

# The Meaning of Passover Symbols

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## WHY DO WE USE THE FOLLOWING?

1. Three Matzot placed separately in the sections of the special matzah cover, or in the folds of an ordinary napkin: Two of these symbolize the two loaves of bread over which a benediction is pronounced on Sabbaths and festivals. The third matzah emphasizes the unique role of the matzah in the Pesach ritual. The matzah is a symbol of the affliction of slaves in Egypt and a reminder of the haste of departure. An allegorical explanation teaches that the three matzot represent the three groups into which Judaism is divided: Kohen, Levi, Yisrael; if we are ever to survive, we must always be united. At many Sedarim, we add supplementary symbolic matzot for different oppressed Jewish communities and individuals to be remembered at Passover when we celebrate our freedom and they are still denied their freedom. You should also discuss non-Jewish communities and individuals who still await their own physical, spiritual and political freedom.
2. A Roasted Shankbone (Zeroah) commemorates the paschal sacrifice which our ancestors brought to the Temple on Pesach in ancient times. Vegetarians often substitute a beet (with its red juices) rather than use real bones.
3. Bitter Herbs (Maror) symbolize the bitterness of Israel's bondage in Egypt. Horseradish is usually used or a bitter lettuce.
4. A Roasted Egg (Beitzah) symbolizes the HAGGIGAH or "Festival sacrifice" which was always brought to the Temple in Jerusalem on festive occasions and which on Pesach supplemented the paschal lamb.
5. Charoset symbolizes the mortar the Israelites used building the "treasure cities for Pharaoh". Charoset is a mixture of grated apples, chopped nuts, cinnamon and a little wine, and there are many different recipes reflecting different places and cultures where Jews have celebrated Passover.
6. Parsley, Lettuce, Watercress (Karpas), or any other green herb and a dish of salt water into which it is to be dipped before being eaten: These greens symbolize the coming of Spring and suggest the perpetual renewal of life. Hence, they represent the ever-sustaining hope of human redemption. The message to us is that we must always be optimistic.
7. Four Cups of Wine to be offered during the Seder service: one at Kiddush, one following the recital of the first part of the Hallel, one after Grace and one at the conclusion of the Seder. These four cups symbolize the four-fold promise of redemption which, according to the Bible, God pledged to Israel: "I will bring you forth," (Exodus 6:6): "I will deliver you," (ibid). "I will redeem you," (ibid) and "I will take you," (Exodus 6:7).
8. Salt Water: used as a simple spice for vegetables (karpas). Some say it represents tears shed in Egypt, and others suggest that it reminds us of the Red Sea through which God led the Israelites. It may also represent the tears shed by God when He had no choice but to punish the Egyptians for their oppression of the Israelites.
9. Cup of Elijah (Kos Eliyahu): Elijah has always been associated with the coming of the Messiah. Pesach, the holiday of freedom, is an ideal time to usher in the messianic age, and so we invite Elijah to be present with us. Also, in Exodus 6:8 the Bible states, "I will bring you to the land..." Throughout the ages the Jews looked forward to this promised return to the Holy Land. In Jewish literature, Elijah was always a protective presence when a community or individual was threatened; and his presence at the Seder was very welcome throughout Jewish history in Europe when this was an especially dangerous season for Jews.