

# Pesach

"A happy (or joyful) heart is good medicine" (Proverbs 17:22)

## Odd and Interesting Pesach Facts

**What's in a name? Pesach is known by several names, each having a particular significance:**

- **Chag ha-Matzot:** Festival of the Unleavened Bread (Shemot 23:15); this is the biblical name that commemorates the physical exodus from Egypt.
- **Chag ha-Pesach:** Festival of the Paschal Offering (Shemot 34:25); this name refers both to the paschal lamb and to God's "passing over" (*pasach*) or protecting the Hebrews' homes in Egypt during the ten plagues (Shemot 12:23).<sup>1</sup>



- **Chag ha-Aviv:** Festival of the Spring; this name reflects the fact that the festival occurs in the spring (in the northern hemisphere, obviously).
- **Zeman Heirutenu:** Season of our Freedom; according to the liturgy, Pesach marks the establishment of the children of Israel as a free and independent people.
- **"Crossing-feast":** This name was given by Philo, who traced the name to, as he claimed, "the crossing of Israel itself from Egypt... and no doubt also the crossing of the Reed Sea."<sup>2</sup> He apparently did not consider the verses in Shemot 12:23 and 27 that describe the passing over of the Israelites' dwellings by the destroying angel.

**Does your family have odd Pesach customs? Bet they aren't as strange or interesting as these:**

- **Hungary.** When the Hebrews were leaving Egypt, the Egyptians must have been pretty glad to see them go since they showered them with gold and silver as they fled (Shemot 12:35). Recalling these "gifts," Jews in Hungary decorated their seder tables with all of their valuable jewelry and silver. Call these the seders with bling.

Here's another one from Hungary. According to Jewish tradition, the Hebrews crossed the Sea of Reeds on the seventh night of Pesach. In commemoration of this miracle, after midnight of the seder (or on the seventh night of the holiday), some Chasidic Jews would reenact the drama of the crossing by taking a pitcher or bucket of water and dancing with it until the water spilled on the floor, and then dancing around or through the puddle, thus "crossing" this miniature "sea," and singing the *Song of the Sea*, "Then sang Moses...."<sup>3</sup> Unless you waterproof your floor, this is definitely not recommended as a seder activity!

- **U.S. Civil War, Greece, and Morocco.** Charoset, a mixture of apples, nuts, cinnamon, and wine (or other creative ingredients) is a seder symbol that commemorates the bricks that the Hebrew slaves were forced to make. During America's Civil War, Jewish Union soldiers at seders where the ingredients for charoset were not available, included a real brick on their seder plate. Even better: In 18th-century Salonika, people added crushed stone to their charoset, presumably to retain the link of the food to the use of the bricks it represents. This custom must have been popular because it was also followed by Jews in Morocco. For some reason the popularity of this custom has apparently waned. But if you plan to try it, first consider how you would explain what you did to your dentist.
- **Iran.** Are your guests feeling sleepy when you reach "Dayeinu" in your seder? Try this Iranian and Afgan

custom: When the singing reaches the ninth stanza, "If He had supplied our needs in the desert for forty years, and had not fed us the manna," guests whack each other with green onion stalks every time they sing the refrain "Dayeinu." What's this all about? According to Bamidbar 11:5-6, the Hebrews complained, "We remember the fish that we used to eat in Egypt, the cucumbers, the melons, the leeks, the *onions* and the garlic. Now our gullets are shriveled. There is nothing at all. Nothing but this manna to look at." Perhaps these seder participants are atoning for the Israelites' yearning for their old lives in Egypt.



