



# Guide to Passover for Interfaith Families

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Supporting Interfaith Families Exploring Jewish Life



## Guide to Passover for Interfaith Families

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## What is Passover/Pesach?

For many Jews, Passover is the most important of all Jewish holidays. In fact, more Jewish Americans observe Passover than any other Jewish holiday – even more than light Hanukkah candles. In Hebrew the name of the holiday is *Pesach*, with a guttural sound forming the final consonant of the word – the same sound that ends the name of the famous composer, Bach.

Passover's popularity is partly because it's the holiday in which we retell the [foundational story of Jewish history](#), the Exodus from Egypt. If you're familiar with the Exodus story, the holiday is named for the part of the story in which God is getting ready to smite the Egyptians with the tenth and final plague. God instructs the Hebrew slaves to mark their homes and warns them that the Angel of Death will be sweeping across all of Egypt, killing the first born sons of all that live, but that the Angel will pass over and spare the first born sons of every home that bears the designated mark.

Passover is also a big deal because many Jewish families come together to share a special celebratory meal (called the *seder* – more on that in a bit). Imagine a holiday with the importance of Thanksgiving, but without the breaded stuffing (more on the food rules of Passover later).



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Passover is [a week-long festival](#), usually falling somewhere in March or April. (The Jewish calendar is based mainly on the lunar calendar, and so Jewish holidays fall on different dates on the secular American calendar from year to year.) Part of the Jewish community celebrates Passover for seven days, and the other part for eight. Why? Because it's very Jewish to differ over details! (We'll answer this question more seriously below.)

## The Seder: The Ritual Passover Meal

The most well-known thing that Jewish people do during Passover is to gather together for a ceremonial festive meal called a seder. *Seder* is the Hebrew word meaning "order," as in "order of events." [A Passover seder](#) is the ritual meal that people celebrate on the first and in some cases, also the second, nights of Passover. (Why do some celebrate the seder just on the first night and some on the first two nights? We'll get to that later, we promise!)

The main thing to understand about a seder is that it combines a delicious meal, the telling of the story of the Exodus from Egypt, and a lot of symbolic foods and rituals tied to the Exodus story. Whether you're hosting a seder at your home or you are a guest at someone else's, a typical seder is set



The seder and the Haggadah were developed by a group of ancient rabbis who lived in the Land of Israel under Greco-Roman cultural influence

up like a dinner party with a script. There's a book, called a *Haggadah* in Hebrew, which contains the ritual order of the meal – traditionally comprised of 15 steps, or ritual units. Usually, every guest gets a copy, though sometimes people have to share if there aren't enough copies for all the guests. The Haggadah functions as the "script" for the meal, and often everyone attending is invited to take turns doing the readings contained throughout the book.

The seder and the Haggadah were developed by a group of ancient rabbis who lived in the Land of Israel under Greco-Roman cultural influence. They did some

cultural borrowing in crafting the Haggadah, using the Greco-Roman concept of a *symposium* as a blueprint and filling in that structure with Jewish content. A symposium was a meal with guests during which an important subject would be discussed and explored, and a specific number of cups of wine would be served. The hosts would issue invitations, which would state the topic for the evening's discussion and the number of cups of wine that would be served. (The more potent the wine that a particular host served, the more he or she would be admired in community gossip). At the beginning of the evening, guests would arrive and be invited to get

comfortable – reclining on pillows and cushions and preparing to eat and drink, talk and argue deep into the night.

What the ancient rabbis did in [crafting the seder](#) was to create a very Jewish version of the symposium. The topic for the evening's discussion: the Exodus from Egypt and the meaning of liberation for our times. The number of cups of wine to be served: four. The meal: sumptuous, with symbolic foods representing different parts of the Exodus story. The rabbis who originated the seder envisioned the food, drink, and discussion continuing on as late as people would like – even until dawn. Passover is the ultimate dinner-party-Jewish-holiday.

### *Did Jesus of Nazareth participate in seders, with matzah and a Haggadah, similar to the one Jews use today?*

The short answer is “well, sort of but not exactly.”

As a 1st Century Jew living in Judea, Jesus assuredly celebrated Passover, and some New Testament scholars think that the Last Supper was probably a Passover ritual meal. However, during the time that Jesus lived, the ancient Temple in Jerusalem was still standing, and Jews primarily celebrated the holiday in a different manner than the seder as we know it.

