

## Americanized Jewish Passover

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I spent the night of April 5<sup>th</sup> at my friend Morgan's house to celebrate Passover. From just one night, I learned so much about the Jewish people and both their religious rituals and beliefs. Morgan's mom, Suzanne, told me so many stories about why the Jewish people started celebrating Passover and all of the little myths that went along with the stories. There was the chametz, why you're not supposed to use electricity, the giant "X" that was drawn on the front door, why matzah is eaten during Passover, the cups of Elijah and Miriam, and the opening of the back door. However, although Morgan's family still believed many of the myths, they didn't necessarily practice some of these rituals that all of the Jewish people were supposed to while celebrating Passover. What I experienced was a more Americanized version of the Jewish Passover.

This periodic ritual is celebrated for eight nights once a year. This year, Passover was celebrated from sundown on March 25<sup>th</sup> to April 2<sup>nd</sup>. Morgan's family was only able to get together later in that week because of all of their crazy schedules, but getting together a few days after the holiday ended didn't change the fact that they were still celebrating together as a family. During Passover, it is customary to eat only kosher for Passover foods. Typically, the Jewish people always eat kosher all year round. Kosher is translated similarly to "clean;" not physically clean, but of a religious purity (Calvo 1). Kosher for Passover foods are all still kosher, but nothing can be made with leavened bread. Not only does Morgan's family not eat kosher all year round, but even on Passover we ate foods like brisket, potatoes and gravy, kugel, and chocolate chip cake. However, we did eat the traditional Passover foods like gefilte fish, matzah ball soup,

and the hillel sandwiches, as well. What I thought was funny was that Morgan and her family liked latkes so much, they decided to even make them as an appetizer before Passover dinner was served. Latkes are kosher, but they're usually served on holidays like Hanukah because they link with the story of Hanukah and are made with flour. Some change the recipe and use matzoh meal instead of flour, but since Morgan's family never has been too strict about eating kosher for Passover, this wasn't done.

As we were waiting for dinner to be finished cooking, Suzanne sat down with me and explained to me that "real Jews" go around their home and business the night before Passover begins and collect and burn all of the chametz. Chametz are all of the things, like foods made with leavened bread, that are not to be consumed during Passover (Lauffer 1). Also, during Shabbat, all of the Jewish people are not allowed to use anything with electricity because they follow a practice called Melacha, which can be loosely translated to "work." During Melacha, one of the things prohibited is lighting a fire, and relatively all uses of electricity generally fit under the action of lighting a fire (Frazer 1). Again, Morgan's family has never even practiced the "no electricity during Shabbat" ritual or the burning of the chametz. Suzanne even told me stories about how when she was younger, her neighbors used to knock on her front door and ask her parents to get something out of the refrigerator for them because they were not allowed to even open one.

Although the story of Passover is usually explained in the middle of Passover Seder, Suzanne felt it'd be easier for me to understand what was going on if she told the story first. She also explained that the story of Passover is always started with the youngest child asking the four questions that were answered as we go through the Seder:

Why on this night do we eat only matzah?

Why on this night do we eat bitter herbs?

Why on this night do we dip twice?

Why on this night do we eat reclining on a pillow?

Morgan's family didn't take this part of the Seder too seriously. Her stepdad yelled out from the kitchen, "Does this shirt make me look fat?" Her grandmother asked, "So exactly how many calories are in the matzah?" These were part of the four questions that they always asked on Passover. Suzanne then pulled out a children's book called The Story of Passover that she kept from when Morgan was much younger and read aloud the entire story of Passover to everyone in the dining room. She read that the Jewish people left Israel because there wasn't enough water to grow their crops, so they moved to a land called Egypt. The Pharaoh of Egypt used the Jewish people as slaves to help build his pyramids, and when Moses was old enough, he begged the Pharaoh to let his people be free. The Pharaoh wouldn't listen to Moses, so God punished him and Egypt with ten plagues. The ten plagues are blood, frogs, vermin, wild beasts, pestilence, boils, hail, locusts, darkness, and slaying of the first born (Simon 1). Moses informed his people that if they did not obey God's commands, the tenth plague would come to their house and take the life of their eldest child. Moses told every family to find a lamb and sacrifice it, using its blood to draw a red cross on the front door. If this was done, the Angel of the Lord would "pass over" their house, sparing the life of their first born (Smith 1). God threatening the Pharaoh with the plagues forced him to free the Jewish slaves. They all packed their things and hurried out as fast as they could, but since they didn't have enough time to bake bread for the trip, they brought along the dough, to which the sun baked into flat cakes, called matzah (Simon 1). Every year since then, when celebrating Passover, this story is told over and over again to remind us of the hard times the Jewish people went through and, like any history story, to make

sure it never happens again. Because of the myth in the Passover story that if a family drew a red cross on their front door with a lamb's blood, it became a ritual for the Jewish people to do, although not necessarily quite literally in a lamb's blood in the modern-day, so that their first born would be saved.