- **Saharan desert.** A group of Jews known as the "heretics of Wargla," who lived for many hundreds of years in the forts or "ksurs" of the Sahara, celebrated Passover by leaving their homes and marching into the desert, thus commemorating the trek of the Israelites under the leadership of Moses.<sup>4</sup>
- **India.** Some current cultures have roots in ancient Judaism. The holiday called "Anasi Dhakacha San," "the holiday of the closing of the Anas" (an earthen jar containing sour liquid used as a sauce), was celebrated by ancestors of the present Bene Israel of India for eight days from the fourteenth of Nisan. During this period they abstained from the use of leaven, although they had forgotten the origin of the festival.<sup>5</sup>
- **Lithuania.** In the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research there is an announcement flyer, purported to have been issued in Vilna during World War I, which states: "On account of the hard times and the great dearth in which we are living, the rabbis have found it necessary to announce that the poor people who do not have the means to buy wine for the Four Cups can, according to the law, fulfill the duty of the Four Cups with sweet tea."<sup>6</sup>
- **Morocco.** In Morocco some Jews have the custom of eating heads of sheep at the first seder in commemoration of the paschal offering in the Temple. This custom gave rise to their name for the first seder: *Layl ar-rass*, "Night of the Heads."<sup>7</sup>
- **The Caucasus.** They light their homes with many candles in honor of the festival; women usually wear their best clothes but the young women and girls try to dress mostly in linen and braid flowers into their hair. Customarily many families will gather in the house of the *chakham*, or in the house of any man who knows enough Hebrew to explain the Haggadah in their language, and everyone brings food that they have prepared for their seder—a community pot-luck. Seated on the ground, as is the custom, they have their seder meal and listen as the learned man translates and interprets the *Haggadah*.



before Pesach, eating only beans and dried peas, and on *erev Pesach* they abstain from all food until after the paschal lamb has been sacrificed in the presence of the entire community, following precisely the ritual described in the Torah.

- **Safad, Israel.** Rabbi Isaiah Horowitz (1565-1630), to demonstrate his love for the *mitzvot* of matzot and maror, would kiss it at his seders.<sup>8</sup>
- **Afghanistan.** Jews from Afghanistan (also Iran and Bukharah) have the custom of preserving a piece of the afikoman as protection against the evil eye.
- **Libya and Tunisia.** The afikoman was carried by sea travelers as a protection against storms at sea.
- **Poland.** In the seventeenth century Jews would break a piece off of the afikoman and hang it on the wall. A story by the author David Frischmann (1859-1922), "Akhan Asher B'varsha," describes a Jewish boy in Warsaw who was so hungry that he ate the afikoman hanging on the wall.
- **Persia.** Some Jews would keep a piece of afikoman in their pocket as a charm for plenty and blessing.

- **Spain.** The Seder leader in fourteenth-century Spain, prior to reciting *ha lachma anya* ("This is the bread of affliction"), would walk around the seder table tapping the seder plate three times on each participant's head. With each person, the taps would get progressively harder. Some Sephardic Jews still practice this peculiar custom, which is intended to encourage children to ask more questions. Perhaps they do, if only to keep their own heads from being whacked!
- **Palestine, ca. 200 CE.** Keeping the children awake and engaged at the seder was always a challenge. In Chapter 10 of the Tosefta (a law code contemporaneous with the Mishnah), there are instructions for conducting the seder, which includes this very strange direction: "Rabbi Elazar said, [The adults] grab unleavened bread [from each other] for [the sake of] the child [to astonish him] so that he will not fall asleep."<sup>9</sup> The image of adults snatching matzoh from each other during the seder is an amusing one; children must have thought that the adults had surely taken leave of their senses, but they would certainly keep alert to watch for the next dumb thing the adults would do!

### Notes

1. Zeitlin, Solomon, "The Liturgy of the First Night of Passover," *Jewish Quarterly Review* 38/4 (April 1948).
2. Philo, English translation by F.H. Colson, Harvard Univ. Press, Cambridge, 1937, vol. 7.
3. Scheiber, Alexander, "Ikvoṭ Kramatizatziā be-Ṭekese ha-Pesah be-Hungaria," *Yeda-Am*, no. 7-8 (May 1951), p. 6.
4. Slouschz, Nahum, *Travels in North Africa*, Jewish Publication Society, 1927, pp. 345-346.
5. Kehimkar, Haem Samuel, *The History of the Bene Israel of India*, Tel Aviv, 1937, pp. 16-22.
6. National Archives and Records Service, Washington, DC.
7. Lubelsky, Mordecai, "At a Seder in Casablanca," *The Day-Jewish Journal*, April 1958.
8. Horowitz, Isaiah, *Shene Luhoth Haberith*, Safed, c. 1600.
9. Lieberman, Saul, *Tosefta ki-feshutta*, 10:9, Jewish Theological Seminary, 1955-88.