### *It's very unlikely that Jews during Jesus' lifetime had the Haggadah and ritual seder that we are familiar with today, because many of the rabbis who crafted it lived after Jesus' lifetime*

Passover, in the Holy Land during Temple times, was above all a pilgrimage festival. Jews would bring offerings from wherever they lived to the Temple in Jerusalem, and they would celebrate over meals including lamb (important to the Exodus story) and matzah (unleavened bread – we'll explore the meaning of this ritual Passover food later). It's very unlikely that Jews during

Jesus' lifetime had the Haggadah and ritual seder that we are familiar with today, because many of the rabbis who crafted it lived after Jesus' lifetime, and after the Jerusalem Temple was destroyed by the Romans.

The rabbis who developed the Haggadah were trying to find a meaningful way for Jews to celebrate Passover in the aftermath of the destruction of the Temple and the exile of most of the Jews by the Romans, several decades after the life and times of Jesus. Jews could no longer go on a pilgrimage to Jerusalem and bring lambs and other offerings to the Temple, so the

ancient rabbis reconstructed the ceremonial aspects of the holiday so that they could function for Jews living in exile.

Many Christians have a deep interest in Passover, and some churches hold Seders of their own. Because Passover, the Exodus story, and the themes of liberation and redemption were very important to Jesus,

and because many Christian readings of the Gospels interpret the texts to mean that Jesus was crucified at the time of the Passover holiday, it's not surprising that some Christians find it meaningful to incorporate some form of the seder into their own religious life. Easter and Passover always take place during the same season, and sometimes they even overlap. As with the December holiday season, there are many opportunities for Jewish and Christian families and congregations to share traditions, stories and fun activities when Passover and Easter arrive in the spring.

One note on the subject of churches that hold their own seders: Interfaith families may want to be aware that some Jews feel conflicted or negative toward church seders, whereas other Jews feel good about them and are willing to be guests at them or even help lead them. If you or your family get invited to a church seder, our advice is to check in with one another about your feelings, feel free to ask the organizers of the event anything you want to know in advance and decide what you want to do based on your own comfort level.

There are also some interfaith seders or secular seders tying the Exodus story to the struggles other communities have had for their own liberation and dignity. More on that later.

## Haggadah: The Passover Guide and Storybook

The Haggadah is the guide book everyone uses at a seder. Haggadah is Hebrew for “the telling,” which makes sense because the Haggadah tells the Exodus story. The plural of the Hebrew word, Haggadah, is *Haggadot*, with a long “o” in the last syllable.

### Traditional Haggadot will have:

- pre-Passover instructions for preparing one’s home for the holiday
- a listing of the order of the ritualized sections of the seder
- instructions for each of the prayers, blessings, and ritual actions that are to be done in each of the 15 sections of the seder
- a retelling of the story of the Exodus from Egypt, with additional commentaries on different parts of the story
- well-loved Hebrew prayers and songs associated with the holiday

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First Nuremberg Haggadah, circa 1449 – Handwritten on parchment using ink and watercolor, with square and semi-cursive Ashkenazic script.

### More liberal or alternative Haggadot will generally have all of the above, although:

- they may replace certain traditional prayers with more contemporary or liberal Jewish content expressing the same core themes
  - they may include different biblical or ancient rabbinic versions of the Exodus story
  - they may modify some of the ancient rabbis’ rituals to reflect changing social values
  - they may add new rituals or ritual items to express liberal Jewish values on contemporary issues connected to the themes of oppression, liberation and justice (we’ll see a couple examples of this later)
- they may abbreviate the traditional Haggadah texts in order to make the length of the seder more do-able for parents with young children
  - they may expand on the traditional Haggadah texts by adding contemporary questions for discussion, or by adding readings that describe the struggles for justice that other people have gone through or are currently going through

Most of the traditional Haggadah is written in Hebrew or Aramaic, the ancient languages of Jewish life and prayer in the Middle East, usually with an English translation on the facing page. Some modern or alternative Haggadot have a retelling of the story without much Hebrew or Aramaic, and





transliteration of the Hebrew into English letters (affectionately known as “Heblish”), so that everyone can join in with the Hebrew singing and chanting at the meal.

If you are a first-time guest at the seder, your hosts will provide a Haggadah for you to use, and you can follow the lead of your

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may include readings and songs from other traditions and parts of history that fit with Passover themes.

Haggadot will often have song lyrics and musical notation to help new singers learn fun Passover song melodies. There are so many different varieties of Haggadot available nowadays, and some of them come with an accompanying CD to help the non-singers at the table, or for seders in which there are a lot of newcomers to the experience. Some publishers have included

hosts about how to participate. If you are planning a seder at your house for the first time, we have a list of suggested Haggadot that you can purchase or download (see below). If you live near a Judaica shop, synagogue gift shop or Jewish bookstore, you can also go browse through the choices there.

### *So you got invited to your boyfriend/girlfriend's house for Passover... Does that mean you should expect a ring?*

In some families, bringing a boyfriend or girlfriend home for Passover indicates a strong level of commitment. In other families, holiday tables are open to everyone, and the more the merrier; your partner may not intend to signal anything by bringing you home.

