

# What's on the Seder table: Ritual feast reminds Jews both of their ancient slavery and the fact they're no longer slaves: [Final Edition]

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## ABSTRACT (ABSTRACT)

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The Passover or Pesach is observed with a Seder ("order"), a ceremonial meal involving readings, ceremonial foods, songs and drinks. The Seder table is a crowded one; in addition to the meal, wine and grape juice of the family, it holds a collection of symbols.

- The afikoman is a piece broken from the middle matzoh of three used for Seder rituals. It is hidden by the Seder leader to be eaten for dessert, and when it is found by the children, it must be "ransomed back." The afikoman recalls the promised Messiah.

## FULL TEXT

This story features a factbox entitled, "A Crowded Table"

(From the Calgary Herald, April 10, 2001) Apology: A photograph that appeared on Saturday's Religion page with a package of stories on Jewish traditions at Passover, did not represent, as the photo caption indicated, a typical Passover table. The Herald apologizes for the error. \*\*\*\*\*

Ilana Krygier, education director at the Calgary Jewish Centre, will always remember the ingenious places her father hid the "afikoman," the piece of flatbread for which Jewish children must search toward the end of the Passover.

"He'd just slip it into a videotape under his chair; or he'd hide it in the top of a tissue box," she laughed.

Every Jewish family has enduring memories of Passover, Krygier said. And yet, when asked whether her memories are "family" or "Jewish," she says she can't separate them -- "they're completely intertwined."

At nightfall on the 15th day of the month of Nisan, in the year 5761 -- otherwise known as April 7, 2001 -- Jews in Calgary and worldwide will begin celebrating the eight days of Pesach or Passover, the Festival of Unleavened Bread, the Festival of Freedom.

The Pesach, "passover," commemorates the exodus of the Hebrews out of Egypt over 3,000 years ago under the leadership of Moses. That marked the end of 400 years of slavery, and to some extent, the birth of the Jewish people.

During Passover Seders or ritual meals, four glasses of wine are drunk in slow succession, to commemorate the four

promises of God to his people (Exodus 6:6-7, 11:17): "I will free you from the burdens of the Egyptians . . . I will redeem you . . . I will take you to be my people . . ." and finally, "I brought you out of the land of Egypt."

A "fifth glass" of wine is left in the middle of the Seder table, said Calgary's Rabbi Menachem Matusof, for the prophet Elijah, harbinger of the Mossiach or Messiah. Late in the evening, the front door is opened to welcome the prophet.

With the first Passover, 3,317 years ago, a number of ideas entered perhaps permanently into the human consciousness: deliverance, liberation, redemption.

Prior to the Passover, ancient nature religions tended to see human history as circular, like the seasons of the year. And among the ancient Greek philosophers, Hindus and Confucianists, history was seen as a pointless recurrence of rises and falls. So history was relatively unimportant in understanding human existence.

After the Passover, for the first time, history was seen as linear, as going somewhere. Human existence itself, both individual and collective, became defined in terms of the recurring motif of a journey, like the later Christian Pilgrimage, the Muslim Haj, and even the modern notion of "progress."

"It was truly revolutionary, especially in the context of the nature religions of the Middle East," said University of Calgary religion professor Eliezer Segal, author of the children's book Uncle Eli's Passover Haggadah.

"For the first time, history itself became important. And because history was important, personal morality became important," as either furthering or hindering the purpose of history.

"God created humanity with a purpose -- we don't always know what the purpose is, but there is a direction," a movement dependent on and furthering human righteousness.

Unlike the living memory of the Passover, however, the modern notion of progress almost encourages forgetting the past. And that threatens the community upon which the future depends, Segal suggested.

What is needed instead is for each generation to recapture the experience of its forebears.

"There's a statement in the Haggadah" -- the liturgy of the feast -- "that in every generation, each person must see themselves as if they've personally been liberated from Egypt."

