

PASSOVER LORE—DO YOU KNOW?

NAMES OF THE FESTIVAL:

Chag Ha-Matzot ("Festival of the Unleavened Bread"), ***reflects the centrality of matzah*** in the celebration of Pesach.

Chag Ha-Pesach ("Festival of the Paschal Lamb Offering"), ***recalls the offering that was brought to the Beit HaMikdash*** (Holy Temple) in Jerusalem in former times, even as the word Pesach (from the Hebrew, "to protect") links us to the biblical account of the tenth plague when our ancestors' homes were "protected" when the Angel of Death "protected" them.

Chag He-Aviv ("Festival of the Semi-ripe Barley"; in later Hebrew this name connotes "Festival of Spring"), ***reminds us of the agricultural dimensions and seasonal significance*** of the Festival.

Z'man Cheruteinu ("Season of Our Freedom"), ***marks the attainment of the goal of freedom*** from bondage by our ancestors. The Sages chose this name for use ***in every Amidah*** (central prayer) ***and Birkat HaMazon*** (the Blessing after Meals/Nourishment) throughout Passover.

MA-OT CHITTIM ("Wheat Money");

For Passover, special **care must be taken to provide for the poor, as the costs for Passover observance are greater than usual**. Less fortunate Jews should yet be able to celebrate free of worry on the Festival of Freedom. The practice of distributing *ma-ot chittim* (also known as *kimcha d'Pischa*, literally "Passover flour") was instituted so that the needs of the indigent might be met. This custom has given rise, in local communities, to the creation of special Passover funds. The money for selling one's chametz (see below) is generally channeled into such a fund.

CHAMETZ:

Any product that is fermented or that can cause fermentation may not be eaten on Passover. Only five grains are included in this prohibition: wheat, rye, barley, oats and spelt. Any food or drink made from one of these grains, or which contains one of these grains, even a most miniscule amount, is considered chametz. Obviously, matzah is made from one of these five grains, although careful attention has ensured that no leavening has occurred.

In addition, all utensils that came into contact with chametz may not be used during Pesach or even on the day preceding it. These and any non-Pesach foods we are saving are stored where we won't see them or get into them. (The prohibition includes not seeing chametz in one's domain.) The surfaces upon which we prepare food, cook food and eat food are scoured and usually covered for the duration of the Festival. The refrigerator is likewise cleaned to remove any trace of chametz. Many utensils may be "kashered" for Passover, that is, they might be rendered usable for the holy day by following the traditions for doing so.

Ashkenazi Jews have followed the minhag (custom) of treating rice, corn, peanuts or members of the pea family as chametz because these products swell when cooked and so resemble a leavening process. According to the strictest application of this minhag, neither the grains nor any of the flours or oils made from them may be used. Some Ashkenazi commentators do allow the use of these products when in certain forms, such as oil. Sephardic tradition allows these products, in any form, to be eaten. No, one cannot declare oneself a Sephardic Jew for eight days a year!

However, the **Committee on Jewish Law and Standards (CJLS) of the Conservative Movement has ruled** unanimously in separate rulings **that peanuts and string beans are not members of the pea family** and hence should not fall under this minhag **(and are hence fully acceptable for Passover use in all forms by all Jews)**.

In addition, in 2015, **the CJLS published two separate Jewish legal opinions now allowing Ashkenazi Jews to eat rice, corn, peanuts, et al, just as our Sephardic brothers and sisters do.** [Here](#) is a link to the one written for our North American context. The permissibility for Ashkenazi Jews to eat these products is *not* a requirement, of course, but a possibility, one that can be especially helpful to those on certain restrictive diets.

Whether one follows Sephardic or Ashkenazic tradition, one is keeping kosher for Passover. There should be no belittling the considered, meaningful practice of someone else. For those who choose to follow the Sephardic practice, please note that the Rabbinical Assembly's guide explains a number of caveats that must be followed. For those who are Ashkenazic, please note that eating off the kosher-for-Passover plates that have had items like corn on them does not in any way adversely affect your own keeping of Passover. In addition, **Ashkenazi Jews are fully able to eat derivatives of rice, peanuts, et al, such as peanut oil, as the custom to refrain from rice, corn, beans, etc., never affected derivatives.** Please contact me with any specific questions.

In addition to a prohibition on eating chametz, one cannot get any advantage from it. So, for example, Jewish bakeries often close during the week of Passover to not make money from chametz during the holy day.