There were also six small plates of different foods arranged on a larger plate in the center of the table. Usually it shouldn't have to be explained, but I had to ask Morgan what was on the little plates, since most of it didn't exactly look edible. She told me that everything on the plates were symbolic foods required for the ritual. The first thing she explained was the Zeroa, which was the lamb shank. Just like in the story of Passover Suzanne told me, the lamb was sacrificed for the people to mark their front doors with a red cross to save their first born. Next, the Charoset was a mixture of chopped apples, nuts, wine, and spices. This was a symbol of the mortar made by the slaves for the Pharaoh's pyramids. The Maror followed that. The Maror was horseradish, and since it's considered to be a bitter herb, it symbolized the bitter and hard life the Jewish slaves had in Egypt. The Chazeret was next, and that was celery, which also symbolized the mortar. Sometimes the Chazeret varies and it could be other things, like romaine lettuce or green onion. After that came the Karpas, which was parsley. The parsley symbolized the springtime and when everything starts to grow again. Later in the ritual, the Karpas is to be dipped once in salt water to symbolize all the tears cried by the Jewish slaves while in Egypt. Finally, the Betzah was last. The Betzah was a roasted egg and was considered to be the symbol of life (Jacobs 3).

Once the story was over and I knew what everything on the Seder plate meant, we recited the Kiddush as a family, which was another ritual done every year. The Kiddush is the blessing of the wine and was actually quite short: "Baruch atah adonai, elohey-nu melech ha-o-lam, bo-

rey p'ri ha-ga-fen." After that, Morgan took the Karpas, dipped it into the salt water, and ate it. Next, a piece of matzah is always broken in half as a reminder that the Jewish slaves didn't have enough time to bake bread before they left. Morgan's stepdad took one half, wrapped it in tinfoil, and went out of the room to hide it somewhere for the kids to go looking for as a game after dinner. This half of matzah was called the Afikoman. Whoever found the half in tin foil always got a prize of some sort. After the matzah is broken and hidden away, we sang "Dayenu," which literally means "it would have been enough." This is a song that the Jewish slaves sang to God, thanking Him for all that He's done for the slaves, like giving them the Torah and Shabbat. In the song, they try to tell Him that even if He had given them just one of those precious gifts, it would have been more than enough (Lauffer 1). Next, we all took two pieces of matzah and filled it with a little bit of both Charoset and Maror in between, calling it a Hillel sandwich. This was considered to be the second "dip" during Passover to remind us that our ancestors were able to withstand the bitter slavery. I wasn't a big fan of the Hillel sandwich because the Maror was very bitter and took away from the sweetness of the wine and apples in the Charoset. I took another piece of matzah and spread some Charoset on top and ate it, which was a lot better and was a lot tastier than I ever expected. At this point, we all begin to not sit straight up, but recline in our chairs because we are starting to get full. This is not only comfortable, but is done to remind us that we are free because the slaves were not allowed to recline on a pillow while eating, only the free people were.

It was at this point that we began eating the actual festival meal. After the first course of our gefilte fish, which is the worst smelling and tasting thing I've ever put in my mouth, everyone turned their attention towards the two large cups standing the center of the table. Suzanne said that the one filled with wine was Elijah's and the other filled with water was

Miriam's. Together we sang, "Eliahu hanavi. Eliahu hatishbi. Eliahu, Eliahu. Eliahu hagiladi," which is the song of Elijah. It's a myth that Elijah comes during Seder every year to wish us another year of peace and freedom, so Morgan's stepdad got up and opened the back door to allow him into their house whenever he felt like joining us. Afterwards, he made a joke about how mad he gets every year when Elijah never shows up to "party" with them. We continued on our next course of matzah ball soup when I realized that we didn't sing a song for Miriam. I asked Suzanne about it, and she said that this was her own ritual. Every year during the Passover Seder, she pours water into her colorful, and significantly prettier, goblet for Miriam. The story goes that Miriam actually found wells filled with water and helped the Jewish people survive in the desert, so Suzanne likes to celebrate and honor her role in her ancestor's survival (Manushkin 28). She also whispered to me that she thought it was sexist that we praised Elijah and not Miriam. We finished eating through the rest of our main courses and then said, "Baruch ata Adonai, hazan et hakol" to thank God for the food we have eaten. Before dessert even came out, all of the kids, including Morgan and I, knew that it was time to find the Afikoman. We all got up out of our seats and were waiting for the "okay" from Suzanne to make a run for it. As soon as Suzanne said "go," we all sprinted in separate directions, looking under every nook and cranny, searching for this piece of tin foil with a cracker inside of it. After about ten minutes, I finally checked behind a painting in the foyer and the Afikoman fell right out! I was so excited and everyone else was so mad that they didn't get to it first. Suzanne came right up to me and handed me a \$10 bill, and then gave everyone else \$5 so they wouldn't feel left out. Now I know why finding the Afikoman was always considered the best part of Passover!

Although I experienced Morgan's family's own version of Passover, I still really did learn a lot about their beliefs and the meaning behind their rituals. I even experienced rituals that

they made up! It was so interesting to hear the entire story of Passover and how Moses saved all of the Jewish people from the Pharaoh because I never knew that story at all. I did, however, know that the Jewish people ate matzah during Passover because it could be baked in less than eight minutes, but I had no idea that every food on the Seder plate had such strong meaning behind it. Not only that, but just about everything they did during the Seder had a really strong importance to them in their religion and I feel so grateful that they opened their doors so freely to me and took the time during their special and sentimental holiday to explain things over and over again until I finally understood just as much as they did.

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