

Interfaith Welcoming Passover Seder





1716 E. Franklin St.
Richmond, VA 23223
www.virginiainterfaithcenter.org



6101 Executive Blvd.
North Bethesda, MD 20852
www.jccouncil.org

Planning Your Interfaith Welcoming Passover Seder

The Virginia Interfaith Center for Public Policy and the Jewish Community Relations Council of Greater Washington are collaborating to encourage families, congregations and communities to hold Interfaith Welcoming Passover Seders this Passover season.

The Interfaith Welcoming Passover Seder will:

- Build relationships between Christians, Jews, Muslims and immigrants in our midst;
- Affirm that Virginia is a place that welcomes all;
- Challenge messages and acts of hate that have made Jews, Muslims and immigrants feel frightened or unwelcome;
- Lift up the Passover themes of justice and migration.

You can plan one. Any person, congregation or community can plan an Interfaith Welcoming Passover Seder. Here's what you do:

- **Choose a date.** If you regularly host a Passover Seder in your home, consider making it an Interfaith Welcoming Passover Seder this year. If you are planning a congregation or community Seder, you may want to consider a Sunday afternoon or evening (good for most faith communities) in late April or early May. In general, avoid Fridays, Saturdays and Sunday mornings, hard days/times to engage Christians, Jews and Muslims. Be aware of the dates for Holy Week for Christians.
- **Choose a place:** An Interfaith Welcoming Passover Seder can work in many locations – a synagogue, a mosque, a church, a community center, or a home. Simply decide the number of people you want to invite and pick a spot. Given the goals of community building, a smaller home setting is good.
- **Use the following prepared order of service.** We are offering this service (*haggadah*/liturgy) for your use and adaptation. The service can be downloaded from both www.virginiainterfaithcenter.org (under Resources) and www.jccouncil.org.
- **Recruit diverse leaders.** An Interfaith Welcoming Passover Seder should model the diversity we seek to affirm in its leadership. Recruit diverse leaders to participate in leadership roles. Both VICPP and the JCRC can assist you in identifying people in your community if you need help. Rabbis, of course, are experienced in leading Seder services, but other lay Jewish leaders can be recruited as well. (Although technically the leader doesn't have to be Jewish, it is helpful to have someone who is familiar with traditional Seder services in leadership.)
- **Invite people to participate.** Decide how many people you'd like to participate. Invite people either through personal channels or congregation/community ones. Given the themes around welcoming refugees and immigrants, figure out how you can invite some refugees or immigrants. Also, given the current anti-Muslim environment, you should also be intentional about inviting (and welcoming) Muslims to the Seder.
- **Publicize your Seder.** Let VICPP and JCRC know you are hosting a Seder as they can help to promote it.

• **Print out materials:** All participants should have a copy of the liturgy.

• **Arrange for the Seder food symbols:** Below are the primarily food symbols you will need and a few notes about where to find them:

Matzah — This can be found in almost all grocery stores.

Maror (Bitter herbs) — Romaine lettuce, horseradish or endives (escarole).

Haroset — A mixture of fruit and nuts designed to look like mortar. Recipe: mix 1 apple peeled and diced, 1 cup chopped or ground walnuts, and ½ cup sweet red wine.

Egg — Any hardboiled egg will do.

Zeroa (Shank Bone) — A roasted lamb shank bone, which you can find at any butcher. You can also simply use a chicken or turkey bone. Vegetarians have been known to replace the bone with beets.

Salt water — Make your own by adding salt to water.

Karpas (Greens) — Most Seders use parsley or celery for greens.

• **Decide on other food:** Most Seders have prepared food or a potluck of food. Decide how you want to arrange for food. Feel free to ask people to contribute to shared costs or contribute a dish.

• **Set the table:** Before people arrive, you will need to set up the table (or tables). Have a plate with three pieces of matzah. Set out a cup with wine/grape juice for Elijah and a cup of water for Miriam.

THE SEDER MEAL

A meal to celebrate and remember the Passover night when God rescued the Children of Israel from slavery in Egypt

WHY DO WE OBSERVE THIS FEAST?

Moses said, "You shall observe this rite as a perpetual ordinance for you and your children. When you come to the land that the LORD will give you, as he has promised, you shall keep this observance. And when your children ask you, 'What do you mean by this observance?' you shall say, 'It is the passover sacrifice to the LORD, for he passed over the houses of the Israelites in Egypt, when he struck down the Egyptians but spared our houses.'" And the people bowed down and worshipped.

