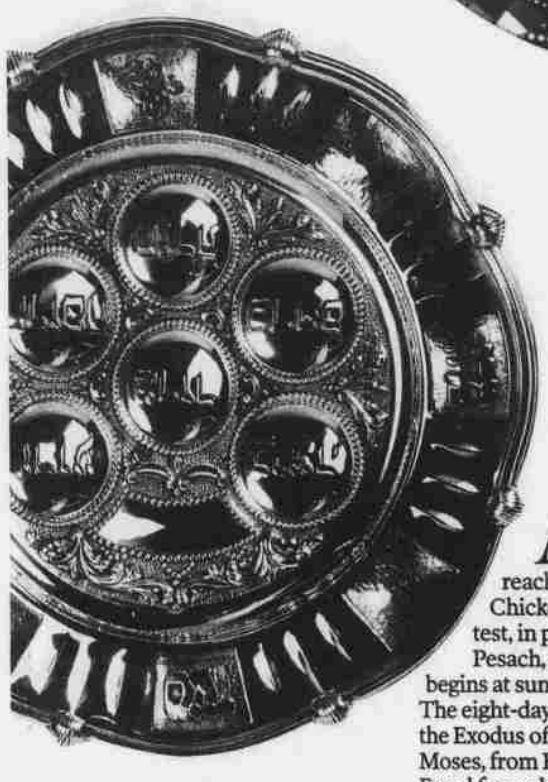


Passover: history, freedom — and CHICKEN SOUP

JOE WOODARD
CALGARY HERALD

A winner has been announced in the National Jewish Outreach Program's The Best Chicken Soup in America Contest, in plenty of time for Passover.

Pesach, also known as Passover, begins at sundown on April 5 this year. The eight-day holiday commemorates the Exodus of the Hebrews, led by Moses, from Egypt 3,320 years ago. Freed from slavery, the Hebrews crossed the desert to the Promised Land, founding the nation of Israel.

Passover, more than any other Jewish holiday, focuses on food. The eating of leavened bread is strictly forbidden, as the Hebrews left Egypt in a hurry and had no time for the bread to rise.

Before the holiday, Jewish homes are wiped clean of any yeast. During Passover, the only wheat product permitted in the house is unleavened matzo, cracker-like flatbread.

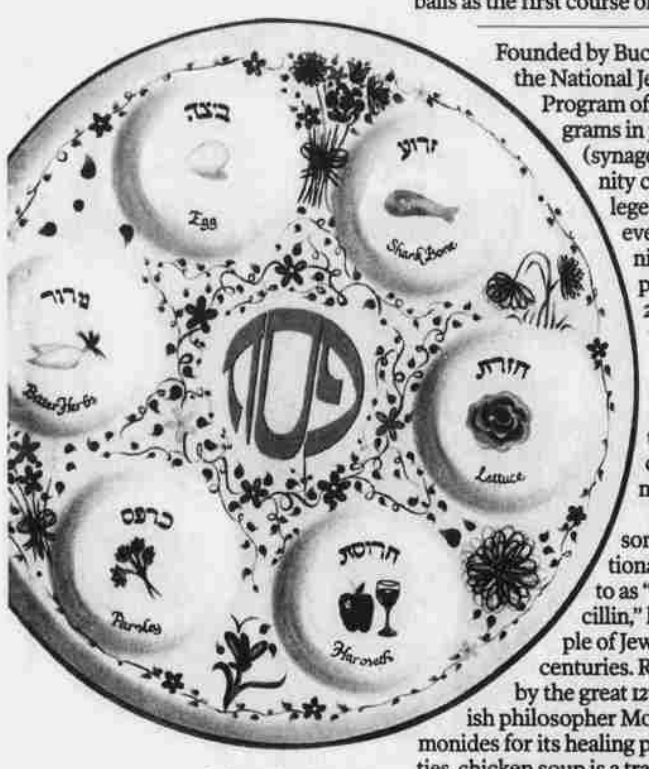
The main ritual of Passover, the Seder dinner, includes a symbolic retelling of the Exodus from Egypt, highlighted by the eating of symbolic foods. An elaborate dinner is served, usually including chicken soup as the first course — hence the NJOP's contest.

"We had Tex-Mex soups, Yemenite soups, even a soup made with coconut milk," NJOP founder Rabbi Ephraim Z. Buchwald announced at the award ceremony.

"It was remarkable to see that chicken soup is as varied as the Jewish community itself."

The contest's cook-off took place in New York on Feb. 24. Five finalists prepared soups for the occasion. One was named best chicken soup in America — the creation of life-long New Yorker Rosely Himmelstein.

Himmelstein's soup, a traditional broth of root vegetables and fresh herbs, is designed to be served with matzo balls as the first course of Seder.



Calgary Herald Archive, CanWest News Service

Seder plates express have compartments for the various types of food to be served at the dinner. The variety of styles reflects the many cultures of Judaism.

Founded by Buchwald in 1987, the National Jewish Outreach Program offers free programs in 3,620 locations (synagogues, community centres and college campuses) in every U.S. state, nine Canadian provinces and 28 other countries. The program aims to preserve Judaism's distinct traditions and cultural richness.

