

My Experience as a Jew at Passover

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Unlike other Jewish festivals, Passover does not involve presents, delicious foods, sweets, dancing or games. Instead there are very strict dietary restrictions, long services and a strong emphasis on history. It may, therefore, seem surprising that Passover has always been my favourite of the approximately 16 main Jewish festivals marked each year.

Passover lasts eight days (or seven for those following Reform Jewish customs or living in Israel) and centres around the remembrance of the Exodus of the Jews from Egypt, where they were slaves thousands of years ago. For many practicing Jews, the pinnacle of Passover is the two Seders. A Seder is a ritual evening meal absolutely dripping in customs and symbolism. Although each family may have their own traditions and tunes, no matter where you are in the world, you will experience the telling of the story of the Exodus, drink four cups of wine whilst reclining, eat matza (unleavened bread) and other symbolic foods, share a meal together and sing numerous songs and blessings in Hebrew.

The youngest at the table sings the song “Mah nishtanah” that asks four key questions (“Why do we eat only unleavened bread?”, “Why do we eat bitter herbs?”, “Why do we dip our food twice?” “Why do we recline?”) with the refrain “Why is this night different from all other nights?”. These questions are then answered through the telling of the Passover story by reading through a Haggadah, which is a book containing all the passages read, rituals performed and songs sung during the Seder in the specific and ancient order.

Asking questions is absolutely key to the celebration and appreciation of Passover. It was only as I became older that I learned that some of the many rituals of the Seder exist purely to prompt the children to question them. Indeed, at points the focal Seder Plate (containing the symbolic foods – an egg, a bone, bitter herbs, a vegetable to be dipped in salt water, and a sweet mixture called Charoset approximating an edible version of the mortar used by the Jewish slaves to build the pyramids) is removed from the table with the sole purpose of prompting a child to ask why it has been removed which can then escalate into a full-blown recital of Jewish history.

I believe the concept of questioning is relevant to all of Judaism. Through questioning what I am taught, I am able to expand my knowledge and appraise its relevance to my life. The questioning of friends’ own beliefs and opinions has allowed me to broaden my horizons – religiously, morally, spiritually and politically. Most importantly, the constant self-questioning of my own Jewish beliefs and values and how they sit with my predominantly liberal and forward-thinking secular opinions has been key in my personal development as a Jew living in modern day Britain.

The very essence of Passover is the remembrance of the Exodus from Egypt and thanking God for this miracle. It is emphasised in the Hagaddah that one must remember the Exodus as if they themselves had been freed from Egypt, and the story is read using the words “your”, “we”, “I” etc. in order to increase the connection between modern day Jews and the Jews of Ancient Egypt. Naturally, it is an opportunity to not only remember to be grateful for your own personal

freedom and the other good things in your life, but also to remember those in our world who still remain in captivity or whose beliefs and rights are oppressed. It is fitting that many families will recite a prayer for the victims of the Holocaust, an example of a potentially more relatable tragedy to befall the Jewish people (and indeed so many others).

Personally, I have found celebrating Passover to be a very formative experience in the development of my Jewish identity. As a child living in Scotland where Jews constitute a mere 0.1% of the population, I would often tell acquaintances and even friends that I was simply vegetarian instead of explaining the Jewish food laws. My weekends often revolved around synagogue where I would attend services and Sunday School, but I was able to keep my Jewish life quite separate from my secular life. However the dietary restrictions of Passover generally led me to try to explain what was going on to my school friends. The avoidance of all foods and drinks containing grains like wheat, oats and rye, and even other foods like peas, rice, lentils and beans is to commemorate that the Jews did not have time for their bread to rise as they fled Egypt, and hence the consumption of anything leavened is prohibited. This would often result in more questions asked about Judaism. I have become far more confident telling anyone who will listen about my faith and its importance to me, spurred on by these early childhood conversations. Recently I have found myself explaining to baffled flatmates, friends and colleagues about my Jewish heritage spurred on by questions about the observance of Passover.

Like so many religious festivals, Passover is generally spent with family, friends and community and prompts many less observant Jews to resurface to mark this important celebration in some way. However unlike many holidays both in the Jewish religion and presumably other faiths as well, it is actually very difficult for the true meaning to be masked. There is no exchange of gifts to distract us, and each and every tradition is symbolic in some way of the Exodus. Rules surrounding cleaning and eating act as continual reminders of the very purpose of Passover – to remember our past, whilst concluding the Seder with the words “Next year in Jerusalem!” prompts us to look to the future and to re-evaluate and question our own lives.