You may not know until you get there – unless you ask. Because Passover is a family holiday with the same kind of family status as Thanksgiving or Christmas in Christian families, being a guest at their seder is a good opportunity for you to learn a lot about your partner's family and whether or not he or she brought you along to show that the relationship is serious.

### **The 15 Steps of the Seder**

The path from slavery to liberation was crafted by the ancient rabbis in fifteen ritualized steps, each one represented by a named section of the seder. They are:

- 1. Kadesh** – a blessing over wine
- 2. Ur-chatz** – ritual washing of hands without the usual blessing
- 3. Karpas** – eating some leafy greens or green vegetables

4. **Yachatz** – raising up and breaking the middle Matzah (more on this later)
5. **Maggid** – the telling of the Exodus story (the longest section of the Seder)
6. **Rach-tzah** – ritual washing of hands before the meal, with the blessing
7. **Motzi** – the blessing over the Matzah and the meal
8. **Matzah** – another blessing over the Matzah, this time emphasizing the special nature of eating Matzah as a Passover ritual act
9. **Maror** – eating bitter herbs
10. **Korech** – eating a sandwich of Matzah and bitter herbs (and then adding a sweet, chutney-like Jewish dish called *charoset*)
11. **Shulchan Orech** – the festive meal
12. **Tzafun** – eating the *Afikomen* (more on that later)
13. **Barech** – grace after meals
14. **Hallel** – singing psalms of praise
15. **Nirtzah** – conclusion

For a very accessible overview of each of these steps of the seder, including a description of what happens and the symbolic meaning of each element, click [here](#).

Some of the most well-loved ritual elements of the seder take place within some of the 15 steps listed above. These include:

The leader takes the middle matzah, breaks it in half, and then has someone hide one half. At the end of the meal, kids are invited to search for the hidden matzah, which is known as the *afikomen*.

- **Drinking four cups of wine** (or grape juice) throughout the evening
- **During the *Yachatz* section**, the leader takes a ceremonial plate that has 3 pieces of matzah stacked on it, and lifts it up. Then, s/he takes the middle matzah, breaks it in half, and then has someone hide one half somewhere in the house. At the end of the meal, kids are invited to search for the hidden matzah, which is known as the *afikomen*. In some families, the child who finds it gets a gift, though often every child gets a gift when the *afikomen* has been found.
- **During the *Maggid* section**, in which we retell the Exodus story, there are several well-loved parts, such as:
  - ♦ **The “Four Questions,”** often sung by young children who have learned the traditional melody for singing these questions in Hebrew. (Video of this [here](#).)
  - ♦ **The chanting of the 10 plagues** that struck ancient Egypt before Pharaoh finally let the Hebrew slaves go. In sorrow that so many Egyptians suffered



as part of our liberation, we remove one drop of wine for each plague, symbolizing a diminishment of our joy.

- ♦ **Singing a song called “Dayenu.”** It repeatedly proclaims that if God had only provided a fraction of the goodness that God showed to our ancestors, “it would have been enough” (that phrase is the meaning of the Hebrew word, *Dayenu*. Want to practice the song? Click [here](#).)
- **Tasting different varieties of *charoset*** (more on this food below)



- **Eating the bitter herb – *maror*** – and seeing just how hot it is. If peoples’ faces turn red, it’s especially memorable.
- **Setting a place at the table**, including a cup of wine, for the spirit of the Hebrew biblical prophet, Elijah, and later during the Seder, opening the door so that his presence (or, metaphorical presence if you prefer) can come in.
- **Singing fun folk songs near the end of the Seder** – you can see YouTube videos of many of them [here](#).
- **Concluding the Seder** with the words, “Next year in Jerusalem.”

### Elijah’s Cup and Miriam’s Cup

The biblical prophet, Elijah, is a major figure in the biblical books 1st and 2nd Kings. In Jewish tradition, Elijah is associated with the hope for the return of the Messiah and the ushering in of an era of peace, justice, and harmony throughout the world. The traditional Jewish belief is that Elijah will reappear one day, and the Messiah will follow soon after. More liberal Jewish theologies look at the idea of Elijah’s arrival and the hope for Messianic redemption in a non-literal way. For Jews with these beliefs, the entire tradition of hoping and waiting for the Messiah is a metaphor for the sacred obligation of all people to work for justice and peace and, in so doing, to help bring about a “Messianic era” of a world at one.