So there are aspects of the Passover rituals designed to remind Jews of both of their ancient slavery and the fact they're no longer slaves. They eat the "bitter herbs" of slaves, but they eat reclining, like ancient aristocrats.

"Though it seems contradictory, you have to have those two aspects for the experience to be meaningful," he said.

The process of remembering is necessarily a ritualistic one.

Yeast, leavened bread and bread products -- chametz -- are entirely forbidden during the feast, in remembrance: "It was not leavened, because they were thrust out of Egypt and could not tarry," (Exodus 12:39).

So in the days before Passover, each house is cleaned and then scoured for any chametz, and the last bits burned. Then a special set of Passover dishes is brought out.

On the day of the feast, the eldest son fasts in memory of the first-born of the Egyptians, whose deaths -- "the Lord smote them" - -prompted the Hebrews' expulsion from that land.

The feast proper begins at nightfall. Because each Seder is a family affair, the observance is not uniform. But it typically takes these steps:

- The family gathers at the Seder table, the candles are lit, prayers are said, and the first cup of wine is drunk.
- The head of the family, leading the feast, then washes his hands.
- He dips green vegetables in salt water (the tears of slaves), eats them, and then passes them to the others.
- From a dish of three matzohs or flatbread, he takes the middle one, breaks it and hides half, called the afikoman; this represents the still-hidden Messiah.
- Then everyone present lifts the plate of matzohs and chants, "this is the bread of affliction which our fathers ate in Egypt; this year here, next year in Jerusalem; this year slaves, next year free."
- The Haggadah or narrative of the Exodus is read. And the Four Questions are asked by the youngest: "On all other nights, we eat leavened bread; why on this night do we eat only unleavened bread? . . . why on this night do we eat only bitter herbs?  
. . . why on this night do we dip (food) twice? . . . why on this night do we recline?"
- The second cup of wine is drunk with a blessing.
- Then they all wash their hands, and the master of the feast recites a prayer over the unleavened bread.
- The bitter herbs (representing slavery) are dipped and eaten with the matzohs; more bitter herbs are dipped in charoset, a sweet fruit paste, representing the mortar that the Hebrews were forced to work with in Egypt.
- Then the meal itself is eaten.
- After the meal, the children search for the hidden afikoman -- the Seder can't end until it is eaten -- and when found, they insist it be ransomed back.
- The third cup of wine is poured out with a blessing and drunk, and one is poured for the prophet Elijah.
- Verses are recited from the Psalms and the Book of Lamentations; or remakes of popular songs are sung (such as Haggadah Wash That Man Right Out of My Hair, There's No Seder Like Our Seder, or Take Me Out To The Seder).
- The fourth cup of wine is poured and drunk, and the front door is opened for the prophet Elijah. When the children go to the front door, one of the adults present may drink the prophet's wine, trying to convince the kids "they just missed him."

Jews of the Diaspora (the exile from the Promised Land) have a formal Seder on the first two nights of the eight-day feast; those in Israel celebrate only on a single night.

And chametz, leavened bread products, are forbidden for the full eight days.

"It's a family time; a permanent part of my memory is singing songs with my cousins at the seders, growing up in Philadelphia," said Rabbi Moshe Saks of Calgary's Beth Tzedec Synagogue.

"We're a religion of history, and our past includes (passing on) the Torah.

"There's a midrash (biblical commentary) that every Jewish soul was present on Mount Sinai when the Torah was given. So we have a stake in the past as well as the present."

Further, Saks said, the past that brought the Jews into existence then lays its obligations upon them.

Professor Segal agrees.

"There are lots of occasions in the daily liturgy when we remember the Exodus from Egypt," Segal said.

"What's special about Passover is the special commandment to transmit that to the next generation."

#### A Crowded Table

The Passover or Pesach is observed with a Seder ("order"), a ceremonial meal involving readings, ceremonial foods, songs and drinks. The Seder table is a crowded one; in addition to the meal, wine and grape juice of the family, it holds a collection of symbols.

