

PASSOVER STORY

by Rabbi Dr. Herbert M. Baumgard
Temple Beth Am, Miami, Florida
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Springtime is the season of hope. In most parts of the world, it is the season of rebirth, when crops begin to grow after the hard winter. In ancient Greek and Semitic religion, spring was the season when the god of vegetation (Tammuz, Adonis) was resurrected from the underworld. So springtime is the season of resurrection in Judaism - the season when the people was reborn (from slavery to freedom). In Judaism, the God does not die, nor is He reborn. He is an "ale chai, an ever-living God."

On the other hand, a people may suffer defeat and enslavement, and it experiences the seasons of life-barrenness and fertility, defeat and victory. The cycle of Jewish holidays is geared to nature's ebb and flow and to Israel's history. Passover, the spring holiday, is a celebration of nature's revival (see the Song of Songs read in the synagogues at this season) and a celebration of the Exodus from Egypt.

Passover has twin themes - creation and freedom. It has its vivid symbols: matzah, the unleavened bread, "the bread of affliction", a reminder of ancient and present suffering; maror, bitter herbs, a reminder of the bitter times endured by the Jewish slaves in Egypt; and charoset, the sweet mixture of nuts and raisins and apples which are, at once, a reminder of the good to be experienced by the faithful and the mortar used to make the bricks for Pharaoh's cities.

The major religious services are held in the Synagogue on the first two and last two days of the holiday in Traditional Synagogues (on the first and last day in Reform congregations). A Seder, a family meal during which the Passover story is told as part of a religious service in the home, is one of the joyous features of the holiday. Some congregations hold a congregational Seder in modern times, but the home Seder is the primary experience of the holiday.

American Jewish families will recite special prayers at their Seders for Russian Jews who are not free to celebrate the Passover.

During the Seder, a special cup of wine is passed for Elijah, the great prophet who, according to legend, will return to earth to announce the coming of the Messiah. Since Passover is the season of redemption (from slavery), Jewish tradition teaches that the Messiah will come, ushering in a world of peace and justice, at Passover time.