the freedom “from” things (like anger, hatred or slavery) is often more precious than the freedom “to” be able to do things. Freedom “from” represents the ability to make choices, that ability to “pass over” or “skip over” choices that are harmful.

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Spring cleaning and casting out leaven

- “Spring cleaning” possibly originated from the intense cleaning and searching for leaven in one’s home, in order to cast it out before Passover. The physical act of searching for leaven should inspire us to search for the sin in our lives as leaven is a symbol of sin (See 2 Corinthians 5:8).
- Exodus 12:15 defines two types of leaven. “Seor,” the first Hebrew word for “leaven,” indicates a leavening agent such as yeast or soured bread dough. “Chametz,” the second Hebrew word for “leavened,” indicates a grain product which has been leavened. Any flour of the five species of grain (wheat, spelt, oats, barley and rye) which is mixed with water and allowed to ferment before being baked is “chametz.” (The Sages established that the time necessary for the fermentation process to take place is eighteen minutes after water has been added to the flour.) Some sins, like the “seor” of yeast, are obvious. Other sins, however, are more subtle, like “chametz,” and we might not even be aware that they are hiding in our “pantry.” Starter dough leaven represents the old way of life (such as: sin, bad company or old habits). Like starter dough, these things can continue to leaven our lives day to day. The apostle Paul said to get rid of the old leaven and to start over with a new batch (See 1 Corinthians 5:6-8). Passover is a perfect time to make a fresh start and to get rid of the leaven in our lives.

Messianic Significance:

- Passover is ripe with Messianic significance. Jesus celebrated a last Seder (Last Supper) with His disciples. At the Seder Jesus used the familiar items on the seder plate and the four cups to explain the mystery of God’s plan of salvation to His disciples. Afterwards, Jesus was crucified on the 14th of Nissan, the day when the Passover lambs were sacrificed in the Temple. During the week of Passover, He resurrected from the dead and appeared to His disciples. The Gospels tell the story of Jesus’ last Passover on earth, and also anticipate a future time when Jesus will again drink from the cup (See Matthew 26:27-29).
- As we celebrate Passover, eat the matzah and drink the 4 cups, we proclaim the Lord’s death until he returns (See 1 Corinthians 11:26).
- Passover is considered to be the First Redemption. The Last Redemption will be like the First Redemption and will occur when Messiah comes back to the earth to rule as King.

Traditions:

It is customary to:

- Fast on the 14th of Nissan if you are a firstborn (if the 14th falls on a Sabbath, the fast is observed the previous Thursday). The Fast of the Firstborn commemorates the miracle which spared the firstborn sons from the 10th plague in Egypt.
- Consider the 14th of Nissan also as a festival day since the Passover sacrifice was offered on the 14th (ie. work is forbidden after midday). The 14th of Nissan is also a day to contemplate Jesus’ trial and crucifixion in preparation for the Seder that night.
- Hide pieces of leaven and conduct a last minute search for it. Once the leaven is found, it is burned and one renounces ownership of it. (See Exodus 13:7, 12:19.) Traditionally this ceremony is performed on the eve of the 14th of Nissan (at twilight on the 13th of Nissan, ie. 24 hours before the Seder). The search for leaven is symbolic of the purification of one’s heart and tongue before singing praises to God (ie. during the Seder). The search for leaven represents one’s effort to purify the heart before the Seder begins.
- Participate in a Seder. Seder means “order” and is a 15-step ritual revolving around the Passover dinner. The Haggadah, meaning “the telling,” is a book of instructions, prayers, blessings and stories used at the Seder to tell the Passover story.
- Give charity, as at other Festivals, so that the less fortunate can also celebrate Passover.

Scripture Readings:

1st Day of Passover: Exodus 12:21-51, Numbers 28:16-25, Joshua 3:5-7, 5:2-6:1, 27. **2nd Day of Passover:** Leviticus 22:26-23:44, Numbers 28:16-25, 2 Kings 23:1-9, 21-25. **Intermediate Sabbath of Passover:** Exodus 33:12-34:26, Numbers 28:19-26, Ezekiel 37:1-14. **7th Day of Passover:** Exodus 13:17-15:26, Numbers 28:19-25, 2 Samuel 22:1-51

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