M'CHIRAT CHAMETZ (Selling Chametz):

Since one must not own any chametz during Pesach, **any chametz stored is sold (to a non Jew) for the duration of Pesach.** The transaction is technically an actual sale: People sign a document appointing the Rabbi as their legal agent for this purpose. Food that is sold must be placed out of the way and covered, along with the year-round ("chametz-dik") dishes, so that one does not encounter the chametz during Pesach itself. At the end of the holiday, the agent (the rabbi) arranges for the reversion of ownership of the now permitted chametz. Some who do not change dishes nevertheless should consider selling their

actual chametz. **Those needing or desiring Rabbi Sacks' help** to accomplish this mitzvah **should contact him by Wednesday morning, March 24 or mail/scan the form elsewhere in this Migdalor to him so that it arrives to him by the end of the day on Tuesday, March 23.** The Rabbi's address is: Rabbi J.B. Sacks, 91 Camino Arroyo N, Palm Desert 92260.

B'DIKAT CHAMETZ/BI-UR CHAMETZ (Search for/Burning of Chametz):

After thoroughly cleaning one's home, a search for leaven takes place, usually on the evening before Pesach begins, i.e. the night before the first seder. However, because Passover begins on a Saturday night, the search is conducted on the Thursday before. So as not to make this search in vain, a few crumbs or pieces of chametz are conspicuously placed, searched for by candlelight and when "found," swept onto a wooden spoon with a feather. (Obviously, it is helpful to count how many pieces of bread/candy/whatever you have conveniently placed throughout the house so that no chametz remains!) Children (of all ages) delight in this tradition. One does not have to have a wooden spoon and/or feather to conduct the search.

The following morning before 10:00 a.m. or so (consult the Rabbi if more specificity is required), these last crumbs/pieces are burned (in some places, flushed or thrown in the outside garbage can). A short declaration is recited both evening and morning, which you can find [here](#).

Any other chametz found in the house is then considered to be "mere dust" and not food (and hence, the household is still considered to be fully kosher for Pesach for the family that worked so hard to clean. (A humane remedy if there ever was one!!!) Many modern young families, whether traditionally kosher for Pesach or not, have now incorporated this Ritual in whole or in part as a feature of their family's preparation for Pesach. This year the first seder takes place on Saturday, March 27, so the **search for chametz takes place on Thursday evening, March 25, with the burning/disposal of chametz the next morning.**

ON MATZAH and MATZAH SH'MURAH ("Watched Matzah"):

One may eat matzah at any time during Passover (and during the year), but **the mitzvah** ("commandment") **to eat matzah applies only to the seder on the first night**—and even then one only needs to eat matzah immediately following the recitation of the blessing for matzah recited during the seder. The general standard for matzah is that the process is supervised "from the time the grain is milled (into flour)." From that point on, it is to be stored in cool conditions and kept away from water or moisture until the time for baking it into matzah.

Some, however, have the custom, especially for seder evenings, of applying a stricter level of supervision called *sh'murah mish'at k'tzirah*, "supervised from the time of reaping." The grain for this

matzah is watched from the time it is harvested to ensure that no moisture has affected it. Such a stricture is apparently post-Talmudic. Chassidim use only this *matzah sh'murah* for all of Pesach. Most of us are not this strict. Nonetheless, many of us enhance our own *s'darim* (plural of seder) with *matzah sh'murah*.

Matzah sh'murah usually comes in large round cakes, with a different taste and texture. It **probably comes much closer to what our ancestors actually ate in haste when they were leaving Egypt.**

Although one can find this matzah in the square or rectangular prepackaged format like the more common plain matzah as well, we prefer the round, handmade kind specifically to better recall the original Exodus experience.

TA'ANIT B'CHOROT (Fast of the Firstborn):

According to custom, firstborn Jews fast from sunrise the day before Passover, i.e. the morning preceding the first seder. This fast, Ta'anit B'chorot (also known as Ta'anit B'chorim), commemorates the miracle that the firstborn Jews were spared from the tenth plague that killed every firstborn Egyptian. Some authorities insist that both firstborn women and firstborn men should fast. Since we in the Conservative Movement promote equality of women and men, we adopt the approach that *all* firstborns should fast.

