



# Passover: **Laws, Customs** & Meaning

JEWISH HOLIDAYS

PASSOVER

TRADITIONS

LAWS & CUSTOMS

## Passover Laws & Customs: The Prohibition of Chometz

The holiday of Passover's uniqueness is due to its multitude of observances and restrictions incumbent upon the Jew, as well as its universal symbolism. One is the injunction against the possession or utilization of *chometz* (leaven). The prohibition of *chometz* is complimentary to and reinforces the commandment to eat only *matzoh* or unleavened foodstuffs for the entire eight days of Pesach. Both remind us of Yetziath Mitzraim, the hurried

departure from Egypt — an event, though distant in history, we yet relive in our present day.

*"In every generation, it is for one to think that he himself went forth out of Egypt."*

— *The Haggadah*

### ***What is Chometz?***

*Chometz* is the fermentation that results when flour is mixed with water and allowed to stand for the period necessary for this process to activate — usually 18 minutes. The process applies to whole grains or grains which are used in the preparation of any foodstuffs or drink. Therefore, any product containing flour or grain in any form, and not prepared according to the rules of Passover and under strict supervision, cannot be used for Passover.

### ***What Foods Are Chometz?***

Food or drink made from wheat, rye, barley, oats and other grains are considered *chometz*. Thus all pastries, cakes, beer, whisky, etc., are *chometz*. Grain vinegar and products containing vinegar such as pickles, horseradish, etc. are likewise *chometz*. The latter may only be used if they bear proper certification that they were prepared for Passover with products other than grain derivatives.

Any prepared or manufactured product requires a reliable endorsement by a duly ordained Orthodox rabbi — including matzoh or products containing matzoh meal, such as cakes, macaroons, etc. Endorsements are also required for candy, soft drinks, wine, liquors, milk, canned and dried foods. Only fresh green vegetables and fruits require no supervision.

Children should not be fed *chometz* during Passover unless a physician has so ordered and only after consultation with an Orthodox rabbi.

### ***Food Prohibited by Custom***

Some items are prohibited for Passover by the rule of custom only, although by law they are outside the category of *chometz*. The reasoning is that these foods are sometimes used in making bread and have similar properties. Included in this group are: rice, millet, beans and peas. Other items are similarly not proper for use because they are often mixed with *chometz*, including saffron, cloves and mustard. All dried fruits, including figs, dates and prunes, are not to be used unless dried and packed under rabbinical supervision. Herring and salted mackerel and the like are normally not served on Passover, but when used must be soaked three times in water before the onset of Passover.

## "KOSHER FOR PASSOVER" SEAL

The Hebrew words "Kosher Le-Pesach" on a label are usually the customer's guide when shopping for Passover. One must guard, however, against unscrupulous merchants or "charlatan" rabbis who exploit the Passover market merely for financial gain. It is best to buy products with the seal "Kosher for Passover" included as part of the label or legend printed by the manufacturer, with certification by a recognized Orthodox rabbi affiliated with a rabbinical body. Where there is any doubt, consult your local rabbi.

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## The "Kashering" of Utensils

On Passover we must not leave any trace of leaven in our food or utensils. For this reason the dishes and utensils must be limited to those that either were not used at all except for Passover, or if previously used, have been cleansed and purged from any absorption of *chometz* in the manner prescribed by law.

Utensils made of metal or wood can be purged and rendered fit for Passover use. The procedure for kashering varies according to the type of utensil and the manner of

its previous use.

### ***Metal Utensils***

Metal utensils must first be scoured and cleansed spotless and stay unused for 24 hours before kashering. If these utensils were used for stewing and cooking, they may be kashered by purging them in boiling water (scalding).

### ***Crockery & Glassware***

Crockery, since it is very porous, cannot be kashered, even if only once used with *chometz*. Earthenware, porcelain and chinaware have similar surfaces to which purging cannot be applied. Flour sieves, knives and forks consisting of parts nailed or glued together, and narrow-necked bottles cannot be kashered for Passover.

Conflicting views are given relative to whether glassware may be kashered. One view holds that glassware is similar to crockery, where no kashering procedure can help. The other view is that kashering is not required at all for glassware — it is sufficient to soak the glass vessels (except narrow necked jars and bottles) in cold water for one day, at the end of which the water is changed, re-soaked a second day and repeated again on the third day.

### ***Kashering by Purging***

A cauldron or other large vessel which has not been used

for *chometz* purposes for at least 24 hours is filled with plain water (containing no washing soda or lye) and brought to a boil. All rust spots are removed from utensils to be kashered, and then the utensils are placed in a net or otherwise tied into the boiling cauldron for a short period.

This is sufficient for community silver or other smooth surface utensils. But heavily ornamented or grooved utensils cannot be effectively kashered in this way alone — the ornamented spots should be brought into contact with red-hot coals (glowing).

