

The Surprising Ancient Origins of Passover

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Source:

The Passover Seder is one of the most recognized and widely practiced of Jewish rituals, yet had our ancestors visited one of these modern-day celebrations, they would be baffled. Not only does our modern Seder wildly diverge from the Passover of old: during antiquity itself the holiday underwent radical changes.

As the centralized Israelite state took shape about 3,000 years ago, the religion of the people varied from place to place and took variegated forms, hints of which we can see in the Bible, virtually the only historical narrative we have of this period. Among the different folk beliefs and frankly polytheistic practices these proto-Israelites practiced, the springtime rites seem to have had special status. Two of these rituals would later become subsumed by Passover: Pesach and Hag Hamatzot.

Pesach

Pesach was a pastoral apotropaic ritual, that is: its purpose is to ward off evil. It was carried out by the semi-nomadic segment of Israelite society that subsisted on livestock. Spring was a critical time of the year for them, a time of lambing and a sign that soon they would have to migrate to find a summer pasture for their flock.

In order to protect their flocks, and families, from the dangers ahead, they would slaughter their flock's newest addition as an offering, either a lamb or a kid, followed by a family feast.

The Origin of Matzah

Hag Hamatzot, on the other hand, was celebrated by the settled segment of Israelite society, who lived in villages and who drew their subsistence from farming. For them too spring was crucial, meaning the start of the harvest, of the cereals on which they depended.

Of the cereals grown by the ancient Israelites in this period, the first grain to be ready for harvest was barley. Although this made for inferior bread, it was highly prized: not rarely, by the spring harvest, the last year's stores had been already depleted and hunger took grip of the land.

This new bread would have been unleavened, as the leavening used at the time was a portion of dough set aside from the last batch of bread. But this would have been unavailable due to the gap created by the empty stores. Add to this the fact that barley flour hardly rises anyway, and that the baking techniques of the time would have made even the superior bread made of wheat flour flat and hard, and you've got matzah.

Still, when hungry even matzah is a cause for celebration and one could imagine that the communal threshing grounds were filled with joy, cheer, and jubilation.