—Exodus 12:24-27

PRAYERS

Blessed are you, O Lord our God, ruler of the universe, for you kept us alive and sustained us and brought us to this season. May this place be made holy by the light of your presence, shining upon us in blessing and giving us peace. Amen.

Blessed are you, O Lord our God, ruler of the universe, for you feed all with your goodness, with grace and lovingkindness and with compassion. You give food to all flesh, and your mercy endures forever. Amen.

EGG
The egg symbolizes the desire for freedom to which hard labor gave birth.

PARSLEY
A symbol of springtime, parsley is placed in salt water, a sign of the tears that need to be shed before joy can be experienced.

MIXED FRUIT
Mixed fruit, called charoseth (which is made of apples and walnuts), helps us to remember the mortar which the Israelites were forced to make when they were slaves in Egypt.

UNLEAVENED BREAD
The unleavened bread is the bread of haste, made with eagerness to experience the Lord's deliverance.

WINE
Wine is drunk to honor the Lord, recognizing his benefits, and the goodness that makes everything possible.

BITTER HERBS
Bitter herbs, usually red shredded horseradish, represent the bitterness the Israelites endured before their escape from Egypt.

SHANK BONE
The shank bone of the Passover Lamb brings to mind the deliverance which the Lord God wrought for us by the blood of this sacrifice. It is served on the plate reserved for Elijah.

DEFINITIONS

Baruch Attah Adonai Eloheinu. A phrase in the ancient Hebrew language, meaning, "Blessed are you, O Lord our God."

Seder. A Hebrew word meaning "order" or "arrangement," since all the rituals of the meal are done in a very specific sequence.

Passover. An 8-day holiday commemorating the night the angel of death "passed over" the homes of the Israelites in Egypt whose doorposts were marked with the blood of a lamb. The Seder meal is traditionally eaten on the first day of Passover.



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Interfaith Welcoming Passover Seder

Introduction

Please encourage several readers by going around the table, allowing each participant to read alternating paragraphs.

The Jewish festival of Passover commemorates the Israelites' Exodus from slavery into freedom over 3,000 years ago as recounted in the Torah, the Jewish scripture. The purpose of our gathering today to participate in our Interfaith Welcoming Seder is to unite our diverse community through elevating the universal themes of religious freedom, welcoming the stranger, and all people's journeys from slavery to freedom as recounted in the Passover story.

Background [*Not necessary to read aloud*]: The major event of Passover is the Seder, a ceremonial meal with a liturgical component, which enables us to retell and relive the story of the Exodus from Egypt. The word "Seder" means, "order," as we conduct this service in a certain order. The heart of the Passover Seder tells the story of the Jewish people's Exodus from slavery in Egypt. During the retelling of this story, we say the words, "Arami oved avi." This phrase is sometimes translated as "My father was a wandering Aramean" and other times as "An Aramean sought to destroy my father." Somewhere between the two translations lies the essence of the Jewish experience: a rootless people who have fled persecution time and time again.

[*Participants should read aloud*]:

"This year we amplify our concerns for the millions who are persecuted in the name of religion, the millions who are abused for practicing their faith, and those abused because they are immigrants or refugees. We remember that when Moses first said to Pharaoh, "Let my people go," his demand was for religious freedom: "Let my people go so they may celebrate a feast for God." Moses was asking in the name of God for the most basic of human rights, the right to practice one's faith freely. That clarion call is as fresh today as the day it was first spoken by Moses.

In our own day, so many of the world's conflicts are motivated or heightened by religious strife, be it a resurgence of worldwide anti-Semitism in the shadow of the *Shoah*, the Holocaust; oppression and decimation of the world's oldest Christian communities through murder, mayhem and expulsion; persecution of vulnerable Muslims; or the devastating battles turning brothers against sisters within the same religious family. People are forced to flee their homes due to violence — physical or economic. Here at home we are deeply troubled by threats against Jewish institutions, torching of mosques, and targeting of immigrants and refugees, among increased manifestations of hate.

Until all of God's people recognize the Divine image in every sister and brother, the Passover we hope for will elude us. Until all God's people can experience their quest for religious meaning without fear, the Passover to which we aspire will escape our grasp.

Our most fervent prayers are for the millions of immigrants and refugees, many of whom fled their ancestral homes as believers who dared to be different from the local majority or as parents seeking opportunities to feed and clothe their families. As we sit at our Seder tables, we voice our prayers and concern. We extend our hands to those who have escaped from countries that are plagued by religious strife, war and life-choking poverty.

Whether it applies to us personally or to our neighbor around the corner or around the world, we repeat the Seder prayer every year, 'This year, we are slaves; next year, may we be free'."