### ***Marble, Wood & Kitchen Surfaces***

Marble and wood tables are kashered by having boiling water poured over them or by placing a wood or metal top over them. Kitchen tables are kashered by pouring boiling water over the surface and moving a white hot iron or stone over the entire area. Kashering should be completed before the time of burning *chometz* on the morning before Passover.

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## **Mechirath Chometz: Selling the Leaven**

*Chometz* should not be kept in the home during Passover.

We must dispose of all bread, cake and other *chometz* foods before the onset of Passover. Items containing *chometz* such as cosmetics, drinks, etc., which we cannot dispose of before Pesach, as well as utensils which were not purged, must be packed away before the holiday and sold to a non-Jew. During Passover the *chometz* is packed away in a room or closet locker where it remains inaccessible or sealed for the period.

Since the sale must conform to all details of Jewish law in which the average layman is not sufficiently versed, it is desirable that an individual delegate his rabbi to act as his personal agent to sell the *chometz*. After Passover, the rabbi purchases the *chometz* back from the Gentile. If this procedure was not followed, then all food kept over Passover must be discarded.

### ***Biur Chometz: The Eradication***

"Biur Chometz" means the eradication from one's premises of all leavened bread as well as other foodstuffs and drinks that contain or are processed from grain. In most households this process is started by Jewish women many days before Passover. Only such *chometz* that would impose a hardship to destroy before Passover is sold by the rabbi to a non-Jew.

The official search for leaven starts with a ceremony performed on the evening preceding the eve of Passover.

The head of the family, equipped with a lighted candle, wooden spoon, feather, piece of cloth and thread, pronounces an appropriate benediction and starts the search for leavened bread. Some morsels of bread are placed in conspicuous places beforehand where it can be recovered, and thus the pronouncement of the benediction will not be in vain. All "*chometz*" is swept into the spoon with the feather, wrapped in a piece of cloth and tied with a thread. The family head deposits the package together with *chometz* to be eaten in the evening and the next morning in a safe place, and recites the prayer *Kol Chamiro* found in the Haggadah.

The package is burned the following morning after the *chometz* meal and after removal of all *chometz*, at which occasion the prayer *Kol Chamiro* is repeated. The above prayer should always be said by the owner and in a language he understands, because with it he renounces ownership of any *chometz* that has escaped his attention.

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## **The Fast of the First Born**

The Fast of the First Born is observed on the day before the festival. Logically, we should expect a feast not a fast on the part of the first born, to celebrate the miracle of

deliverance from the tenth plague. However, according to the teachings of our Sages, sympathy for the human species is demonstrated. The Midrash avers that G-d silenced the jubilant song of the heavenly chorus lauding the righteous deliverance of the Israelites with the protest, "My creatures are drowning in the sea, and you are singing?" An echo of this protest is found in the noncompletion of the Hallel throughout the last six days of Passover.

The fast of the first born is, therefore, interpreted as a sign of gratitude. The father fasts for his little son until the latter reaches the age of thirteen. The "Siyum" — the completion of a studied tractate of the Talmud — was introduced later so as to mitigate the strain of some who found the fast an excessive ordeal. The "siyum" is a joyous occasion and a religious meal may be partaken of by those who join in the celebration.

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## **Rules for Preparing the Seder Table**

The table should be prepared before the onset of twilight. Religious law and custom require each person to drink four cups of wine at specified intervals indicated in the Haggadah. The cup should have a capacity of at least one

"Raveys," which is equivalent to 3.3 fluid ounces.

Somewhat more than half the cup is sipped each time and it is best to leave over the remainder lest one be unable later to fulfill the quota of the additional cups. On drinking the four cups, one leans to the left side, as it was the custom in ancient times among free noblemen to dine on couches in a leaning position.

One cup, remaining untouched, is set in the center of the table and symbolizes the visit of the Prophet Elijah, a figure prominently associated in Jewish tradition with redemption.

All persons, women and children alike, who reside in the house, no matter how menial their position, must be present at the table and share equally in the Seder. The head of the family is obligated to explain in detail the history of the deliverance from Egypt.

The "Hessebet" refers to the cushions placed on the left side of the chair at the Seder table to make it easy to recline on that side. By positioning ourselves this way we indicate our spirit of independence and secure confidence — this style of reclining prevailed among sovereign princes and lords in ancient times. The reclining is enjoined by law, at least while the required portions of matzoh and "moror" are eaten and the cups of wine are sipped.

### *The Three Matzohs*

Three matzohs are used on Passover eve at the Seder table. In addition to the two whole breads required on all Holidays and the Sabbath, over which we pronounce the benediction, on Passover a third one is added which we use for the *Afikomon*. The three matzohs, our Rabbis said, symbolize the three classes into which we were divided after the deliverance: Kohanim, Levites and Israelites.

