

A Summarization of Passover Traditions

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The Spring festivals of Passover and Unleavened Bread are an extremely important time of observance and reflection in Jewish communities all over the world. It is a time of both communal and family fellowship, where one often observes the Passover meal with a congregation or synagogue, in addition to extended family. This is the time when the Jewish people commemorate *zeman heruteinu* or the "Season of our freedom." Every morning Exodus 20:2 is to be remembered, which admonishes, "I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery" (NASU). Even though non-Jewish Believers, who were not raised in the Synagogue or necessarily exposed to Passover since their youth, can feel separated during this time of traditional observance, Passover has a message to all peoples, as it presents the God of Israel as the God of Freedom, interested in releasing all human beings from injustice.¹

Certainly, when Believers in Messiah Yeshua sit down to partake of the Passover meal, we are not just remembering the Exodus of the Ancient Israelites and the plagues that God dispensed upon the Egyptians. We are sitting down to remember great events in the salvation history of the world. The primary event we remember is the slaying of the Passover lamb, God's mercy toward His people in Egyptian bondage, and how He led them to freedom through the Red Sea. This is a heritage that all those who follow the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob partake of, as the Apostle Paul writes, "For I do not want you to be unaware, brethren, that our fathers were all under the cloud and all passed through the sea" (1 Corinthians 10:1, NASU).

¹ J.H. Hertz, ed., *Pentateuch & Haftorahs* (London: Soncino Press, 1960), 295.

Messianic Spring Holiday Helper

But Passover takes on an all new depth and dimension for us when we understand that Yeshua and His Disciples partook of the *seder* meal prior to His arrest and execution. And of course, the elements of the Passover typify His redemptive sacrifice for us. But how did Yeshua actually observe Passover? Biblically speaking, there are only two principal elements of the Passover meal: the lamb (Leviticus 23:5; Numbers 28:16) and *matzah* or unleavened bread (Leviticus 23:6; Numbers 28:17). Of course, by the First Century C.E. some distinct traditions regarding Passover had advanced, which found their way onto the *seder* plate of Yeshua. Certainly since then, as the Second Temple was destroyed and as the Jewish people have been dispersed all over the world, new traditions have developed in the new places where many found themselves. As Messianic Believers, what place are these traditions to have in our Passover observance? How important is it for us to understand some of them, so that we might be enriched and encouraged?

The Search for Leaven

The observance of Passover often begins several days before the day of Passover with a search for leavened items in one's home that are to be removed. Exodus 12:19-20 specifies, "Seven days there shall be no leaven found in your houses; for whoever eats what is leavened, that person shall be cut off from the congregation of Israel, whether *he is* an alien or a native of the land. You shall not eat anything leavened; in all your dwellings you shall eat unleavened bread" (NASU). The eating of unleavened items is a memorial to the Exodus, where the Israelites had to eat *matzah* because not enough time was available to allow bread to rise (Exodus 12:34). The possession of *chametz* or leaven² in one's home is forbidden, although various traditions have arisen to account for how this is to be observed. Some of these traditions bear in mind how sanitization has changed since the time of the Exodus.

An educational custom that has developed in the Jewish community is *bedikat chametz* or the "search for leaven." The Mishnah specifies "On the night preceding the fourteenth [of Nisan] they seek out leaven by the light of a candle" (m.*Pesachim* 1:1).³ It dates back to Second Temple times as an activity often to participate in with small children. While most of the leaven in one's house has already been removed, parents will often hide pieces of bread or leavened items for the children to find. The search for leavened items in ancient times often was undertaken with the use of a candle, feather, and

² Also known in the Hebrew Scriptures as *seor*; in the Greek Septuagint and Apostolic Scriptures as *zumē*.

³ Jacob Neusner, trans., *The Mishnah: A New Translation* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1988), 229.

