

# My Journey Through the Haggadah- Introduction

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Source: My Journey Through the Haggadah, Yekutiel Atkins

Pesach or Passover has another name in the Torah, the Festival of Matzoth. It is also called in the liturgy 'The Season of Our Freedom'. It celebrates and marks the Jewish people's freedom from 210 years of slavery and domination in Egypt some 3,000 years ago. We will discuss more about "Freedom" later on in the comments on the Four Sons.

The Torah, that is the Five Books of Moses, also known as The Pentateuch, is the story of the Jewish People and the Commandments given to them, from their beginning with the birth of Abraham until the eve of their entrance to the Land of Israel. Prior to this, however it opens with a brief account of the Creation of the Universe. This account is not meant to be scientific treatise, as our Rabbis say, the Bible is written "in the language of men" \*. There we learn from the story of Adam and Eve that we are all descended from those two first people, which makes all of mankind, related one to the other

We are introduced to Abraham, (Gen Ch.11 V. 26) who, while not the first to come to an understanding of the One God, who is the 'Fount of All' and the 'Creator of the Universe', but whose character and steadfastness makes him the one chosen by God. His descendants, the Children of Israel, - the Jews, were to be the instrument by which the peoples of the world were to be introduced to the 'One God' and hopefully the understanding and final realization of the brotherhood of man.

The Bible tells us that Abraham was told by God to leave "Your land, your birthplace and your father's house and to go to a place which I will show you". (Gen. Ch. 12 V 1). He was also told that God would "Bless those who Blessed him" (Abraham). God also revealed to Abraham, in what is known as the "Brith bein Ha'betarim" – the "Covenant between the Pieces", (Gen. Ch. 15. ), that his descendants were to spend 400 years in exile in a foreign land. The Rabbis calculated that this exile started with the birth of Abraham's son Isaac so that the actual time spent in Egypt was only 210 years. The question arises why did Abraham's descendants have to spend any time in exile at all? After all the Land of Canaan was promised to Abraham and his descendants (Gen. Ch.13 V. 14-17.) why not start there and then.

The answer given by the Torah (Gen. Ch. V.15 v16) is simple. Abraham left Haran ( Gen. Ch. 12. V. 5), the city in which his father had settled. 'To go to the Land which I will show

you', (Gen Ch. 12 V.1). Taking with him Sara, his wife, Lot his nephew and the people he had made, that is converted to the recognition of the Creator, the one and only God. When he

was gone, would their faith be strong enough to continue in his way? Abraham's only son at that time was Ishmael the son of Hagar his Egyptian concubine, who was not a member of Abraham's own tribe that had originated in Ur of the Chaldees.

Much later Abraham was to send his servant Eliezer to Haran, where his immediate family still lived, to bring back for Isaac his son by his wife Sara, through whom the Jewish people are descended, a wife, Rebecca. (Gen. Ch. 24). Later still Jacob, Isaac's son, also went back to the family in Haran to find a wife from his ancestral family. (Gen. Ch. 28 V. 2.) He eventually came back with four, (Gen. Ch. 29) Rachel Leah Bilha and Zilpah.

Ishmael, Abraham's other son by his concubine; Hagar married an Egyptian, as his mother was, (Gen. Ch. 21. V. 21). Of Isaac's twin sons Esau and Jacob, Esau also married out of the tribe by marrying two local Hittite women, Judith and Basemath (Gen. Ch. 26. V. 34-35) much to the great sorrow of his parents thus forfeiting the right of inheriting the mantle of Abraham and of becoming one of the fathers of, and the ancestor of, the

Children of Israel. Israel was the additional name given to Jacob by God, (Gen. Ch. 34 V. 10).

By marrying into a people of idol worshippers there was a great danger of being influenced by their wives and leaving the path chosen by Abraham. This showed the necessity of Abraham's descendants leaving Canaan and going into exile. By so doing and by being strangers in a strange land, they stuck together and married among themselves. In the end they became enslaved by the people among whom they lived which helped to keep them together. Keeping their own laws and customs they were less influenced by the idolatry of the indigenous population.

Had they stayed in Canaan the opposite might have taken place. Abraham and Isaac were honoured by the people among whom they lived. However we see from the story of Dinah, (Gen. Ch. 34) how easy it is to be seduced by the pleasant but licentious and idolatrous life of Canaan. It was essential therefore if God's promise was to come to pass, that the descendants of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob were to be a special people devoted to the one true Creator of the Universe that the children of Israel had to be sent away, so that they would grow into a cohesive people and not disappear by assimilation.