Many who observe this fast use a Jewish legal principle pertaining to the importance of Talmud Torah (Torah study) to supersede and cut short a fast. A *siyyum* ("conclusion") is the study of the final lines of a body of text, the study of which one is now "concluding." Usually held immediately after shacharit (morning) services, a *siyyum* is followed by a *se'udat mitzvah*, a mandatory "feast" to celebrate the completion of significant learning by someone. This brings any fast observed up to that point to an abrupt end for all who are present.

Nevertheless, some firstborn, however, choose to absent themselves from this study session because they prefer to fast—not only to connect with this piece of history and tradition, but in order to heighten the taste, both gastronomic and spiritual, of the seder—or, alternatively, to commemorate the three-day fast in the time of Queen Esther which took place at Passover time (and not at Purim!).

Let us note that the fast is not observed today by most Sephardic and Mizrahi communities. Nonetheless, we in the Conservative Movement promote this fast for all our families, including those of Sephardi and Mizrahi backgrounds.

This year Ta'anit B'chorim starts at sunrise on Thursday, March 25, and continues until after sundown that evening.

S' FIRAT HA-OMER ("Counting of the Omer"):

The Torah commands us to count seven full weeks from the time we bring the omer. On the fiftieth day we are to bring an offering of new grain to the Holy One (*Leviticus 23;15-16*). An omer was a sheaf or a dry measure of barley from the new spring harvest that was brought to the Temple on the second day of Passover. We still count these seven weeks.

The purpose of the counting, according to the Kabbalists (mystics), is to join Passover, the festival of physical redemption and emancipation, with Shavuot, the festival when the Israelites entered into the brit, the covenant with God (and receiving the Torah), making it the festival of spiritual freedom. In this understanding, the purpose of the Exodus was to get to Mount Sinai. While it is true that without Pesach, there would not have been Shavuot, it is equally clear that without the goal of Shavuot, Pesach would be divested of much of its significance. Thus the days between the two festivals are anxiously and expectantly counted, just as one awaits a close friend by counting the days until her or his arrival.

Starting on the second night of Passover (Sunday, March 28), during the second seder, until the evening of Shavuot, **we count the omer by reciting a special benediction** concerning the counting of the Omer **and then enumerate what day of the omer period we are in.** We do so using two methods: by the exact number of days (e.g. the twenty-third day) and by the number of weeks (e.g. three weeks and two days). Enumerating in both methods helps avoid any confusion.

MAIMUNA

Among North African and Turkish Jews, Passover is somewhat extended by celebrating the day after Pesach (evening and next day, April 4-5) as Maimuna. According to tradition it is the *yahrzeit* (anniversary of death) of Maimon ben Joseph, the father of Maimonides (**Rabbi Moses ben Maimon** or (by using the boldfaced initials) Rambam, twelfth century).

Coins, candy and grass are thrown to the children upon returning from synagogue. The coins and candy represent the wealth and food that the Israelites brought out of Egypt on their way to freedom, and the grass symbolizes the reeds of the Red Sea. (The Red Sea will again part: However, in this case someone must sweep up the grass!)

The table is set with various types of good luck symbols: pitchers of milk, garlands of leaves and flowers, branches of fig trees, ears of wheat, a plate of fresh flour with a coin, a jar of honey, various greens and a fish bowl complete with (raw, fresh) fish, the latter an obvious and common symbol of fertility. The menu consists of an array of sweets, including coconut macaroons, marzipan stuffed dates and walnut pancakes known as *mufleta*. (Since the sweets were prepared during *Chol ha-Moed*, the intermediate days of Pesach, they are prepared with attention to the laws of Pesach food preparation.)

Traditionally, Maimuna is the time for matchmaking among the young. In Israel, Maimuna takes place outdoors in a picnic-like atmosphere characterized by (what else?) much eating, drinking and singing. Exactly how this festival originated and its connection with Maimon are obscure—though interestingly, Maimuna reflects an immediate transition to the agricultural themes and dairy foods of the Omer period and Shavuot respectively.

ON KASHERING YOUR HOME and BUYER'S GUIDE

For information on kashering your kitchen and home, and for information on buying for Pesach, please use the [Pesach guide](#) produced by our Conservative Movement's Committee on Jewish Law and Standards (CJLS). In addition, the Kashrut Subcommittee of the CJLS published [this supplement](#) specifically for this year.

Of course, for all specific questions you have, please contact Rabbi Sacks.