Chicken soup, sometimes affectionately referred to as "Jewish penicillin," has been a staple of Jewish cuisine for centuries. Recommended by the great 12th century Jewish philosopher Moses Maimonides for its healing properties, chicken soup is a tradition linking Jews of all backgrounds.

Yet, having chicken soup at Seder is not a mitzvah — a sacred obligation — though several other types of food must appear on the Passover table. So why use chicken soup to remind Jews of their heritage?

"It's something so sensory — the smell, the taste, the warmth. There's hardly any Jew who can't remember 'my grandmother's chicken soup' — Friday night at Grandma's," says NJOP program director Yitzachak Rosenbaum.

"It's a universal, highly sensory memory — like Passover itself."

What unites chicken soup and Seder is commitment to both concrete history (rather than poetic myth) and the sanctity of the body (rather than mystical transcendence). This "realism" is perhaps unique to Abrahamic religions, beginning with Judaism and inherited by Christianity and Islam, the "seed" of the Jewish patriarch Abraham.

"The rituals we use for Passover aren't mystical; they aren't designed to escape the body," said Rosenbaum.

"It's history — otherwise we wouldn't do what we do. And we can't see history as simply something happening in the past. Every person has to see themselves as redeemed from Egypt.

"We are trying to understand the slavery of our people, so we can act in a godly fashion, trying to redeem others. As God was merciful, we try to be merciful."

The Seder feast is filled with symbolism. It begins with the haggadah — the retelling of the story of the Exodus from Egypt, during which four cups of wine are consumed, commemorating the four promises of God: "I will take you out of Egypt... I will rescue you... I will redeem you... I will take you to me for a my people" (Exodus 6:6-7).

A little wine is poured onto a plate from the second cup, recalling all who suffer in life — even Pharoah's soldiers, drowned in the Red Sea during the Exodus.

On the Seder plate rest a burnt lamb shank or chicken bone and a hardboiled egg — in remembrance of the sacrifices no longer offered in the Temple of Jerusalem, destroyed by the Romans in 70 CE.

Unleavened bread is eaten as a symbol of poverty and humility. Maror — bitter herbs such as endive or horseradish — follow the matzo, recalling the bitterness of slavery; then onion or parsley, dipped in salt water as a symbol of human tears. Maror is dipped in charoset, a lumpy paste of wine, chopped apples and nuts, representing the mortar with which the Jews were forced to work in Egypt.

More hardboiled eggs are eaten in recognition of hardship — "and as a symbol for the chosen people," Rosenbaum said: "The more you cook them, the tougher they get."

Meanwhile, a youngster asks four scripted questions about the historical symbolism of the Seder, beginning with: "Why is this night different from other nights?"

This isn't ritual for the sake of mystic enlightenment, says Rosenbaum. It's theatre for the sake of education.

"You shall teach your children the four questions — the haggadah says — your wise son, your wicked son, your simple son — teach all your children about your heritage," Rosenbaum says.

The Seder isn't "spirituality" — though Rosenbaum says the theatre serves to sanctify the meal. The Seder atmosphere may be reverent, jovial, thoughtful — or all those things. But it can't quite be called meditative, he says. The sights, smells and textures are very much "here and now, recalling there and then."

Rosenbaum says there's a real connection between the Jewish emphasis on history and taking the body very seriously.

"We take the body seriously because God created man — body and soul. And while the soul is closer to God and the body closer to the Earth, man's job in this world is to sanctify and redeem his life and all life, to make physical life holy."

> Seder traditions aren't merely symbolic. To Jews, they are a connection to the past that must not be forgotten

The natural things of life are inherently holy, though they can be profaned, says the rabbi. For example, if sexual relations are treated only as a matter of physical pleasure, they become sinful. But the word for marriage, kidushin, is derived from the word for holy, kados. The marriage bed has been called the "holy of holies." Only because sexuality is meant to be holy, Rosenbaum explains, does it have the potential to become profane.

He cites another example: when a Jew leaves the toilet, there is a blessing to be recited. "Dirty words," Rosenbaum says, may be derived from reality of human waste, but devout Jews are thankful to God for even the most mundane functions of their bodies.

This acceptance of physicality aligned with spirituality — as opposed to physicality transcended by spirituality — is a key difference between Western and Eastern religions.

The etymology of the word "religion" used in the West is generally taken to come from the Latin word, *religare*, "to bind back" or "to rebind" — literally, what a vine-dresser does to vines, training them on a frame. Poetically, this may suggest re-establishing, by worship, a lost or broken intimacy with God.

More concretely, it suggests transforming an anarchic thicket to an orderly, productive vineyard.

An alternative, less likely, derivation is from the Latin, *relegere*, "to reread" or return to the chronicles.

In India, however, the word generally translated as "religion" is *darsana*, meaning "to see" or "seeing," says University of Calgary religious studies professor Leslie Kawamura.

"There is no sense of redemption in Buddhism," says Kawamura.