Because of the famine in the land of Canaan, Jacob and his sons and their families went down to Egypt, (Gen. Ch. 46), where at first they were treated with honour for the sake of Joseph, Jacob's son who had become the viceroy and the most powerful man in Egypt after Pharaoh (Gen. Ch. 41 V 39-44). The account of Joseph being taken to Egypt, his trials and tribulations and his rise to power, the going down to Egypt by Jacob with his children, the enslavement of the Children of Israel, and the story of the Exodus, are told in the book of Genesis from Chapter 37 to the end of the book, and in the first 17 chapters of the book of Exodus.

The Exodus from Egypt, begins with the first commandment or "Mitzvah" to the Jewish people as a people, and is the commandment to mark and celebrate the Rosh Chodesh (The New Month marked by the appearance of the New Moon) of the first month Nisan. ( Ex. Ch. 12. V. 2). Nisan is the month in which the first Pesach and the Exodus occurred This first commandment addressed to the Children of Israel as a group, is the beginning of the history of the Jewish people as a people. Indeed in the special prayers recited during Passover, Passover is called "the Season of our Freedom".

The Jewish people have been scattered far and wide, at first, after the destruction of the first Temple when we were exiled to Babylon for some 70 years until, under Ezra and Nehemiah we were able to make Aliyah and return to the Promised Land. And then again with the second Exile, after the rebellion against the Romans when the Temple and Jerusalem were destroyed nearly 2000 years ago. During this long night of dispersion, we as a people experienced humiliation, pogroms, and persecution, forced conversion and the greatest horror of all, the Holocaust. The remembrance of our Exodus from Egypt, the subsequent gathering at the foot of Mount Sinai where we received the Torah (Ex Ch 20), the celebration during the centuries of the Passover and the recitation of the Haggadah, kept us together as a Free (in our hearts) people, proud and subservient to no one, but the God of Israel.

The commandment to celebrate the Passover Festival is given in Exodus Chap.12 V. 1-20. These verses contain several commandments in connection with how the festival should be celebrated. Each family was to take a lamb or young goat for the Passover Offering, which was to be the main part of the ceremonial meal. Before the lamb could be slaughtered, we were commanded to remove from our possession all Chametz (leaven) (Ex. Ch. 34 V. 25). If a lamb was too much for one family, two or more families should join together.

It is to be celebrated from the evening of the 14th day of Nisan, which was to be calculated by the elders after deciding which day was the 'New Moon'. They "should eat it with Matzah and bitter herbs" (Num. Ch. 9 V. 11) .The Passover was to be kept "throughout the generations forever" (Ex. Ch. 12 V 14). For the seven days (eight outside Israel), no "chametz" was to be seen or found (in your possession) and certainly not eaten. (Ex. Ch. 12. V 19). In Ex. Ch. 12 V. 26-27 and in several other places the Jewish people are commanded to teach their children throughout the generations the commandments and in particular those relating to the

Festival of Passover.

The Seder is the most outstanding ceremony of the Festival of Passover. The Seder meaning "Order," of the recitation of the Haggadah and the festive meal takes place in our homes on the first and (excepting in Israel) second night of the festival today as it has done from the time of Joshua's and the Children of Israel's entry into the Land of Israel. (Josh. .Ch. 5 V. 10). Not in the same way however, as without the Temple we cannot offer the Passover Offering, which in Temple times was the central part of the Festival. The Seder is the climax of the preparation for Passover, which has gone on from the end of the last Passover a year ago, with the production of Matzoth and other specially prepared food stuffs.

As mentioned above the Torah says that we are not to eat "Chametz" during the seven (eight days outside Israel) days of Passover, nor to have it in our possession or to own it. (Ex Ch. 12 V. 15).

We must now define what is Chametz.. Chametz is the result of any of the five species of grain, wheat, barley, spelt, oats and rye, ground or whole, being in contact with water for more than 18 minutes without being baked in the oven. This of course includes drinks that are made from grain such as whisky and beer and many others. Chametz is not the process of fermentation in which case wine would not be permitted.

