

Leavening Agents

How can I determine what is, and what is not, kosher for the Passover season?

One of the major Biblical injunctions concerning Passover is to eat unleavened bread for seven days, remembering the bread of haste that the Ancient Israelites had to eat as they left Egypt (Deuteronomy 16:3). By extension, not only does the command pertain to eating unleavened bread, but it is a week-long prohibition against eating anything with leavening agents. This has been interpreted and applied in different ways, with some divergent *halachah*, in the Jewish community over the centuries.

The Talmud, for example, specifically rules that there are five types of grain that can be used for the production of *matzah* or unleavened bread: wheat, barley, oats, rye, and spelt (b.*Pesachim* 35a), and notably the list does not include rice and millet. Ashkenazic authorities would later extend the list of forbidden grains to include “legumes” such as beans, peas, corn, lentils, buckwheat, and sometimes peanuts. The prohibition exists because of the belief that flour made from these substances could be easily confused with leavened flour. It is notable that the addition of legumes comes largely from Medieval European Jewry, having made contact with the New World, and debates over what grains are “kosher for Passover” do not come from the First Century. In more modern times, various segments of Orthodox Ashkenazic Jewry have liberalized their stance on whether or not rice, beans, or corn can be eaten at Passover, as prohibitions against eating these things were largely given for a different time. Of course, this has not stopped many Ashkenazics from other branches of Judaism from eating “legumes” during the season of Passover.

Generally, Jewish *halachah* in both the Ashkenazic and Sephardic communities permits *matzah* to be mixed with grape juice, oil, or egg for the young and infirm. Egg *matzos* for Passover are *not intended* to be eaten by everyone during this time, although if one is confused, consulting one’s rabbi is recommended.

Much of the confusion surrounding what is “kosher for Passover” in the Messianic community comes from Jewish Believers who were raised in nominally observant or relatively liberal homes. It also comes from non-Jewish Believers who were not raised in the Synagogue (or possibly even adjacent to any sizeable Jewish community), and hence are not familiar with many of the customs and traditions surrounding this holiday. In significant parts of the Jewish community, it is not uncommon for most homes to have a special set of dishes just to be used for Passover and Unleavened Bread. In some sects, kosher for Passover toothpaste, bottled drinking water, Coca-Cola, and even toilet paper are available. When some people see all of the Rabbinical injunctions, they easily get confused, even though they do not need to be.

The commandment regarding unleavened bread in the Scriptures pertains to eating and one’s daily consumption. Obviously, any kind of bread or cereal that has yeast cannot be eaten. Various kinds of alcohol that have been produced with yeast (i.e., beer) cannot be consumed. This does not necessarily mean that one has to buy “kosher for Passover” cheese, because the cows who provided milk for the cheese ate corn for their diet. Most of the questionable items pertain to things that one would normally eat with bread, and you should check to see if there is a kosher for Passover section at your supermarket.

This should give you a good idea about what you can eat. You may also want to consult a Jewish cookbook that will have many kosher for Passover recipes. More than anything else, we would urge you not to feel condemned if you make a few mistakes in an effort to be kosher during Passover. God’s grace covers our sins, our “leaven,” and when we find that we do make mistakes, we try to quickly rectify them.