

PASSOVER

The Festival of Freedom

RHEINA EPSTEIN
Correspondent

April is an important time of the year for holy celebrations.

Stimulate your patrons to learn more about other cultural practices by featuring a display on the Jewish Passover. The flower cross (featured overleaf) is a striking example that can be used for an Easter display, during Christmas, or as an obituary for a famous person. Watch these pages for displays related to Ramadhaan and the Festival of Lights later in the year. And remember, suggestions or ideas are welcome.

Passover celebrates the liberation of the Children of Israel from Egyptian bondage and serves to remind us of the importance of continuing the battle for freedom in every generation. In addition to this basic spiritual concept, the rituals and special foods connected with the festival make it the most popular of all the Jewish holidays. It is observed for eight days in the Hebrew month of Nissan (March-April) and is a major festival ordained in the Bible along with the festivals of Shavuot (Pentecost) and Sukkot (Tabernacles).

The staple food of Passover is *matzo* (unleavened bread)

made simply from wheat flour and water - not even salt is added - commemorating the hasty departure of the children of Israel from Egypt. 'They took up their dough before it had time to leaven', (Exodus

12:34) followed by Exodus 13:7-8, 'unleavened bread shall be eaten for seven days and there be no leaven seen with you in all your borders.'

A major task therefore before the holiday, is to remove from the home every bit of leavened bread and all materials and products associated with it (called *chametz*), which involves cleaning the home thoroughly and includes changing certain dishes and utensils. The preparation for Passover culminates the night before the festival in a ritual procedure to search for leaven, accompanied by an appropriate blessing.

The Passover Seder is a special home service held with family and friends on the first two nights of Passover. During this Seder the *Haggadah* (literally relating or telling) recounting the dramatic story of the exodus from Egypt, is read. The *Hagaddah*, as we know it today, is the result of centuries of change and development and consists usually of the Hebrew text accompanied by a translation in



the vernacular of the country of residence along with notes, comments and illustrations.

This *Haggadah* not only prescribes the order (or *seder*) in which the story of the exodus is recounted (together with poems and songs to be recited and sung in celebration of the event) but also the ritual and the foods that are to be eaten.

A tray of symbolic foods is placed at the head of the *Seder* table. These foods are:

- ✧ *maror* - bitter herbs - usually horseradish/lettuce - symbolising the bitter lot of the Israelites during their bondage in Egypt
- ✧ *karpas* - a vegetable - following an ancient custom of beginning a formal meal by passing around, as hors d'oeuvres, vegetables dipped in salt water or vinegar (again the bitterness of bondage)
- ✧ *charoset* - a nut, apple, spices and wine mixture - symbolising the mortar the children of Israel were compelled to make for their Egyptian taskmasters
- ✧ *zeroa* - a shankbone or neck of poultry, roasted - symbolising the Paschal lamb offered as the Passover sacrifice in Temple times
- ✧ *baytza* - a hard-boiled egg, browned in its shell - symbolising the regular festival sacrifice brought in the days when the Temple stood in Jerusalem.

It is also customary to drink four cups of red wine during the *Seder* - one of the explanations being that the Bible uses four different verbs in describing the drama of the redemption from bondage in Egypt, viz. bring, deliver, redeem, take.

Besides the drinking of the four cups of wine, there are other rituals including the Four Questions which the youngest person present has the honour to ask of the leader of the *Seder* - asking why this Passover night is different from all other nights and why do we do things on this night that we do not do on other nights. The response in the *Haggadah* is designed to satisfy the four archetypal sons - the wise son; the wicked son; the simple son and the son who does not ask questions (and to make him ask).

Because the *Seder* is centred around children there are devices to keep them awake and involved, such as searching for a hidden piece of *matzo* and getting a present for finding it, asking the Four Questions and singing songs.

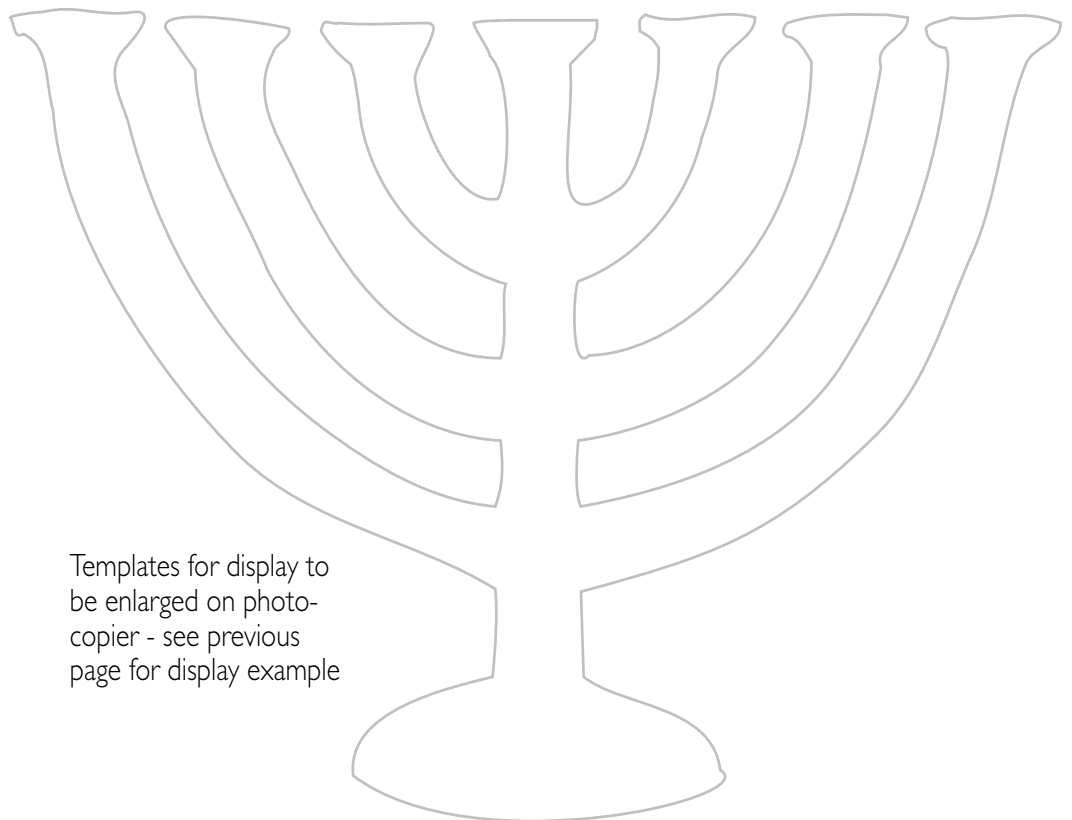
The whole reading is punctuated by comment, analysis and discussion as the

Haggadah is a learning experience for both children and adults.

(With acknowledgements to **The Jewish Book of Why** by Alfred J Kolatch, published by Penguin Compass 2000 and Raisel Mirvis.)

2006

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Templates for display to be enlarged on photocopier - see previous page for display example