Matzoth are made from dough made by mixing a special flour that prior to being ground has been specially watched and guarded so as not to come into contact with water before being processed, with water and with no other additive, even salt. Special supervision ensures that the dough from which Matzoth is made is speedily processed so that no more than 18 minutes elapses from when the dough is mixed and rolled out into matzoth until it is placed in the oven. Ordinary flour that is bought in a store or supermarket is Chametz as before being ground, the wheat kernels are soaked in water for ease in milling.

In modern times, we purchase many foods already processed and prepared. Even with reading the lists of ingredients on the label, how many of us know what is put in our food, which we buy so trustingly and eat. How many of us know what are the additives the colours, taste enhancers, emulsifiers, anti-oxidants, hydrolyzed protein and other chemicals too numerous to mention many of which are made from chametz products that are put into manufactured and processed food, let alone what is their origin.

How much more so should we be sure, that all food and drink for Passover including wine, spirits and liqueurs, even seemingly simple foods like sugar, tea, coffee, salt and spices, should not contain additives, which unknown to ourselves may be included, perhaps to stop them clogging or to enable them to "run" smoothly, that are 'Chametz'. It is essential therefore that Matzoth and all processed food and drink that is bought to be consumed during Passover are specially baked, cooked or otherwise prepared, under the supervision and endorsed as "Kosher for Passover" by a reliable Rabbinical authority, and carries the appropriate "Hechsher" (guarantee of fitness for use during Passover).. This is so as to ensure that no "Chametz" is included in the process or contents or additives of the product and is necessitated by the strictness of the Mitzvah of, not eating, not owning, and not even seeing on our property the slightest vestige of "Chametz".

To many people, these regulations may seem unnecessary hair splitting, but Jewish food laws, kashrut and the observance of the Sabbath and the Festivals have been the bonds that have kept the Jewish people together and helped us withstand the attacks both spiritual and physical that has been our lot throughout the ages.

To make sure that no chametz is owned or seen or found during Passover the conscientious housewife begins her preparations immediately after Purim which takes place a month before the Passover. Gradually every room, every closet, every cupboard, every pocket is turned out and cleaned until on the night before the Seder the house is ready. Pots and pans, cutlery, china and glassware have all been replaced by utensils specially kept from one year to the next, for the Passover. How to make sure that ovens, microwaves, gas burners and other kitchen equipment may be made fit for use over Passover, one must ask a recognized

Rabbinical authority.

The Torah tells us that Passover must be celebrated in the spring. (Ex.Ch. 13 V. 4). The Jewish calendar is lunar, based on the cycle of the moon around the earth. The moon takes about 29 days and 12 hours to circle the earth. With a year of twelve months, the year is therefore about eleven days short of the solar year which is recorded by the secular calendar, and which is based on the earth circling the sun. To keep both periods synchronized so that Passover always falls in the spring, 7 times during each period of 19 years an extra month is added so that in every 19-year period, we have a 13-month year 7 times. This extra month is always the month before Passover and is called the Second Adar

The Torah tells us that the Korban Pesach, the Passover Offering, is to be brought on the 14th of Nisan in the afternoon, and that day strictly speaking, is the Festival of Passover. The Bible calls what we nowadays call Passover the "Festival of Matzoth". The Festival of Matzoth as mentioned above is celebrated on the 15th of the Hebrew month of Nisan,. As the Jewish day begins at sunset, the Seder night is on the evening of the 14th of Nisan, which is the beginning of the 15th of Nisan and is when, in Temple times the Passover Offering was eaten.

There are therefore, two separate although joined festivals. One the Festival of Passover that is the 14th of Nisan in which we are to bring the Passover Offering, which today we cannot do since the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem, some two thousand years ago. And the Festival of Matzoth, which starts on the night of the 14th which is the beginning of the 15th, the Seder night. The festival of Matzoth lasts seven days in Israel and eight days in the rest of the world. During this time we are not permitted as mentioned above, to eat any food which contains chametz.

The Torah tells us that the Passover Offering may not be brought with chametz in our possession. (Ex.Ch. 34.V. 25) so today, from the time that the Passover offering would have been brought in Temple times, we may not have chametz in our possession. This means that we have to remove all chametz from our houses by the ceremony of B'dikat Chametz. This takes place on the night of the 13th of Nisan that is the evening of the day before the Passover Offering would have been brought and the night before the Seder night. Any chametz found during the ceremony together with all other chametz in our possession including that left over from breakfast, is burned the following morning.