## Where in the traditional *Haggadah* are the "stars" of Pesach—Moses and Elijah? Look hard: they're not easy to find!

- **Moses.** Israel's greatest prophet, its first spiritual and secular leader, appears in the *Haggadah* only *once*—incidentally at that, in a quoted verse! (Hint: Look for Rabbi Jose the Galilean's calculation of the number of plagues.) Why doesn't Moses have a greater role in the seder? Some say this is to dramatize the power of God and the spiritual message of the *Haggadah* in describing how the Israelites were delivered from Egyptian bondage. God is intended to be the source of the miracle; Moses was only God's agent.
- **Elijah.** The Cup of Elijah is a prominent symbol of the seder, and the Prophet, messenger of consolation and salvation, is invited to enter the seder home. Children watch the cup intently to see any sign of Elijah's visit by looking for any change in its contents. But where is Elijah mentioned in the *Haggadah*? Only in the *Birkhat haMazon*, the Grace after the meal; and this prayer is not so special—it is said after meals every day of the year! However, even though Elijah has no special place in the *Haggadah*, he still has a place in Jews' prayers every day of the year.



## Whence those "Four Sons"? What's the origin of those four sons' questions?

Actually, they are straight from the Torah! The Rabbis embellished these questions by having them asked by four sons of differing character: "wise," "wicked," "simple," and "clueless" (my license). Look up the verses! It's all there.

- **"Wise" son:** "What are the testimonies, the statutes, and the laws, which the Lord our God has commanded you?" Relate the Passover story, and don't forget to mention the afikomen. (Devarim 6:20-25)

- **"Wicked" son:** "What is this service to you?" "... It is the sacrifice of God's passover, for that He passed over the houses of the children of Israel in Egypt, when He smote the Egyptians, and delivered our houses." (Shemot 12:26-27)
- **"Simple" son:** "What is this?" "By strength of hand the Lord brought us out from Egypt, from the house of bondage." (Shemot 13:14)
- **"Clueless" son:** "?" "It is because of that which the Lord did for me when I came forth out of Egypt." Here the answer to the son is to an unasked question. (Shemot 13:8)

## There are *Two Pesachs*? Oy, vey!

Yes, the Torah provides for a second Pesach for those who were unable to offer the Pesach sacrifice on 14 Nisan (Num. 9:9-14). Why did this "second chance" exist? Offering the Pesach sacrifice was so important that an alternative date was needed to give those who might have not been able to get to the Temple in time, or those who were in a state of ritual impurity, another opportunity to satisfy this obligation. Called *Pesach Sheni*, "Second Pesach," it occurs one month later on 14 Iyar. Some people still observe *Pesach Sheni* by eating a piece of matzoh. Luckily, though, there is no Pesach *kashrut* requirement for this date!



## So What is the Afikoman, Really?

One of the symbols of the seder is the stack of three ceremonial matzoh that is placed on the table near the seder leader. Close to the beginning of the seder, the center piece of matzoh is broken in half. One of these pieces of the middle matzoh is called the *afikoman*, which is eaten at the conclusion of the meal. The afikoman is first mentioned in the Mishnah: *V'af atta emor-lo ke'hilkhot ha-pesach, ein maftirin achar ha-pesach afikoman* (J.T. *Pesachim* 10:8). This directive is also mentioned in the *Haggadah* in the answer to the wise son's question. The traditional translation of this passage is "Explain to him the laws of Pesach: no dessert may be eaten after the Pesach sacrifice." But that's only an approximation of the Hebrew meaning. Exactly what does this passage *really* mean? If you look at a number of different *Haggadot*, you will find this verse translated differently in each one, since any translation is essentially an exercise in interpretation. To illustrate just how different some translations of this passage are, consider the following from one of my *Haggadot*: "One does not break up the Passover ceremony by announcing, 'To the aftermeal entertainment!'" But the essential sense of the passage is that after some point in the seder there is to be no "afikomen."