Symbolism of the Seder

At the Seder, every person should feel as if he or she were a slave going out of Egypt.

Background: Traditionally, the Seder begins with the story of the Jewish patriarchs, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, and recounts the Jewish people's descent into Egypt, recalling their suffering and persecution. We are with them as the ten plagues punish Pharaoh and his nation, and follow along as Moses leads the Israelites out of Egypt and across the Red Sea. We witness the parting of the waters, allowing the Israelites to pass and escape. As we eat bitter foods of affliction and poverty, the Exodus becomes a reality.

The service is read out of a book called a *Haggadah*, and as the narrative proceeds we refer to several symbolic items on a large plate called a Seder plate. Traditionally, each item on the plate is used and explained as the meal progresses. Today, we will use the symbolism of the Seder plate as a springboard for our discussions

Please point to each item, describe, and discuss the questions below.

Matzah — Unleavened bread, representing the bread of affliction that was eaten by the slaves as they rushed out of Egypt.

Question: Do you know of any family member or friend where that person was afraid and had to leave quickly to escape in fear? Do you know women or children who had to leave an abusive home to save their lives? Do you know an immigrant or a refugee that left because of the fears of violence or oppression?

Maror (Bitter Herbs) — Representing the bitterness of life as a slave.

Question: Have you heard the stories of living in desperation, enslavement to oppression that left almost no more tears, only daily drudgery and pain? Do you know of immigrants who have been abused in their workplaces because they are immigrants?

Haroset — A mixture of fruit and nuts designed to look like mortar. Its sweetness represents the sweetness of freedom, and its appearance reminds us of the mortar the Israelites were forced to make for Pharaoh.

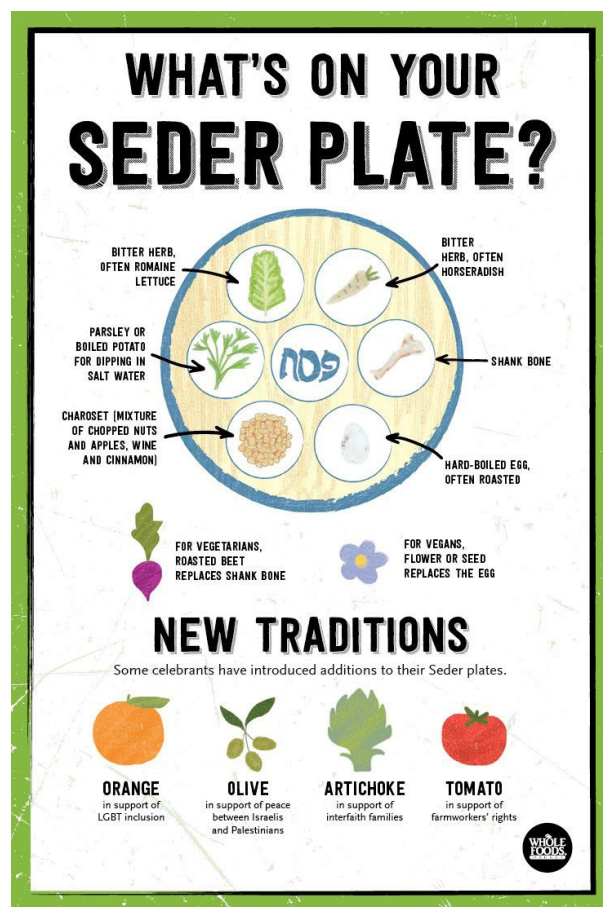
Egg — Represents the circle of life.

Shank Bone — Represents the lamb that Jews sacrificed as the special annual Passover offering when the Temple stood in Jerusalem.

Salt water — Represents the tears of the slaves

Question: Have you sat with someone who has been overwhelmed with grief and tears from finding no way out of a hurtful place in life? Have you or someone you know been mistreated because of your race, faith or immigration status?

Karpas (Greens) — Represent the initial flourishing of the Israelites during the first years in Egypt, and the coming spring (participants may each dip some greens into saltwater to eat).



Other Symbols:

Elijah's Cup — On each table stands a cup for Elijah, the prophet in Jewish tradition who will usher in the messianic age, an era of global peace. As each participant adds some grape juice or wine to Elijah's Cup, we are pledging to make some contribution to help bring about a messianic age, when all immigrants and refugees will be welcome in our midst (please ask each participant to add some wine or grape juice to the cup).