In a typical seder, a cup of wine, “Elijah’s cup,” is filled with wine or grape juice and set before an empty chair that remains empty throughout the seder. Toward the end of the seder, we are instructed to open the door for Elijah, and we collectively imagine his presence (and/or the ideals it represents) entering the room. Adults sometimes humorously challenge young children to inspect Elijah’s cup at the end of the seder to see if there’s any sign that someone drank some of the wine or juice.

In more recent years, many Jews have added a [parallel ritual to Elijah’s cup](#). A cup is filled with water and set on the table near Elijah’s cup. This cup, Miriam’s cup, represents the biblical figure of Miriam, whom we meet in the book of Exodus and in other parts of the Torah. Miriam was Moses’ older sister, and she helped ensure that baby Moses was rescued when his mother was forced to send him adrift in the Nile River because of Pharaoh’s decree. Later, she led the

newly freed Hebrew women in song and dance at the shores of the Red Sea. The Torah describes her as a prophet, and the ancient rabbis taught that, after the Hebrew slaves had been freed and then wandered in the wilderness for 40 years, wherever they encamped, a magic well with fresh water would appear, and that God made this miracle happen on account of



Miriam’s righteousness. Because of these strong associations of Miriam with courage, liberation, and water, the custom of placing a ceremonial cup of water on the seder table in her honor has appealed to many Jews who value gender equality. This ritual honors the stories and contributions of women in Jewish tradition.



## Passover Foods: Foods That Tell the Seder Story

The ritual foods of Passover tell the biblical story of the Exodus from Egypt and the story of the ancient rabbis who wrote the Haggadah. One contemporary rabbi, Jill Jacobs, adds: "During the seder, we don't just tell the story of the Exodus, we see, smell, feel and taste liberation." What follows is a brief description of many of the special foods of Passover.

First, let's focus on the foods that are placed on a ceremonial plate, usually in the middle of the table or somewhere where everyone can easily see it. This special plate is called the Seder Plate. The traditional foods on this plate are:

- **Maror** – a bitter herb, often horseradish, or bitter greens like chicory or endive. It's supposed to be uncomfortably hot! It represents the bitterness of slavery. (You can see people taking a "maror challenge" using very, very hot horseradish [here](#).)
- **Chazeret** – a bitter vegetable or green, often Romaine lettuce. It's also a symbol of the bitterness of slavery, but it gets used in a different part of the seder than the Maror.
- **Karpas** – a leafy green, very often parsley. Represents the rebirth of spring.
- **Bay-tzah** – a roasted egg. Also represents the rebirth of spring and the national birth, or rebirth, of the Jewish people from out of the constraints of bondage. The roasting recalls the Passover sacrifice brought to the Temple in Jerusalem in ancient times.
- **Z'roah** – a shank bone of a lamb. Represents the Passover offering of a lamb made at the ancient Temple in Jerusalem in the early spring. Sometimes a chicken neck is substituted, and in vegetarian homes, a beet or a carrot may be substituted.
- **Charoset** is a sweet, thick or chunky [fruit and nut spread](#) that symbolizes the mortar that Jewish slaves used in their hard labors building cities and brick buildings for the Pharaohs. Jews of European descent usually make it with [apples, nuts, honey, sweet wine and cinnamon](#). Jews from other lands have [other ingredients](#), but it is always ground or chopped to resemble mortar, and is usually brown in overall color.

In some more liberal Jewish households, people add other symbolic foods to their seder plates to call attention to issues of oppression, liberation, justice and inclusivity. Two of these new items that growing numbers of Jews are adding to their seder plates are:

- **An orange** – Putting an orange on the seder plate was [an idea](#) originated by Dr. Susannah Heschel in the 1980s. It represented the inclusion of LGBTQ and other marginalized people in the Jewish community, and the fruitfulness that these members of the community bring to Jewish life. Somehow, the new custom she shared with her guests morphed into a fast-traveling urban legend, and the story changed so that the orange was said to represent the

inclusion of women in Jewish religious leadership roles. Today, for many, the orange symbolizes all of the above.

- **Olives** are sometimes included as a call for peace between Israelis and Palestinians. For a short accompanying reading, click [here](#) and scroll to the bottom of the web page.

## The food we serve at the Passover meal also can tell our own family stories through traditional dishes that have been passed on through the generations.

- **Other symbolic foods** have been added to the seder plate over the years – Passover is a very flexible holiday, and different families and communities adapt it to their concerns and passions. If you'd like to read about other examples of this kind of ritual innovation, click [here](#), [here](#), or [here](#).

There are also important symbolic foods on the Passover seder table that aren't placed on the seder plate.

- **Matzah** is unleavened bread – flat, porous, crumbly and pretty tasteless. It is the primary story-telling food at Passover. It is the only bread that is eaten with a Passover seder meal, and throughout

the weeklong holiday. The plural of the Hebrew word matzah is matzot, with a long "o" sound.

