

SEDER PLATE TELLS PASSOVER STORY

Every spring Jews around the world celebrate an important holiday. The exact date of Passover varies because it is based on the ancient Jewish calendar; this year it begins at sundown on March 29.

Three thousand years ago the Israelites were captive slaves in Egypt. When a shepherd named Moses had an encounter with God, he was sent to the Egyptian ruler, Pharaoh, with the demand that his people be set free and allowed to leave the country.

When Pharaoh ignored Moses, God unleashed a series of punishments, ending with the most severe: the death of the first born in every Egyptian household. The Jews, however, were spared this fate because they followed instructions to sprinkle their doorways with lambs' blood. Seeing this, the Angel of Death passed over these homes, giving the holiday its English name: "Passover" (the Hebrew name for the holiday is "Pesach").

Although Jews have been celebrating this event for many centuries, Passover has inspired others who were suffering to have faith in the future. For example, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. used many references to the famous story from the book of Exodus during his leadership of America's Civil Rights Movement in the 1960s.

An important part of the Passover celebration is a ritual meal called the "seder," which means order, so named because it follows a specific order. Most Jewish families observe the seder as a family experience in their homes; some participate in a community seder at the synagogue, such as the one being offered to members of Congregation Emeth on the second night of Passover (which lasts seven nights).

During the meal the Exodus story is read from a special book called the "haggadah," which means "the telling." The haggadah not only relates the historical events but also provides the procedure as well as an explanation of the symbolism of the elements of the meal. This reenactment of the seder meal helps participants relive the experience of their ancestors who gained freedom through God's miraculous intervention.

On the seder table is placed a special plate that usually has separate compartments for the ceremonial foods being served. Each has its own significance intended to remind the participants of the experience of going from slavery to freedom. The traditional items on the seder plate are

- Haroset: a mixture of chopped nuts, apples, and spices symbolizing the mortar the Israelite slaves used in building.
- Zeroa: a roasted bone (often lamb) symbolizing the lamb's blood the Israelites placed on the doorpost, and later representing the burnt offering of the Israelites in the Holy Temple in Jerusalem. (Vegetarians can substitute beets, the red juice representing blood.)
- Maror: bitter herbs, often horseradish, representing the pain of slavery
- Karpas: a green, leafy vegetable like parsley symbolizing springtime and renewal. Dipping this into salt water represents the tears shed by the Israelite slaves.
- A hard-boiled egg, a symbol of mourning over the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem and a symbol of springtime and renewal.
- Also present on the table are other symbolic items:
- A bowl of salt water for dipping.
- A plate with three pieces of "matzah," unleavened, flat, cracker-like bread known as the "bread of affliction." When the Israelites fled Egypt, their bread dough had no time to rise, and they baked it into hard crackers in the desert sun.

- A container of wine: four glasses are drunk to represent God's four promises to the Israelites ("I will free you, redeem you, make you my people, bring you into the Promised Land."). A fifth cup is poured and saved as an offering to the Prophet Elijah, who is the mythological messenger who will announce the coming of the messiah.

Rabbi Debbie Israel of South County's Jewish synagogue, Congregation Emeth, says that children are a special focus of the seder and become engaged because the senses of taste, smell, and touch are all employed. "Four questions are included to help children observe that this night is different and to teach them all the ways it is different. Following these ritual questions, they are encouraged to continue asking questions throughout the evening."

Published in Morgan Hill Times 3-2010