Miriam's Cup — Many Seders also include a cup for Miriam, Moses's sister. Jewish tradition tells us that a well followed the Jewish people through the desert due to Miriam's merit. As each participant adds some water to Miriam's Cup, we are pledging to help nourish an immigrant family or refugee (please ask each participant to add some water to the cup).

From Amidst Brokenness (Breaking the middle *matzah*)

Take the middle matzah of the three on your Seder plate. Break it into two pieces. Wrap the larger piece, the "*Afikoman*," in a napkin to be hidden later. As you hold up the remaining smaller piece, read these words together:

"We now hold up this broken matzah, which so clearly can never be repaired. We eat the smaller part while the larger half remains out of sight and out of reach for now. We begin by eating this bread of affliction and, then, only after we have relived the journey through slavery and the Exodus from Egypt, do we eat the Afikoman, the bread of our liberation. We see that liberation can come from imperfection and fragmentation. Every day, immigrants and refugees across the globe experience the consequences of having their lives ruptured, and, yet, they find ways to pick up the pieces and forge a new, if imperfect, path forward."

Refugee Stories (please select one to read with the group)

Art and Education Bloom in the Desert

The world's refugee camps are some of the most desolate backdrops against which people fleeing violence and persecution rebuild their lives.

The Akre Refugee Camp in Iraq, which houses hundreds of Syrian families, was built out of the remains of a former Saddam Hussein prison. The Za'atari Refugee Camp in Jordan, one of the world's most populous refugee camps, consists of endless rows of beige tents and caravans with almost no plant or animal life. Dust storms, heat, and blindingly bright sunlight make life unbearable for the more than 100,000 primarily Syrian residents. Without much structured activity or access to education, the thousands of children in these camps sit listlessly.

Initiatives like the Za'atari Project and the Castle Art Project are changing this bleak reality. Through these projects, children paint vividly colored murals on the walls of their temporary homes.

They begin to work through the trauma they have experienced and to articulate and depict their dreams in Technicolor. These projects create a sense of camaraderie and community amongst the participants and even provide a venue for the volunteers who run them to provide informal classes on water conservation, camp hygiene, and conflict resolution, in addition to artistic techniques.



Finding Work Amidst Discrimination

The 1951 Refugee Convention clearly states that host countries must permit asylum seekers and refugees to engage in both wage-earning and self-employment. According to asylum experts, “the right [to work] has been recognized to be so essential to the realization of other rights that without the right to work, all other rights are meaningless.” Even with these legal protections, though, outside of the United States, “many of the world’s refugees, both recognized and unrecognized, are effectively barred from accessing safe and lawful employment.”

Despite these challenges, refugees are finding innovative ways to sustain themselves. Paola, a 64 year-old refugee from Jurado, Colombia now living in Jaqué, Panama, started a small business selling tamales with a local Panamanian woman. However, she found that it was difficult to survive and support herself and her grandchildren on the income from tamale-making alone.

When she heard about HIAS’ (formerly the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society, the oldest international migration and refugee resettlement agency in the U.S.) livelihood initiatives to help local refugees learn new sustainable jobs, she submitted a proposal to build a chicken coop and received a grant to seed a successful small chicken farm. She says that this new work has helped her regain some of her dignity and gives her a sense of control that was taken away when she had to flee her home.

The Dream Becomes a Reality

After experiencing unimaginable trauma and often making harrowing journeys out of danger, refugees across the United States are finding liberation after oppression. For Mohammad Ay Toghló and his wife, Eidah Al Suleiman, the dream has become a reality in Buffalo, New York.

After war came to their village outside Damascus, they witnessed the murder of their pregnant daughter and the kidnapping of their son. They sold their car to pay a large ransom and then ultimately escaped to Lebanon. After a lengthy vetting process, Mohammed, Eidah, and their youngest son, Najati, received word they would be resettled by HIAS through the Jewish Family Service of Buffalo. Mohammed says that, when he found out, he thought he was dreaming because “the United States is such a big thing for us that I don’t even see that in my dreams; I was so happy.” Najati is learning English and enrolled in school, and he says that, when he finds himself on the street on the way to school or to an appointment and he needs assistance, people go out of their way to communicate with him and help, even reading his body language to try to understand what he needs.

While the family’s move is bittersweet because their oldest son, daughter-in-law, and grandchildren remain in Lebanon and they worry constantly about their safety, Najati says that, here, in the United States, “wherever we go, we find helpful, loving people.”

As he settles into his new life here, Najati made a drawing to express his gratitude for the opportunities that the Jewish Family Service of Buffalo and the United States government have provided him and his family. The drawing expresses thanks to the United States and features a large Jewish star, surrounded by the phrase “Thank you, Jewish Family” in Arabic. The family’s life in Buffalo is not free from difficulty, but they are beginning to pick up the broken pieces of the trauma they have experienced to fulfill new hopes and dreams here in America.