According to the Exodus story, the enslaved ancestors of the Jewish people hurried to flee Egypt once Pharaoh had finally agreed to let them go. They wanted to bring provisions with them,

including bread that was baking in communal ovens. But in their desperate haste to get out of Egypt before the Pharaoh changed his mind, their bread didn't have time to rise, so the slaves took it as it was, flat and dry, and hurried towards freedom. For the whole week of Passover, the tradition is for Jews to refrain from eating bread or baked goods that have had time to rise – that are leavened – and instead to eat only matzah, which is also known as "the bread of slavery," "the bread of poverty," and "the bread of affliction."

At the beginning of the seder, the hosts place three matzot, piled on top of each other, on a plate. Some families

have a [cloth matzah cover](#), which has three cloth partitions inside, so you can slide one piece of Matzah into each of the interior sections. During the seder, as mentioned above, there's a point at which we take the middle matzah and break it in half. Apart from the three pieces of matzah that are used ceremonially during the seder, people also have lots of boxes or platters of matzah on the table so that everyone can have however much they want during the festive meal.

- **Salt water** – people place one or more bowls of salt water on the table for the seder. At one point early in the seder, there's a ritual activity in which everyone dips the green vegetable from the seder plate into the salt water and eats it. The salty water represents the tears of slaves, as well as the waters of the Red Sea that parted so the Jews could cross into freedom.

### *Some Traditional Passover Foods*

The food we serve at the Passover meal also can tell our own family stories through traditional dishes that have been passed on through the generations.

Passover foods are alien to most people who have not celebrated the holiday before. All families have different traditions, but there are some foods common to most



## Passover foods are alien to most people who have not celebrated the holiday before.

Jewish households in the United States. We have lots of [Passover recipes](#) available on our website.

- **Horseradish** is what most American Jews use for the ritual bitter herbs in the Passover seder. If you've never had it, be careful: It's related to mustard and wasabi, and is strong and pungent.
- **Matzah ball soup**, either chicken or vegetarian based, is [a favorite holiday food](#). Matzah balls are dumplings made from matzah meal and eggs. You can buy a mix to make matzah balls. If you Google "matzah ball soup recipes" you'll find literally hundreds, including videos. (And there's a [matzah ball app](#) for your iPhone.)
- **Gefilte fish** is a [poached fish ball](#) or patty made of chopped deboned freshwater fish, eggs and matzah meal. Many families eat it with horseradish to give it a kick. It was a food eaten by poor Jews in Eastern Europe and Russia. People who are new to it – including Jews of Sephardic or Mizrahi background – tend to either love it or hate it.
- **Matzah or potato kugel** is a sweet or savory pudding sometimes served as a

side dish at the Passover meal. [It can also be made](#) with Passover egg noodles. Want to see a master at work making one? Click [here](#).

- **Tzimmis** is a mixture of fruits and vegetables, often carrots, potatoes and dried fruits. Sometimes meat or chicken is added, and the Tzimmis cooked into a sweet and savory side dish. You can see a video demonstration on one family's recipe [here](#).
- **Sponge cake, macaroons, meringues** and other eggy desserts are traditional for Passover.

### Your Turn to Host the Seder?

Perhaps you've turned to this guide because you have married into a Jewish family and this year, it's your family's turn to host the Passover seder. This is awesome! Passover is a perfect holiday to honor your own family's history while teaching your children about Judaism and connecting with your Jewish relatives. The themes of



liberation and family origins in the traditional Haggadah text can expand to include your experience. Below we've included a bibliography of resources for families leading a Passover seder to help you make something meaningful for everyone.

Here's the short list of what's typically involved in hosting a seder:

- **Preparing the house for Passover** (we'll discuss this below)
- **Inviting guests** (this doesn't require formal invitations! A phone call or email will do it.)
- **Planning the seder service**, including providing copies of the Haggadah you choose for each participant

- **Planning and coordinating the cooking** of a festival meal, including wine or grape juice and ritual foods. To satisfy most Jewish guests, you'll need to do

flurry of preparations. Preparing for Passover includes both a literal house cleaning and a ritual one.

is to [plan ahead](#) and eat up all the leavened food before the cleaning begins, or to donate sealed-up packages of *chametz* to food banks.

In order to get rid of all the *chametz* in the home, in the days before the holiday begins, traditional Jews remove any foods that are leavened or fermented.

your best to prepare foods that are kosher for Passover. (What's this mean? More information can be found [on our website](#).) To be safe, pick up a Passover cookbook or a Jewish cookbook from the bookstore or library – they will have lots of kosher-for-Passover recipes.

- **Enjoying your family and friends** the night of the seder!

