

I'm making my shopping list for Pesach.

We are celebrating something that happened nearly 3000 years ago. The Bible tells the story of how God told Moses, whom Jews think of as the greatest of all prophets, to lead the Children of Israel out of the land of Egypt where they had been slaves to a Pharaoh, who had forced them, under harsh and cruel conditions, to build cities and temples. With the power of God behind him, says the Bible, Moses led them out of slavery to eventual freedom in a land of their own.

Wine, matzo, parsley, horseradish, eggs, walnuts, apple. Let me explain ...

Wine - No Jewish celebration is complete without it. At almost every celebration we say blessings to God and share wine and bread ...

But at Pesach we have no bread. Instead - Matzo. Making bread takes time - the dough needs to have several hours to rise (or leaven) so that the bread becomes light and airy. Leaving Egypt was a bit of a rush job - no time for the dough to rise - so flat crisp unleavened bread. In memory during Pesach we eat no leavened bread - only matzo.

The word seder means order and the seder is a ritual where everything has to be done just right and in the right order. Special prayers are said and special foods are eaten. There is a special book which we use which tells us what to do and when to do it. The book is called the Haggadah, which means The Telling because an important part of the evening is to tell the story of the escape from Egypt. Although the seder may vary slightly in different families and in different countries the ritual has changed very little for hundreds of years. This Haggadah was given to me when I was 13. This Haggadah belongs to my son, Ben. It is a facsimile copy of one which was hand written about 500 years ago. Most of the prayers in it are the same as those in a modern haggadah.

One of the first things in the seder, after the blessing and sharing of wine, which we call Kiddush is that we thank God for the good things which the Earth provides for us to eat. And as a representative sample we eat a little of something green which has a strong but pleasant flavour. Most families use parsley, which we dip into salt water, to remind of the salt tears which our ancestors cried when they were slaves. In our family we also have a piece of boiled potato - it makes us less hungry while we wait for dinner.

Then the youngest child present asks a series of questions - beginning with a question that every Jewish child knows - Why is this night different from all other nights? Why do we eat matzo? Why do we eat bitter herbs?

The questions are answered and the answer begins with the words avodim hayinu l'pharo b'mitzrayim - We were slaves to Pharaoh in Egypt. (Not our ancestors were slaves but WE were slaves - because if they had not been rescued we would still be slaves).

In fact we don't actually tell the whole story of Moses and the escape from Egypt but we remind ourselves of it. The matzo is a reminder of the hurried flight from Egypt. The salt water reminds us of the tears our ancestors shed (and we might have shed). With the nuts and apple we make a sweet, nutty paste called Charoset which looks a little like cement and reminds us of the building work that the slaves did. We eat it with a little horseradish which is very bitter - the bitterness of slavery.

Eggs represent new life but we eat them hard boiled in a dish of salt water (quite weak) and there are the tears again.

Once the telling is out of the way we can settle down to a good meal. But before we do a small piece of matzo is hidden away. We call it the Afikomen. Any children present to find it and hide it again where the adults cannot find it. - we shall be having chicken soup with kneidlach (little dumplings made out of crushed matzo) - My dad makes the best chicken soup and kneidlach in the world!! For our main course this year we shall be having salmon. and for sweet - that will be a bit of a surprise because our guest will bring that.

After dinner we'll say Grace. During grace there is one special moment when a large cup of wine is filled right up to the very top and the front door is opened. This is another job for the youngest child and I can tell you, it is quite scary standing at the open door on a dark night while everyone else is inside. This cup of wine is called Elijah's Cup. The door is opened to welcome the prophet Elijah should he come to announce the messiah. It is also a sign of welcome to any stranger.

We finish the meal by sharing the Afikomen (If it has been captured it must be released from its slavery by the paying of a fine) and the traditional wish "Next Year In Jerusalem". We'll complete the evening by saying grace after meals and having a good sing song of traditional passover songs.

Pesach for Jews is a festival for families and friends. This year our seder will be quite a small affair - there will only be 11 of us.

Although it is fun it does have a very serious side. You see when we talk about Egypt, or Mitzrayim, as we call it in Hebrew, we don't only mean the Egypt of the Pharaohs that many of you learned about in Year 5. Mitzrayim stands for all the things that even today make people slaves. All over the world there are people who are slaves of bad political systems, of poverty and of famine and when Jews remind ourselves of the escape from Egypt we also remind ourselves that escape from this slavery is as important today as it ever was for the Children of Israel three thousand or so years ago.