To explain: Looking at the Hebrew passage, the first phrase means something like "Teach him the laws of the *pesach*." In the next phrase, the words *ein maftirin* can mean either "at the conclusion, you must not..." or "at the conclusion, it is not customary to..." And *achar ha-pesach* can refer to "after eating the *korban pesach*," or "after the festal meal," or even "after the seder ceremony is over." Finally, then, whichever is correct, we must not proceed to whatever "afikomen" represents. It is obvious from this statement that the "afikoman" is something not to be had or done on the seder night

Various explanations have been given for the negative connotation of the *afikoman*; the rabbis of the Talmud and later periods had differing opinions, but these differences can be grouped into two schools of thought. The first considered that the forbidden afikoman refers to various kinds of food. Both the Babylonian and Palestinian Talmuds explained it as "varieties of sweets" or other types of delicacies (B.T. *Pesachim* 119b, J.T. *Pesachim* 10:8), while the Tosefta defined the afikoman as consisting of "nuts, dates, and roasted cakes" (Tosefta *Pesachim* 10, 11).

The second group viewed the afikoman as some sort of social or cultural activity. The word is almost certainly derived from the Greek *epikomios*, meaning "festal procession after the meal." Thus the interpretation of this

group of rabbis, who were under the influence of Grecian culture where pagan partying (i.e., the symposia) was common, was that this meant going off after your own festive dinner to another home, invitation notwithstanding, and continuing to party there (J.T. *Pesachim* 10:9), a custom of the times which the rabbis tried to abolish among the Jews.

The second viewpoint was the one that achieved primacy, and the admonition that became recorded in the *Haggadah* that "One should not have any afikoman after the paschal sacrifice" refers to engaging in post-seder house-hopping parties, but modern practice has evolved to embrace the position of the first group: that nothing should be eaten after the afikomen.

The evolution into the current afikoman custom derives from the Talmudic halakhic discussion about the meaning of not eating anything after tasting the paschal sacrifice since, after the destruction of the Temple, the Passover sacrifice was no longer performed. The idea of not eating anything else after eating the sacrifice presumably was to ensure that the taste would remain with the individual; thus the idea arose that the matzoh could be viewed as a substitute for the sacrifice and the individual eating matzoh as the afikoman would have its taste remaining afterwards. (*Talmud Bavli with Halakhah Berurah*, Birur Halakhah p. 146, Jerusalem 1985).

An engaging interpretation of the word *afikoman* may be found in the Yemenite *Haggadah*, which gives it an acrostic construction. Building acrostics of prayers and other texts was a favorite activity of Jewish scholars and poets.

Nuts	אגוזים
Fruits	פירות
Wine	יין
Roasted things and meat	קליות ובשר
Water	מים
Spikenard	נרדים

In this interpretation, all these foods (and other foods too) may not be eaten after the afikoman.

Sources: *The Passover Anthology* (P. Goodman, JPS, 1961), the Web, and sources cited



### Top Ten Signs Your Seder is too Big

10. You can't find anywhere out of sight to hide the afikoman.
9. To recline at the table, everyone has to do it in unison.
8. You have to sketch your living room/dining room on graph paper first.
7. You have to use a microscope to divvy up the *knaidelach*.
6. When you rotate verses of "*Echad Mi Yodea?*" someone ends up singing, "Who knows 39?"
5. You start looking at ads for closed circuit TVs and auxiliary speakers.
4. While waiting for everyone to wash their hands the second time, the matzoh rises.
3. Even the kids complain that they do not have enough maror.
2. When you read the list of the Ten Plagues, the word "locusts" really rings a bell.  
*And the number one way you know your seder is too big...*
1. When Elijah shows up, you have to give him his wine "to go."

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