

The Florence Melton Adult Mini-School  
Section: Rhythms of Jewish Living  
<http://mcohen02.tripod.com/rhythms.html>  
Instructor: Dr. Marsha B. Cohen  
E-mail: marbcohen@gmail.com

## Topic: Pesach I

<http://mcohen02.tripod.com/pesach.html>

**Key Idea:** The Exodus from Egypt is the starting point of the historical narrative of the Jewish people as a nation. It is referred constantly in the daily and Shabbat prayer services, in the Shabbat and festival *kiddush*, but, most of all, in the observance of Passover (Pesach), a spring pilgrimage festival on the 15<sup>th</sup> of Nisan which, in ancient Israel, took place at the time of the barley harvest. Today's texts will examine some of the texts concerning Pesach in the *TaNakh*, and how the rituals with which we are familiar evolved from them.

The popularity of the Passover seder as a participatory Jewish ritual, structured around the *Haggadah*, and the centrality of the Exodus from Egypt as a motif in Jewish liturgy tend to overshadow and distract attention from the observance of Pesach before the Rabbinic and Geonic period. As we shall see, the Pesach we know today is a complex conflation of two separate festivals discussed in the Torah--the festival of the Passover offering and the seven day festival of unleavened bread—with the ripening of the barley and the Exodus from Egypt. Various texts referring to Pesach before the Haggadah provide insights into the way the Festival of the Passover Sacrifice and the Festival of Matzot may have fused into one.

When did Jews actually begin observing Pesach, and how? Outside of the *TaNakh*, which provides testimony concerning kings Josiah and Hezekiah, archaeologists have retrieved hundreds of sixth century BCE Aramaic documents from the Judaic quarter of the island. One of these documents records that a temple built by a Jewish military garrison on Yeb was already in existence when Cambyses invaded Egypt in 525 BCE. The existence of a Jewish community in Egypt is also hinted at in the reference to the "Book of the Law" discovered by King Josiah c. 623 BCE, believed to have been a version of the book of Deuteronomy. In the first century, according to the Jewish historian Josephus, Pesach and the Feast of Matzot appear to have still been separate festivals.

Beyond the historical evolution of the festival, we will also examine the development of its meaning and messages during the past two millennia.

### ***Our discussion of the texts:***

**Text 1: Exodus 12:2-20.** Nisan is the first month of the year. A lamb or young goat is sacrificed on the afternoon of the 14<sup>th</sup>, and its blood placed on the doorposts so that the plague afflicting on Egyptian firstborn will pass by (*pasach*) Israelite homes. That night the roasted lamb/kid is roasted and eaten with unleavened bread and bitter herbs.

**Text 2: Leviticus 23 :4-8.** The distinction between the festival of the passover offering (*pesach*) and the Feast of Unleavened Bread. On the 14<sup>th</sup> day of Nisan a lamb is sacrificed. On the 15<sup>th</sup> of Nisan, on which no work may be done, the 7 day festival of *matzot* begins, and sacrifices are brought for the next 7 days. The seventh day is also a sacred holiday when no work may be done.

**Text 6: Exodus 12:16.** No work may be done on the Feast of Unleavened Bread.

**Text 3: Exodus 12:33-34; 39.** The Israelites hastily depart from Egypt after the 10<sup>th</sup> plague with no time for their bread to rise.

**Suppl. text: Joshua 5:10.** The observance of the Pesach and of Festival of Matzot under the leadership of Joshua.

**Suppl. text: II Chronicles.** Evidence that the Israelites may not have not been observing Pesach in the prescribed manner between the time of Joshua (12<sup>th</sup> c. BCE) and that of Josiah (late 7<sup>th</sup> century BCE).

Suppl text: "The Passover Papyrus." **One of the "Elephantine papyri "from the archive of manuscripts belonging to the Elephantine Jewish community stationed in Egypt between 499-395 BCE.** This unique Jewish community originated as a military garrison on the island of Elephantina in the Nile, near Nubian border, and now part of the city of Aswan. It possessed its own temple to Yahweh apparently functioning alongside the long-established cult shrine of the local ram-headed deity Khnum. **A very defective strip of papyrus with Aramaic writing on both sides dated 419 BCE, the "Passover papyrus" was discovered in Elephantine, Egypt, January, 1907 and is in the Egyptian Museum of Berlin.**

To my brethren Yedoniah and his colleagues the Jewish garrison, from your brother Hananiah. The welfare of my brothers may God seek at all times. Now, this year, the fifth year of King Darius [419 BCE. Darius was Emperor of Persia from 424-404 BCE] word was sent from the king to Arsames [the Persian satrap over Egypt] saying, "*Authorize a festival of unleavened bread for the Jewish garrison.*" So accordingly count fourteen days of the month of Nisan and observe the passover, and from the 15<sup>th</sup> to the 21<sup>st</sup> day of Nisan observe the festival of unleavened bread. Be (ritually) clean and take heed. Do no work on the 15<sup>th</sup> or the 21<sup>st</sup> day, nor drink beer, nor eat anything in which there is leaven from the 14<sup>th</sup> at sundown until the 21<sup>st</sup> of Nis[an. For seven days it shall not be seen among you. Do not bring it into your dwellings but seal (it) up between these dates. *By order of King Darius.*

**Suppl. text: Josephus, *Antiquities*, Book III, Chapter 10:5 (c. 93 CE).**

In the month of Xanthicus, which is by us called Nisan, and is the beginning of our year, on the fourteenth day of the lunar month, when the sun is in Aries...the law ordained that we should every year slay that sacrifice which was called the Pesach and so do we celebrate this passover in companies, leaving nothing of what we sacrifice till the day following...The feast of unleavened bread succeeds that of the Passover, and falls on the fifteenth day of the month and continues seven days...

**Text 4: Talmud, Berakhot 17a.** Leaven (*chametz*) is, on the national level, associated with subjection to foreign powers that prevent us from fulfilling our obligations to God. On a personal level, *chametz* is analogous to enslavement to the *yetzer harah* (evil inclination).

**Text 5: Haggadah.** *Ha lachma anya* describes *matza* as the "bread of affliction." In Deut. 16:3, the Torah calls matza *lechem oni*, Hebrew for *lachma anya*.

**Text 7: Rabbi Irving Greenberg, *Judaism as an Exodus Religion: Passover.*** The annual observance of Pesach is best understood in the context of daily and weekly acknowledgements of the Exodus. The Exodus is more than a memory: it is an ancient experience that serves as a reference point, influencing the political, economic and legal decisions that we make every day.

**Text 8: Exodus 13:8.** The obligation to transmit to children the reason for the redemption of firstborn sons in the context of the Exodus.