A Summarization of Passover Traditions

wooden spoon, even though a flashlight is often substituted today for safety. Customarily, after the leaven is gathered, it is either thrown out or burned in a fire. In more modern times, it is witnessed in some homes that various cupboards and pantries are simply sealed with tape until the week of Passover and Unleavened Bread are over.⁴

In Jewish thought, the presence of leaven is often likened to the presence of sin in one's life or household, and has also been seen in Rabbinical thought as representing the evil inclination.⁵ Rabbinical tradition regards leaven as sin, because just as the presence of yeast can cause fermentation to occur in dough, so can the presence of sin in one's heart cause one to puff up and become prideful, haughty, and arrogant. The Talmud explains this further:

"And when R. Alexandri had finished saying his Prayer, this is what he said: Lord of the ages, it is perfectly obvious to you that our will is to do your will. But what prevents it? It is the leaven in the dough, the subjugation to the pagan kingdoms. May it be pleasing before you, O Lord our God, to save us from their power so that we may return to carry out the rules that please you with a whole heart" (b.*Berachot* 17a).⁶

This concurs precisely with what the Apostle Paul writes the Galatians, *prior to the composition of the Talmud*, in his reflection of their "Torah observance" with improper intentions: "A little yeast leavens the whole batch of dough" (Galatians 5:9, NRSV). In his admonitions to the Corinthians, he emphasizes that when one observes Passover, a person must strive to eliminate sin—represented by leaven—because Yeshua has come to remove the leaven from us by His sacrifice:

"Clean out the old leaven so that you may be a new lump, just as you are *in fact* unleavened. For Messiah our Passover also has been sacrificed. Therefore let us celebrate the feast, not with old leaven, nor with the leaven of malice and wickedness, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth" (1 Corinthians 5:7-8, NASU).

Even though diligent searches are often made for leaven in Jewish homes during Passover, certain practices have arisen in various communities that may be considered questionable by some. One occurrence, in particular, is the practice of selling leaven to a Gentile through an intermediary such as a rabbi. A person or family may collect all leavened items from one's house and then sell it, for a limited time, to a non-Jew, only to buy it back when Passover is completed. But before you condemn this as being an outright circumvention

⁴ Marlena Spieler, *Jewish Cooking: The Traditions, Techniques, Ingredients, and Recipes* (London: Hermes House, 2003), 31.

⁵ Ronald L. Eisenberg, *The JPS Guide to Jewish Traditions* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2004), 269.

⁶ *The Babylonian Talmud: A Translation and Commentary*. MS Windows XP. Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2005. CD-ROM.

Messianic Spring Holiday Helper

of the Torah, the custom of selling leaven to Gentiles before Passover was originally intended to be an alternative practice, when such items could not be given to the poor (b.*Pesachim* 13a). Originally, leavened items were to be given to the poor outside the community of Israel, and if not given, could be sold, but subsequent later generations interpreted these rulings as allowing for a temporary sale.

Of course, the ramifications for us today regard what we are to do when we remove the leavened items from our homes as Messianic Believers. Are we simply to throw them all away, assuming that we do not eat them several weeks before Passover? Or, are there needy people or food banks that we could donate these items to?

The Seder Centerpiece

The principal elements of observing Passover by far are found on the *seder* plate. The Hebrew word *seder* literally means "order," as the story of Passover and its significance is recalled. In the Book of Exodus, only two specific commands are given regarding the *seder*. It is first stated to eat *matzah* or unleavened bread for a period of seven days: "In the first *month*, on the fourteenth day of the month at evening, you shall eat unleavened bread, until the twenty-first day of the month at evening" (Exodus 12:18, NASU). Secondly, the events that have taken place leading up to this observance are to be recounted: "You shall tell your son on that day, saying, 'It is because of what the LORD did for me when I came out of Egypt'" (Exodus 13:8, NASU).

Additional Rabbinical injunctions, most of which were probably present during the time of Yeshua, add the elements of drinking four cups of wine (b.*Pesachim* 99b), eating *maror* or bitter herbs (b.*Pesachim* 116b), and finally reciting praise or *hallel* at various times during the meal (b.*Pesachim* 117b).