It can be a lot of work to host a seder, but hopefully well worth it! InterfaithFamily has [a helpful article](#) with tips for making your seder inclusive and welcoming for people of multiple backgrounds and faith traditions.

### Pre-Passover Preparation

Before Passover begins, many Jews have already begun their holiday observance in a

There are two major food rules that are part of the observance of Passover – 1) do eat matzah, and 2) don't eat or possess any leavened food products made out of certain grains – these foods are called *chametz* in Hebrew. In order to get rid of all the *chametz* in the home, in the days before the holiday begins, traditional Jews remove any foods that are leavened or fermented, like bread, vinegar or beer, or that contain any ingredients that could be made into something fermented, like flour. By searching for and removing all the *chametz*, such as bread, pasta and crackers, traditional Jews ready their kitchens for the Passover foods they will eat at the seder and the rest of the week of Passover.

Some families try not to have any *chametz* at all in their possession. One way to do this



There is a custom of selling your *chametz* to someone who is not Jewish. Since food is expensive and Passover is only one week long, in the past—and some still today—traditionally observant Jewish families sell any unused portions of leavened products

to neighbors who aren't Jewish, and then buy them back after the holiday. They may then gather all of these food products and seal them away in some part of the home that becomes off-limits during Passover. Once sold, the *chametz* isn't technically in their possession, even though they are actually storing it in sealed-up boxes in the basement, and even though they sold the food for some tiny amount of pocket change. Some congregations use the legal fiction of the chametz "sale" as an excuse to give money to *tzedakah* (charity): they deputize their rabbi to sell the food for them, and give him or her a check to be their agent. The rabbi sells the leavened food to people of other faith traditions and donates the agent money to charity.

After the *chametz* is out of the house and all household cleaning is done, shortly before the holiday begins, some Jews perform a ritual called *bidikat chametz*, the "Search for Leavened Foods." This is a fun ritual especially for families with young children. Here's how it works: The evening before the first seder, one person hides 10 bread crumbs throughout the house and then the family searches for them by candle light, using a feather to scoop them into a paper cone or envelope. The next morning, you take them outside and burn the whole

## The idea at Passover is to be hospitable and inclusive, to the best of a household's ability.

thing (feather and all). If you want to try it, there's a really user-friendly and humorous resource [here](#).

### Inviting Guests

It is also a tradition to invite guests to the seder. Many people will invite travelers, neighbors and friends, both Jewish and not Jewish. The idea at Passover is to be hospitable and inclusive, to the best of a household's ability. One of the best known lines of the traditional Haggadah is, "Let all who are hungry, come and eat." While it's not so easy to just throw your front door open, call out those words, and then get ready for whomever might walk in the door, there are still lots of ways people can act on the spirit of these words. Some families focus on trying to invite one or two guests whom they know are unlikely to receive an invitation elsewhere.

One thing you can do to increase the likelihood of everyone enjoying your seder is to include in your invitation some key points of information about the seder you are planning to hold. These include:

- 1. How long you envision the seder lasting.** It's perfectly OK to hold a short and sweet seder, or to hold an all-night-discuss-every-topic seder, but your guests will appreciate knowing what they're getting into if they accept your invitation. For families with small kids, arriving at a seder only to discover that it's going to be three hours before the meal is served and then highly intellectual discussions are going to carry on until 2 a.m. may turn the seder into, ironically, a form of bondage of its own, filled with antsy and bored kids and rumbling tummies.
- 2. What kind of Haggadah you plan to use** – is it strictly Orthodox, modern Reform, or a Haggadah with a special theme, like vegetarianism, LGBTQ equality, etc.? You can use [Haggadot.com](http://Haggadot.com) to explore the many customizable options or [purchase one](#) that resonates with your family.
- 3. What level of keeping kosher** for Passover you are observing. If you invite someone who maintains a very traditional form of observance, s/he will appreciate knowing beforehand if your



seder is one at which they wouldn't feel comfortable eating, even though they may deeply appreciate the intention behind the invitation. You may also want to indicate whether or not kosher-for-Passover wine and grape juice will be the only wine/juice served, or whether that restriction won't be followed.

4. **What activities, if any, there will be for kids**, both in the seder and away from the seder table.
5. **What kinds of help you need** to pull all this off. It's perfectly OK to ask for support to make the evening work for the kids and the adults, or ask some guests to cook and bring certain dishes to contribute to the meal.
6. **Has everyone had enough?** Whether you plan to go through the seder from first page to last, or whether you are planning to play it by ear and, if there's a sense in the room that everyone's kind of "sedered out," that you might just call it a night. (This sometimes happens after everyone is finishing up eating the festive meal.)

