

# Pesach - The Jewish New Year

Contributed by [The Telling By Mark Gerson](#)

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Pesach, we learn in Exodus 12:2, should occur at “the head of months, the first month of the year.” The Pesach Seder is, therefore, the Jewish New Year celebration. Many people will say, “Stop! Rosh Hashanah is the Jewish New Year.” This is a mistake. As Rabbi Meir Soloveichik says, “The most common statement made about this holiday, one which I habitually make as well, is actually incorrect. . . . Rosh Hashanah is known as the ‘Jewish New Year’ . . . [but] Rosh Hashanah is not the Jewish New Year.” Or, as the scholar Nehemia Gordon concludes, the designation of Rosh Hashanah as the Jewish New Year is “outright bizarre.”

With the Torah having established Pesach as the Jewish New Year, it immediately moves to how the holiday should be celebrated. And it does so with a level of detail accorded no other holiday in the Torah. The menu, the way the meat should be prepared, and the purpose of the dinner discussion are just a few of the instructions pertaining to Pesach that are required in Exodus. Why, we are drawn to ask, would the Torah include such detailed instructions regarding how Jews are to celebrate our New Year? Perhaps the author of the Torah was sculpting Judaism, designing Jewish life, and creating Jews— and wanted our celebrations to reflect the kind of people we would ideally become. More than we design celebrations, they actually design us. This is something that is easily observable. The best single way to understand an individual or a community is to observe their celebrations.

How does a community acknowledge Memorial Day? How does an individual celebrate his fortieth birthday? How does a family celebrate B’nai Mitzvah or a couple a wedding? Even a glimpse will enable an observer to reliably project the aspirations, priorities, and values of the celebrants. And by telling us how to celebrate, on the verge of our becoming a free people, the Torah leads us to consider just what kind of people celebrate this way and thus what kind of people we should become.