We see these various elements present in the Passover *seder* of Yeshua, although perhaps not as refined as they are today in the Jewish community. Yeshua and His Disciples drink wine at their *seder* (Matthew 26:27), they would have partaken of the bitter herbs as did the rest of the Jews of the time, and they sang a designated praise after their meal (Matthew 26:30; Mark 14:26). We see these same things present in the *seder* services throughout the Messianic community today, as Messianic Judaism has largely adapted these traditions, and new traditions that have been added since the First Century, and re-interpreted them in a Yeshua-oriented light.

There are some major symbols of Passover that are present on *seder* plates all throughout the Jewish community. The first of these is the *zeroa* or shankbone of a lamb. The Hebrew term *zeroa* has a variety of meanings,

A Summarization of Passover Traditions

including, “**arm, shoulder, strength**” (*BDB*).⁷ The Talmud rules, “R. Joseph says, ‘There have to be two kinds of meat, one in memory of the Passover-offering, the other in memory of the festal-offering.’ *Rabina said, ‘Even a bone and its broth’*” (*b.Pesachim* 114b).⁸ The shankbone is placed on the *seder* plate in memory of the Lord’s decree that “I will also redeem you with an outstretched arm and with great judgments” (Exodus 6:6, NASU). The Hebrew for “outstretched arm” is *zeroa netuyah*.

It is notable that there are divergent practices among the Sephardic and Ashkenazic Jewish communities as it relates to Passover and whether or not lamb is allowed to be eaten. Ashkenazic Jewry (Northern, Central, and Eastern European) does not eat lamb at Passover. This is based on the Biblical command, “You are not allowed to sacrifice the Passover in any of your towns which the LORD your God is giving you; but at the place where the LORD your God chooses to establish His name, you shall sacrifice the Passover in the evening at sunset, at the time that you came out of Egypt” (Deuteronomy 16:5-6, NASU). Because this is a clear reference to the Temple in Jerusalem, and since the Temple has been destroyed, Ashkenazic Jewish *halachah* prohibits the consumption of lamb as an entrée at Passover, and instead allows for poultry. Sephardic Jewry (Spain, North Africa, and Arab lands) does permit lamb to be eaten as a Passover entrée, as a memorial to the Exodus. Messianic Jewish practice is often divided as to whether or not someone was raised Ashkenazic or Sephardic.

Other objects placed upon the *seder* plate include *karpas*, a fresh green vegetable, typically parsley. Often dipped in salt water early in the Passover meal, it is to symbolize the new life that came forth from the tears of the Ancient Israelites (*b.Pesachim* 114a). *Charoset* is a paste of chopped fruit, nuts, wine, and spices (with many variant recipes), symbolizing the mortar that was used by the Ancient Israelites to make bricks. The *beitzah* or roasted egg is often believed to symbolize the hardness of Pharaoh’s heart.

In the *seder* service itself, a common practice is for all the participants to wash their hands, indicating that one has eliminated impurities (*b.Pesachim* 115a). Throughout the meal, the *magid* is a recitation of the events of the Exodus, and in some Jewish communities the *seder* plate is lifted up to reveal the *matzah* hiding underneath. In Second Temple times, what would become known as the *Rabban Gamaliel Hayah Omeir* or “Rabban Gamaliel would say,” was a required act where the three main elements of the *seder* would be explained: the Passover sacrifice, the unleavened bread, and the bitter herbs (*m.Pesachim* 10:5). Of course, what is notable about this instruction, is that it

⁷ Francis Brown, S.R. Driver, and Charles A. Briggs, *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979), 283.

⁸ *The Babylonian Talmud: A Translation and Commentary*.

Messianic Spring Holiday Helper

was delivered by the principal teacher of the Apostle Paul (Acts 22:3). Certainly, in any Messianic teaching on Passover, we need not overlook these three things.