While during the entire week of Passover we are required to eat matzoh but may subsist on a diet of vegetables or other foods, on the first two nights of Passover we must eat a piece of Matzoh which is equivalent, at least, to the size known in Hebrew as a "K'zayeth," a full-grown olive. Eating half of a regular size matzoh is sufficient to fulfill the minimum requirements of "K'zayeth." In addition it is a religious duty that this "K'zayeth" be baked from dough of wheat that has been carefully watched from time of harvest — this is known as "matzoh Schnure."

### THE SEDER PLATE (KAARAH)

- ✦ **Three Matzohs** — arranged in the three divisions of the Seder dish

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- ✦ **Greens (Karpas)** — parsley, chevil, celery and the like

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- ✦ **Salt Water or Cider Vinegar** — a small basin

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- ✦ **Bitter Herbs (Moror)** — horseradish, salad and the like

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- ✦ **Charosses** — apples, ginger and nuts minced and made

into a paste with wine

- ✦ **Shank Bone (Jaroah)** – of a shoulder of lamb
- ✦ **Egg (Be-tzah)** – both cooked and roasted by fire

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## The Five Dishes & Their Meaning

Every member of the family has to partake in a number of special dishes. The bitter herb (usually horseradish) is dipped in the "Charosses" and the greens into the salt water before they are eaten. The amount of Moror partaken must be not less than a "K'zayeth," which is equivalent to 2/3 average size egg (or 1.1 fl. ounces).

Another portion of the bitter herb is eaten immediately after the first portion. This second portion is known as "Korech" because it is placed between two pieces of matzoh before it is ingested. All the dishes have symbolic meaning:

**(a)** The bitter herbs as well as the greens are symbolic of our bitter life in Egypt.

**(b)** "Charosses" is made of a mixture of apples, nuts, ginger

and wine. The Rambam gives the following recipe: dates, dried figs, raisins, all placed together and mixed with vinegar and spices.

**(c)** The Karpas (parsley or radish) is made part of the meal to signify the festive supper as befits a joyous occasion. The radishes are dipped in salt-water, also symbolizing the royalty of the Seder — in ancient times salt was a luxury afforded only by the very rich. It also commemorates the crossing of the Red Sea.

**(d)** The Shank Bone — with a bit of roast meat clinging to it — is a remembrance of the Paschal sacrifice.

**(e)** The Egg — Another food was needed at the Passover table to represent the "Chagigah" offering at the Temple brought during the major holidays. An egg was chosen for this purpose since the Aramaic word for egg, BE-AH, means "desired" — namely, that G-d desired to redeem us with an outstanding arm.

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## The Four Cups of Wine

On the night of the Seder, four cups of wine are consumed. They are symbolic of the four Hebrew terms used in the divine promise to Moses to deliver the Israelites from

Egyptian bondage. The first cup of wine is used in performing the ritual of "Kiddush."

The Kiddush or sanctification is the formal act whereby the sanctity of the Sabbath, or Yom Tov, is proclaimed. "Remember the Sabbath Day to keep it holy" — and the Rabbis glossed it, "Remember it — over wine." For the Jewish holiday was essentially a festive occasion to be celebrated by the enjoyment of the good things that G-d has lavished upon this world. When the Seder night coincides with Sabbath eve, the two forms of Kiddush, for Sabbath and Festival, are combined.

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## The Haggadah

This service is based upon the Biblical injunction for the observance of the Passover: *"and thou shalt tell thy son on that day saying, it is because of that which the Lord did for me when I came forth out of Egypt."* The Haggadah means simply "telling" the story of Passover.

The duty to transmit one's religious heritage to his children occupies a central place in living Judaism. The failure to do so is to fail in one's responsibility as a Jew. It is not incidental to his religion as many believe. It cannot be said

that one had been an observant Jew, but only failed to make secure his children's Judaism. No, even his own Judaism had been found wanting.

For this night, the Haggadah was assembled, relating the Passover story chronologically and supplemented by liturgical readings and prayers. Aided by it, one may introduce his children to the most important chapter in Jewish history. The 15th day of Nissan marks the genesis of the Jewish people and the beginning of religious training for the child.

### *The "Afikomen"*

The "Afikomen" is a half matzoh broken off from the middle of the three matzohs at the beginning of the Seder meal and eaten at the end of it. It is used to substitute for the paschal lamb which the Israelites brought into Egypt on the eve of their deliverance. They continued to use the paschal lamb as a sacrifice until the destruction of the Second Temple. In Egypt, the Israelites sprinkled the blood of the lamb on their doorposts, and it served as a sign that those who lived inside the doorposts were members of the House of Israel and that their first born were not to be visited by the angel of death. The name paschal lamb is derived from the Hebrew word "posseach," which means "skip." The fact that the angel of death passed over the Jewish homes is of great importance and the holiday is known as "Hag Happsach" — the Passover.



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