### Passover Cooking

Cooking for Passover is fun and, depending on how far into it you get, it can be complicated. The prohibition on using any leavened foods and the grains that even have the potential to become leavened has

provided an opportunity for Jewish culinary invention. Something to keep in mind – especially for families that are new at Passover – is that the traditional rules for observing the holiday are filled with dozens of details, especially around keeping the kitchen kosher for Passover. For some families, the rules can feel so overwhelming that trying to keep all of them gets in the way of enjoying the festival and its main themes – liberation, hope, and rededication to pursue freedom for all oppressed people everywhere. Our advice is



**Talk as a family about how much of the various rules and customs you feel ready to take on, and then do your best to meet your goals, while being forgiving of yourself and each other if you have lapses or make mistakes.**

to talk as a family about how much of the various rules and customs you feel ready to take on, and then do your best to meet your goals, while being forgiving of yourself and each other if you have lapses or make mistakes.

The main Passover restriction is on five grains – wheat, rye, barley, spelt, and oats – that might be ground into flour and fermented with yeast to rise. The exception is, of course, matzah. Matzah is a large flat bread made of wheat flour or other grains permitted on Passover. Matzah bakers mix

Passover is a holiday that the Jewish community has used, throughout the centuries, to remind us of our heritage of freeing others because we were freed.

the flour with water and bake it immediately in a hot oven so that it does not have a chance to rise.

Jews have a long tradition of grinding Matzah into a flour-like consistency, called Matzah meal, to make ersatz versions of non-Passover foods. It can be very confusing to go into a supermarket and find Passover cereal, Passover pasta and Passover cake mix, when you know that traditional Jews are avoiding regular cold cereal, pasta and cake mix. This is just the modern version of Jews rising to the culinary challenge of Passover, to keep the laws that commemorate the Exodus from Egypt without giving up all of life's goodies.

Your best bet for finding kosher-for-Passover recipes is a Passover cookbook or kosher cookbook, both of which are available at most bookstores and libraries.

By the way, for years when Easter falls during the week of Passover, if your family

(or extended family) needs a way to have a kosher-for-Passover Easter meal, [we have resources](#) for that too.

### Passover Themes Meaningful to Interfaith Families

The Passover story is the primary story in Jewish history, and one that Jews retell in short form at every prayer service in the words "...God, who freed us from Egyptian bondage..." Passover is an occasion to retell the whole story. But telling the story is not enough.

Passover is a holiday that the Jewish community has used, throughout the centuries, to remind us of our heritage of freeing others because we were freed. It is the "slavery to freedom" theme that is central to our command to be more than simply good people, but to be people who pursue justice for others.

Along with an end to slavery, in the literal sense, Passover also has the power to teach

us about other types of liberation. We might focus on warfare, on poverty, on healthcare systems, on homelessness, on bigotry, on abuse in the home and a whole host of other issues important in a world of creating and restoring justice. A wonderful non-profit organization called American Jewish World Service (AJWS) offers free Passover resources that connect the Exodus story and its moral mandate to current events, raising our awareness of those who still suffer in bondage, and offering ideas for how we can try to help these people. More about that [here](#).

Passover is also a story about journeys. Therefore it might be a time to tell our spiritual journeys to each other. We might help each other by discussing and attempting to solve problems that have been plaguing us (pun intended) for weeks or months. And each of the Passover foods that tell the Exodus story also helps us to tell our current stories.

Regardless of the themes chosen, by any particular seder gathering, conversation and supportive argument is key to a successful Passover meal. While some homes don't choose this path, it is customary in traditional Jewish homes.



If your family is leading a seder, you can make it meaningful to all who come to the table: children and adults, Jewish and not Jewish relatives and friends.

### Engaging Children and Adults

The Passover seder is [meant to be engaging](#). The most traditional seder features storytelling, singing, foods as teaching tools, questions and answers, and an emotional journey.

Children have a special role in the seder. It's traditional for the youngest child to [recite the Four Questions](#) in the Haggadah. Passover traditions have a strong sense of play. In many families the adults hide the afikoman (mentioned previously) for the children to find, or the children steal the afikoman and hide it from the adults. Many Passover customs exist solely for the purpose of making the children ask more questions.

Today, we can enhance our seders with puppets and plays, toy plagues to throw at each other, poetry and songs of freedom. For a look at hundreds of creative crafts projects families have used to

entertain and teach their kids, and make the seder more fun, see [here](#). People use the format of the seder to celebrate themes of freedom and justice, and the connection of the Jewish historical experience with those of other people. There are Black-Jewish seders that share the history of slavery. There are Israeli-Palestinian seders that explore the pain, suffering, and violence of the conflict, and which seek to foster greater peace and understanding. And there are rainbow seders for all kinds of inclusive learning and community.