Wine (Heb. *yayin*) is a major element during the *seder* meal, obviously as it is to symbolize the blood of the Passover lamb. In the Passover traditions of Second Temple times, four cups of wine were to be consumed by participants in the meal (m.*Pesachim* 10:1). There are a variety of views in the Jewish community as to what these cups mean. The Midrash holds to the principal view among the Rabbis (*Exodus Rabbah* 6:4), which is that they represent four different expressions of God's deliverance used in the Exodus: (1) removal from burden, (2) deliverance from bondage, (3) redemption, (4) restoration. These are derived from Exodus 6:6-7, where the Lord tells Israel He will remove them from Egypt, and fulfill His promises to their ancestors:

"Say, therefore, to the sons of Israel, 'I am the LORD, and I will bring you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians, and I will deliver you from their bondage. I will also redeem you with an outstretched arm and with great judgments. Then I will take you for My people, and I will be your God; and you shall know that I am the LORD your God, who brought you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians'" (NASU).

There are some other views of what the four cups of wine at Passover represent, including the four times that Pharaoh's cup is mentioned in the story of the butler, who brought Joseph before him to accurately interpret his dreams (Genesis 40:11, 13). Another view is that they represent the four kingdoms (Babylon, Persia, Greece, and Rome) that oppressed Israel. An additional interpretation is that they represent four worlds: this world, the days of the Messiah, the revival of the dead, and the world to come. One common practice during the *seder* is to drip drops of wine onto one's plate to remember the ten plagues that God delivered upon Egypt (Exodus 7:14-11:10; 12:29-33).

In more modern traditions, a fifth cup of wine has been added called the Cup of Elijah, who is to come and herald the Messianic Age (cf. Malachi 4:5). Messianic Believers sometimes will include the Cup of Elijah, as it is believed that Elijah or a type of Elijah will be one of the Two Witnesses of Revelation, but is not always included as others think that the typology has been completely fulfilled by John the Baptist (cf. Matthew 17:10-13; Mark 9:11-13).

In the specific *halachah* pertaining to the wine and Passover *seder*, red wine is preferred as it mimics the appearance of blood (b.*Pesachim* 108b). However, white wine is not prohibited as some Jewish communities in Europe had various "blood" accusations levied against them during the Middle Ages, and found it easier to use white wine for the *seder* meal.

In the *seder* meal, it is also not uncommon to consume the *korech*, a sandwich that is made of *matzah* and *moror*, in observance of Numbers 9:11:

A Summarization of Passover Traditions

"In the second month on the fourteenth day at twilight, they shall observe it; they shall eat it with unleavened bread and bitter herbs" (NASU). This practice was instituted by Rabbi Hillel (b.*Pesachim* 115a), who pre-dated Yeshua the Messiah, perhaps making it a common institution in Second Temple times (and hence the common nomenclature for it, the "Hillel sandwich"). The Apostle Paul certainly would have been trained to partake of the *korech* in his Rabbinical training by Gamaliel, who was Hillel's grandson.

It is notable that three pieces of *matzah* are placed on the *seder* table and are present throughout the entire meal. What these three pieces represent has been interpreted differently in the Jewish community as possibly representing the three divisions of Israel (*cohen*/priest, Levite, Israelite), the three Patriarchs (Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob), and the "three measures of fine flour" (Genesis 18:6, NASU) used by Sarah to make cakes for the three Divine visitors (Genesis 18:6), who according to tradition came on what would become the night of Passover.

Messianic views surrounding what the three *matzot* mean often concur with the third view, and are commonly reinterpreted as representing the Divine manifestations of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit in the Godhead. In some Jewish communities today, however, a fourth piece of *matzah* has been added, sometimes representing Jewish communities who live oppressed, with difficulty to observe their faith.⁹ At the beginning of the *seder* meal, the leader is to take the middle *matzah* and break it in two. Half of this broken *matzah* is hidden and it becomes the *afikoman*. In the Messianic community, this has been interpreted as representing Yeshua's death, burial, and resurrection for us, as the *afikoman* is to come forth at the end of the meal. It is thought that at the end of the meal, Yeshua held up the *afikoman* and said "This is My body."