"There is a sense of awakening or enlightenment — the realization that I am the creator of my own suffering. And in Hinduism, there is a sense of transcendence, escape from the body and the world. But the purpose is not redemption; it is peace."

Kawamura says there is no one Buddhism. "There are 84,000 different gates to the teaching of the Buddha," he says, because "each human being has a different perspective on what is lacking for a full spiritual life."

Some believe there is an existence or a being beyond this life, some do not. Some use ritual for meditation, some for worship, some for a daily discipline. Some deny the need for ritual at all.

Just as all Hindus share the ultimate purpose of achieving release from the cycle of rebirth, life and death through selflessness, says Kawamura, Buddhists share the purpose of peace and tranquility through enlightenment. This means realizing all life is suffering arising from attachment to self, that desire is disease, and release lies in the eightfold path of proper seeing, thinking, speaking and living.

"The Buddhist understanding of compassion is quiet different from, say, the Christian understanding of *agape*, charity," said Kawamura.

"Compassion understands the suffering of others. And it takes joy in seeing others joyful."

"We're not theological," says University of Calgary professor of religious studies Eliezer Segal, of Jews.

"Anything anyone says about a major world religion, somebody is going to disagree with. But I think it's fair to say that the purpose of Judaism is to bring God into the world" — neither escaping from the world, nor accepting it as it is.

"The commandments are the means by which otherwise profane or neutral acts become acts of worship. What you eat, how you dress, if one is doing anything in the right way, then it becomes an act of worship," Segal said.

"We don't put a lot of emphasis on cosmic truth. We understand that we're a very finite piece of reality, that we don't see the whole picture, that we aren't equipped to see the whole picture, and it's enough simply for us to do our job."

Segal said the Jewish assumption is that all peoples have jobs to do, but — with 613 commandments outlined in the Torah, the first five books of the Bible — "Jews have it in greater detail."

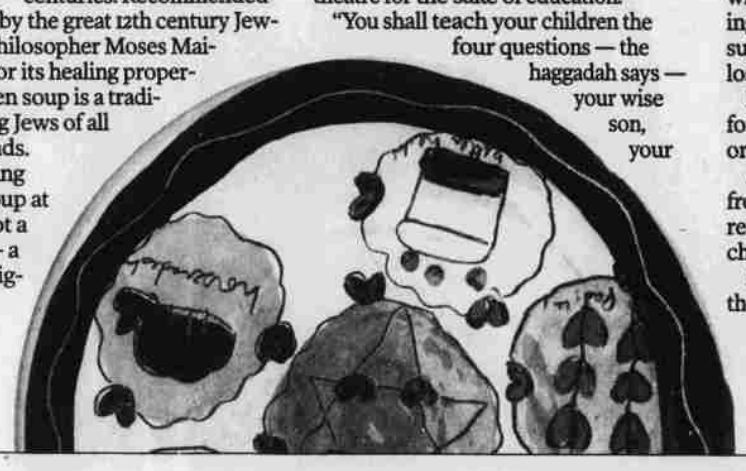
Segal said the full meaning of the Exodus from Egypt can only be seen in the context of Sinai, God's giving the law to Moses, celebrated on Jewish Pentecost, 50 days after Passover.

"The law was engraved on the tablets. The word for 'engraved' — Hebrew doesn't have written vowels — is the same as the word for 'freedom'.

"So the rabbis said — it's a complicated wordplay — that not only was law engraved on those tablets, but also freedom.

"The alternative to law is anarchy, and anarchy is the worst form of slavery, where might makes right."

JWOODARD@THEHERALD.CANWEST.COM



THE BEST CHICKEN SOUP IN NORTH AMERICA

Rosely Himmelstein's winning recipe

- 2 quarts of chicken broth
- 1 chicken, quartered; rinsed
- 1 large carrot, peeled, chopped
- 1 large onion, peeled, chopped
- 1 stalk celery
- 1 leek, white or light parts only
- 1 parsnip, peeled, chopped
- 1 parsley root, greens attached
- 1 sweet potato, peeled, chopped
- 1 handful dill
- 1 small rutabaga, peeled, chopped
- sprigs of cilantro (optional)
- salt and pepper to taste

Put chicken broth in pot; bring to boil. Add chicken. Return to boil; lower heat. Gently simmer uncovered for 1 hour. Add the rest of the ingredients. Simmer for 1/2 hour more; stir occasionally. Skim fat from top.

Pour into bowls; into each add a slice of carrot and a sprig of cilantro.

If storing, let soup cool before refrigerating. When cold, remove the fat that rises to the surface. Use soup within 2 to 3 days, or store in freezer.

Chicken broth
(2 quarts)

- 2 pounds of chicken
- 1 onion, studded with 4 cloves
- 3 garlic cloves
- 1 carrot, peeled
- 1 bay leaf
- 1 celery stalk
- 1 leek

Combine all ingredients with 10 cups of water. Bring to boil.

Simmer over medium heat for 1½ hours, stirring occasionally. Cool, then strain.

For more information on Passover, including how to host a Seder, visit www.njop.org.

Rosely Himmelstein