If your family is leading a seder, you can make it meaningful to all who come to the table: children and adults, Jewish and not Jewish relatives and friends. We have provided a list of Haggadot and other

Passover resources to help you create an engaging Seder that addresses the universal themes of liberation and family origins of Passover. (See Additional Resources below).

### Community Seders at Synagogues: What to Expect

The Passover seder is a home observance, and was not traditionally done in synagogue. Here in the U.S., congregations and Jewish organizations have offered public seders for generations. They exist to offer a large community experience of Passover to people who might otherwise be alone on the holiday or unable to create their own seder. Some people will participate in a temple seder one night and attend a home seder on another night of Passover. Temples also offer model seders that are usually geared for the Passover beginner and for families with young children who may not yet be ready to create a big holiday experience at home. You can practice at a model seder and then go home and make your own.



Temple seders can make good learning experiences for interfaith families, especially when neither partner in the household has led their own seder. These are also good for single people who are away from family. They also serve as a comfortable training ground for people who are considering or have just gone through a conversion process. Anonymity in large crowds often can feel more comfortable for learning than feeling put on the spot at a small private gathering. In any case, however, the job of the leaders is to make the guests feel comfortable enough to join in and safe enough to say no to participating if they are uncomfortable.

Temple seders are often shorter than home seders and are also good for people who want the full experience without the time in preparation and the duration of the meal itself.

For seders in your area, see InterfaithFamily's [event listings](#).

## Additional Resources

### Online Resources

- Barenblatt, Rachel, ed. [The Velveteen Rabbi's Haggadah for Pesach](#).  
A non-denominational Haggadah with a lot of readings in English, transliterations for Hebrew text and good jumping-off points for discussion.
- InterfaithFamily Staff. "[Tips for Interfaith Families: How To Make a Seder Inclusive](#)."
- Wiener, Julie. "[What you need to know about the Seder](#)." *The Island Packet*, April 9, 2008.

### How-To Guides

- Arnow, David. *Creating Lively Passover Seders: An Interactive Sourcebook of Tales, Texts & Activities*. Woodstock: Jewish Lights Publishing, 2004.
- Kay, Alan Abraham, and Jo Kay. *Make Your Own Passover Seder: A New Approach to Creating a Personal Family Celebration*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2004.
- Raphael, Geela Rayzel. "[Five Interfaith Passover Readings You Can Add to Your Haggadah](#)." InterfaithFamily.

## Cookbooks

- Shulman, Zell. *Passover Seders Made Simple*. New York: Wiley, 2001.  
A cookbook and guide to planning the menu at your Seder.
- Wasserman, Debra. *No Cholesterol Passover Recipes*. Baltimore, Md.: Vegetarian Resource Group, 1995.  
A vegan Passover cookbook that conforms to strict Ashkenazi Passover kashrut guidelines.

## Haggadahs for Reading and Study

- Dishon, David, and Noam Zion. *A Different Night, The Family Participation Haggadah*. Albuquerque, N.M.: Shalom Hartman Institute, 1997.  
This non-denominational Haggadah is very complete, and makes a good source for reading and study.
- Elwell, Sue Levi. *The Open Door: A Passover Haggadah*. New York: Central Conference Of American Rabbis, 2007.  
A Reform movement Haggadah that is available as a book for purchase, or may be [downloaded online](#).

- Hoffman, Lawrence A., and David Arnow. *My People's Passover Haggadah: Traditional Texts, Modern Commentaries Volumes 1 and 2*. Woodstock, Vt.: Jewish Lights Publishing, 2008.

### User-Friendly Haggadahs

- Codor, Liora, and Richard Codor. *Richard Codor's Joyous Haggadah: A Children and Family Cartoon Haggadah for Passover Seder*. New York: Loose Line Productions, Inc., 2008.  
A new children's Haggadah with lively pictures.

- Congregation Beth Adam. *Beth Adam - The Seder: A Contemporary Haggadah*. New York: Congregation Beth Adam, 2006. A non-theistic, humanist Seder that contains most of the traditional rituals but no mention of God.

- Roekard, Karen. *The Santa Cruz Haggadah*. Capitola, Calif.: Hineni Consciousness Press, 1992.  
An accessible Haggadah for adults with cartoon illustrations.

- Silberman, and Ozeri. *The Jewish World Family Haggadah: With Photographs by Zion Ozeri*. Akron, Ohio: I Books, 2005.

This glossy Haggadah is beautifully illustrated with photographs that show Jewish diversity.

- Levitt, Joy, and Michael Strassfeld. *A Night of Questions: A Passover Haggadah*. Elkins Park, Pa.: Reconstructionist Press, 1999.  
A good Haggadah for children and newcomers.



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