The most important aspect of Passover as emphasized in the Jewish tradition is stated in the Mishnah. It is the belief that "In every generation a person is duty-bound to regard himself as if he personally has gone forth from Egypt. . .therefore we are duty-bound to thank, praise, glorify, honor, exalt, extol, and bless him who did for our forefathers and for us all these miracles. He brought us forth from slavery to freedom, anguish to joy, mourning to festival, darkness to great light, subjugation to redemption, so we should say before him, Hallelujah" (m.*Pesachim* 10:5).¹⁰ When you celebrate Passover, personalize what you are remembering not only for what it means to be delivered from Egypt, but what it means to be delivered from the bondage of sin to the freedom you now experience in the Lord Yeshua.

⁹ Eisenberg, 285.

¹⁰ Neusner, *Mishnah*, 250.

The Haggadah

Each person partaking of the *seder* meal is often given his or her own *haggadah*, or order of service, to follow, based on the command of Exodus 13:8 for parents to tell their children about Israel's deliverance from Egypt. Between the first Passover in Egypt to the Passovers kept in the Land of Israel, coupled with the division and dispersion of Israel, and later with a vast Diaspora Jewish community by the time of Yeshua, the celebration of Passover advanced substantially. By the time of Yeshua, the specific order of service for Passover became codified in the Haggadah of Passover, first referred to in the Mishnah. This was focused around a midrashic interpretation of Deuteronomy 26:5-9, which allowed for one to recline and remember the mighty deeds God performed before the Egyptians in delivering Israel:

"You shall answer and say before the LORD your God, 'My father was a wandering Aramean, and he went down to Egypt and sojourned there, few in number; but there he became a great, mighty and populous nation. And the Egyptians treated us harshly and afflicted us, and imposed hard labor on us. Then we cried to the LORD, the God of our fathers, and the LORD heard our voice and saw our affliction and our toil and our oppression; and the LORD brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm and with great terror and with signs and wonders; and He has brought us to this place and has given us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey'" (NASU).

We see elements of the traditional Jewish Passover of the First Century included in Yeshua's Last Supper, and some slight deviations. In the Mishnah (m.*Pesachim* 10), the main substance of the Passover *seder* is focused around the unleavened bread or *matzah*, bitter herbs, and the lamb. It is accompanied by customary Hallel psalms (Psalms 115-118), and a retelling of the Passover story in Exodus. (And in post-Second Temple history, more liturgical additions have been made.)¹¹

Today, we obviously see a wide variation of Passover customs and traditions present in the Jewish community and in Messianic Judaism. There are significant variations between Sephardic and Ashkenazic Jews, as well as between Orthodox, Conservative, and Reform (or Progressive) Judaism. The Passover *haggadah* is something that has been adapted and changed by each denomination of Judaism, as some *haggadahs* include an all-night service, where one stays awake and focuses on certain Scriptures, to those that are only focused around a meal at one's home with family and close friends. There are traditions present in Passover today that are unique to the lands where the Jewish people have been scattered. Messianic Judaism has adapted many

¹¹ Jacob Neusner and William Scott Green, eds., *Dictionary of Judaism in the Biblical Period* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2002), pp 266-267.

of these traditions to form its own Passover *haggadahs*, which demonstrate how we are to rejoice in God delivering Israel from Egypt, and Yeshua delivering us from the bondage of sin.¹²

The Four Questions

A significant part of the *seder* that dates back to Second Temple times (m.*Pesachim* 10:4) is the recitation of the four questions, all asked with the Hebrew phrase *mah nishtanah*, "What is different?" While these questions are customarily asked by small children today or the youngest participant in the *seder*, originally they were probably asked by the leader of the *seder*, in order for the adults to contemplate throughout the service. There are some varied Ashkenazic and Sephardic rituals observed when these four questions are asked. The Ashkenazic order of these questions is the more common one practiced in American Jewry, and consequently also the Messianic movement. Each one of these questions focuses around the *seder* meal and its uniqueness:

1. On all other nights we may eat *chametz* and *matzah*, but on this night, only *matzah*?
2. On all other nights we eat many vegetables, but on this night, we eat bitter herbs?
3. On all other nights we do not dip even once, but on this night, twice?
4. On all other nights we eat either sitting or reclining, but on this night, we all recline?