Eleven million immigrants are living in the U.S. without proper documentation. Most came here fleeing violence or crushing poverty. Immigrants are living in our communities, worshiping in our congregations and doing important and needed jobs in the society. They are excluded from most public services and yet many pay taxes.

Immigrants have much lower crime rates than native-born citizens.

As a nation, we have refused to develop a comprehensive immigration reform program and now some are demonizing immigrants. Throughout the state, children and families are afraid to attend schools and congregations. Families are creating legal documents to protect their children should they get detained.

Share your personal story as an immigrant or of an immigrant family you know and how they are feeling.

Carrying Forward (Telling of the story)

Pictures of great-grandparents lining the staircase wall. Souvenirs from our most recent vacation. Table linens crocheted by our relatives decades before our birth. Lavender and jasmine plants whose smell lets us know we are home. A well-seasoned cast-iron skillet passed down through generations. These objects create our homes and make us who we are not just through their presence in our lives but also through the stories they contain, the memories they conjure, and the comfort and familiarity they bring us. These possessions become part of us, part of the story of who we are in the world. When we walk in the front door of our home and look at the objects that surround us, we know that we are home, that we are rooted.

What happens if those objects are taken away? What happens if we must decide quickly, in the dark of the night or without warning in the middle of the afternoon, what to fit in a single backpack as we leave home? This is the decision that those fleeing violence and persecution have faced since biblical times and that they still face today. Having left with only what they can carry, how will they continue to find comfort and familiarity? How will they feel a connection to their own memories without the possessions that link them to their histories and to their lives?

We do not know much about what the Israelites took with them when they went forth from Egypt. The *Haggadah* tells us only that “they baked unleavened cakes of dough (matzot) since they had been driven from Egypt and could not delay, nor had they prepared provisions for themselves.”

Today, we are commanded: **“Remember the day on which you went forth from Egypt, from the house of bondage, and how God freed you with a mighty hand.”** Imagine that you were there when the ancient Israelite ancestors left home with only unrisen bread. What else might you have brought with you? What comfort or memory would these objects bring you in your new homeland?

Each participant should now take a piece of *matzah*. Together recite the blessing for the *matzah*:

***“Blessed are You, G’d, our L’rd, King of the universe, who brings forth bread from the earth.
Blessed are You, G’d, our L’rd, King of the universe, who has sanctified us with His commandments
and commanded us concerning the eating of matzah.”***

You may now enjoy the *matzah* with the bitter herbs and/or haroset.

Conclusion

On each table stands a cup for Elijah, the prophet in Jewish tradition who will usher in the messianic age (an era of global peace). As we now end the Seder, let us pass around Elijah’s cup into which we will each pour a drop of wine as we express our prayers for the world’s refugees and immigrants.

As each participant adds some grape juice or wine to Elijah’s Cup, we are pledging to make some contribution to help bring about a peaceful age when all immigrants and refugees will be welcome in our midst.

Ask each participant to add some wine or grape juice to the cup. After everyone has added some wine to this cup, read the blessing below aloud together:

“Tonight we honor the strength and resilience of refugees and immigrants across the globe. We commit ourselves to ensuring that our country remains open to them, to supporting them as they rebuild their lives, and to championing their right for protection. Just as our own people now eat the bread of liberation, we pray that today’s refugees and immigrants will fulfill their dreams of rebuilding their lives in safety and freedom in the year to come.

Blessed are all those who yearn to be free.

Blessed are we who commit ourselves to their freedom.

Blessed are You, Adonai, Our God, source of strength and liberation.”

Invite short closing prayers from various faith traditions. If a proper meal is to follow, the meal would be served at this time.

Credits

Compiled by Rabbi Bruce Aft, Congregation Adat Reyim of Springfield, Darcy Hirsh and Rabbi Batya Glazer (formerly Steinlauf), and the Rev. Charles Swadley a retired United Methodist pastor and board member of the Virginia Interfaith Center for Public Policy, with excerpts from the HIAS *Haggadah Supplement 2017* and AJC *Festival of Freedom Supplement*. Special thanks to Rabbi Abbi Sharofsky, Rabbi in Residence and Director of Intergroup Relations at JCRC of Greater Washington.

For more information or for help with your service please contact:

Rabbi Abbi Sharofsky, asharofsky@jcouncil.org

Roberta Oster, Roberta@virginiainterfaithcenter.org