- The Haggadah (a "telling") is the collection of prayers, biblical texts and commentaries recounting the story of the Exodus from Egypt; it is the script for the Seder ritual.

- Elijah's Cup, an extra glass of wine, is filled and placed in the centre of the table in expectation of Elijah's visit; his reappearance will herald the coming of the Mossiach or Messiah.

- A Seder plate, in the centre of the table, holds a collection of foods, some eaten, some not, including:

- The Z'roah, a roasted shankbone, recalls the spotless lamb, one per family, whose blood was used in Egypt to mark the Israelites' doorposts, warding off the Angel of Death then visiting the first-born of the Egyptians; it also represents the sacrifices once offered in the Temple of Jerusalem.

- The Beitzah, a cooked egg, represents the burnt offerings the Israelites brought to the Temple before its destruction by Rome in the year 70; this was the start of the modern Diaspora. Like the shankbone, it is not eaten;

- Karpas, a green vegetable like parsley or onion, has a number of possible meanings, including Spring; it is eaten dipped in salt water;

- Maror is the "bitter herb," usually raw horseradish, that reminds Jews of the bitterness of slavery;

- Chazeret, the top and green sprouts of the horseradish root, is another bitter herb, not always included in Seders these days;

- Charoset, a sweet paste of chopped nuts, apples, wine, and cinnamon, represents the mortar the Hebrews were forced to use to build pharaohs' pyramids during their 400 years in Egypt; the wine represents the blood of the Israelites. Some of the bitter herbs are eaten, dipped in the charoset.

And beside the Seder plate sits:

- A bowl of salt water (used for dipping karpas, matzohs and hard-boiled eggs) represents the tears and sweat of the Israelites in bondage; it is also a sign of purification, like the Israelites passing through the Red Sea to the Promised Land.

- The matzoh -- unleavened bread -- replaces regular bread, since yeast-risen products are prohibited throughout Passover week; in their haste to escape Egypt, the Israelites had to pack unrisen bread to sustain their journey.

- The afikoman is a piece broken from the middle matzoh of three used for Seder rituals. It is hidden by the Seder leader to be eaten for dessert, and when it is found by the children, it must be "ransomed back." The afikoman recalls the promised Messiah.

### Illustration

Photo: Canadian Press / Culinary customs surrounding Passover are the most complex to prepare for Jewish holidays. Above is a typical Seder table. ; Photo: Calgary Herald / Rabbi Moshe Saks, second from left, and his family read the Haggadah as they prepare for the Passover Seder meal. ;

## DETAILS

<b>Publication title:</b>	Calgary Herald; Calgary, Alta.
<b>Pages:</b>	OS10
<b>Number of pages:</b>	0
<b>Publication year:</b>	2001
<b>Publication date:</b>	Apr 7, 2001
<b>Section:</b>	Religion
<b>Publisher:</b>	Postmedia Network Inc.
<b>Place of publication:</b>	Calgary, Alta.
<b>Country of publication:</b>	Canada
<b>Publication subject:</b>	General Interest Periodicals--Canada
<b>ISSN:</b>	08281815
<b>Source type:</b>	Newspaper

<b>Language of publication:</b>	English
<b>Document type:</b>	News
<b>ProQuest document ID:</b>	243623093
<b>Document URL:</b>	<a href="https://ezproxy.lib.ucalgary.ca/login?qurl=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.proquest.com%2Fnews-papers%2Fwhats-on-seder-table-ritual-feast-reminds-jews%2Fdocview%2F243623093%2Fse-2%3Faccountid%3D9838">https://ezproxy.lib.ucalgary.ca/login?qurl=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.proquest.com%2Fnews-papers%2Fwhats-on-seder-table-ritual-feast-reminds-jews%2Fdocview%2F243623093%2Fse-2%3Faccountid%3D9838</a>
<b>Copyright:</b>	Copyright Southam Publications Inc. Apr 7, 2001
<b>Last updated:</b>	2017-11-07
<b>Database:</b>	Canadian Newsstream Collection

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