In the Sephardic tradition, the order followed is: dipping, unleavened bread, bitter herbs, and then reclining.¹³ Regardless of how these four questions are ordered, they have developed as a way of instructing children to reflect on the significance of Passover. What is notable, is that as these four questions are asked, participants in the *seder* meal are to customarily recline, even though at the first Passover the Israelites were to eat with their loins girded and in haste (Exodus 12:11), as reclining is a symbol of freedom.¹⁴ Those who are in slavery do not have the luxury of reclining at the table as being free from bondage. This is a custom that the Messiah Himself practiced, as the Gospels attest, "Yeshua was reclining *at the table* with the twelve disciples" (Matthew 26:20; NASU; cf. Mark 14:18; Luke 24:30) during His Last Supper Passover observance.

¹² Barry and Steffi Rubin, *The Messianic Passover Haggadah* Rubin (Baltimore: Lederer, 1996), is perhaps the most widely employed *Haggadah* in today's Messianic Judaism, although many individual Messianic congregations have produced their own *haggadah*.

¹³ Eisenberg, 278.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

Miscellaneous Traditions

There are some miscellaneous traditions that also exist in the Jewish community, but are not practiced by all during the Passover season. Those who hold to an allegorical interpretation of the Song of Songs will often meditate on this text as it is perceived as being a “love story” between God and Israel.¹⁵ The *dayenu* song of “it is enough” is commonly sung at most Passover *seders*, recounting in musical form the hardships of the Israelites and the thankfulness that we are to have for God delivering His people from bondage.¹⁶ Finally, almost all *seders* would be incomplete without the *nirtzah* prayer, a concluding plea to God to send the Messiah so that all in the Jewish community might be able to celebrate it in Jerusalem next year.¹⁷

Of these three final traditions, the most significant for us as Messianic Believers is the prayer for the Messiah to come soon. Unlike most in the Jewish community, we know that the Messiah has come in the Person of the Lord Yeshua. He observed Passover with His Disciples the evening He was betrayed, only to later be tried as a common criminal and executed upon a Roman cross. Yeshua in His death became our Passover Lamb, slain for the sins of the entire world. As He said on that evening almost 2,000 years ago, “But I tell you, from this moment I will not drink of this fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it in a new way in My Father's kingdom with you” (Matthew 26:29, HCSB; cf. Mark 14:25; Luke 22:18). We are still awaiting to find out what that “new way” actually is.

Between now and then, as the emerging Messianic movement grows and expands, many questions will be asked about how we are to observe Passover, what traditions we should incorporate into our celebration, whether or not Ashkenazic or Sephardic *halachah* is best for us, and of course many unforeseen things that we can presently only speculate about. There will be variance in the Messianic community and among Messianic brothers and sisters about how Passover is to be observed. There are many Jewish customs and traditions that are edifying to the Body of Messiah that ministries like ours believe should not be ignored, and have been integrated into our commemoration.

Just like every Jewish family or community has developed its own Passover customs, in the many diverse lands to which the Jewish people have

¹⁵ Traditional Christian exegesis of Song of Songs similarly regards it as a “love story” between “Christ and His church.” Any allegorized love story between God and His people is something which tends to be rejected in modern Jewish and Christian scholarship, which instead widely views it as being ancient love poetry, and somewhat erotic at that.

¹⁶ Joseph Tabory, *JPS Commentary on the Haggadah* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2008), pp 97-98.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, pp 122-135.

A Summarization of Passover Traditions

been spread, do not hesitate to develop some of your own traditions, recipes, or customs if you are not Jewish. If you do this, however, recognize the freedom that others have to adopt an Ashkenazic-style or Sephardic-style *halachah*. More than anything else, whatever you do, do it to the glory of the Lord, and let Him be the focus of your observance. Remember the Last Supper He conducted with His Disciples, and in your partaking of the Passover meal, do it to His glory!