

# Passover and the Seder Plate

## About the Holiday

Passover begins on the 15<sup>th</sup> day of the Hebrew month of Nisan (often falling in April in the secular calendar) and lasts for seven or eight days depending on what custom you follow. It commemorates the liberation of the ancient Israelites from slavery in Egypt as told in the book of Exodus. The story is told and retold each year during the seder, an elaborate meal eaten during the holiday. Using symbolic foods and a guide called a haggadah, Jewish families remember the suffering of their ancestors and celebrate the hope of freedom and redemption.

## Seder

At the center of the table is a plate filled with symbolism. Plates can be designed in many different ways; this plate below incorporates traditional items and ritual steps from the haggadah in its design:

### The Four Questions

Traditionally asked by the youngest person at the table, the Four Questions symbolize the importance of curiosity and questioning and lead to more questions.

### Beitzah (Roasted Egg)

The egg represents the cycle of life.

### Karpas (Spring Vegetables)

Springtime herbs, often parsley, are dipped into salt water, which represents the tears shed by the ancient Israelites.

### The Ten Plagues

According to the story, God brought down ten plagues upon Pharaoh and the Egyptian people to compel them to allow the ancient Israelites leave. It is traditional to spill a drop of wine out of the glass as a symbol of the lessening of joy due to the suffering of others.

### Z'roa (lamb shank bone)

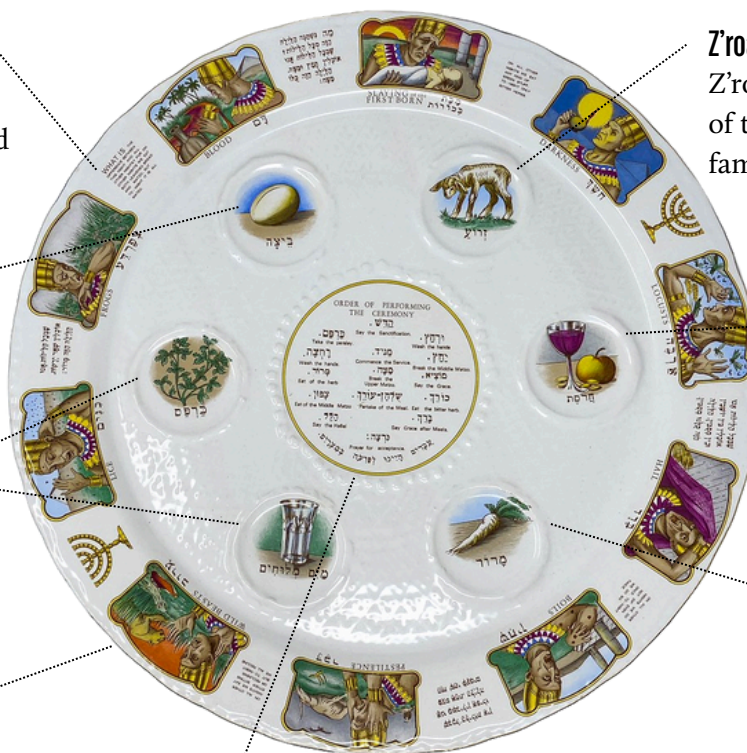
Z'roa is a reminder of God's protection of the ancient Israelites. Vegetarian families often use a beet instead.

### Charoset (sweet relish)

Often made of wine, fruit, and nuts, charoset represents brick mortar made by Israelites during slavery in ancient Egypt.

### Maror (Bitter herbs)

Bitter herbs like horseradish symbolize the bitterness of slavery and oppression.



### Other Elements on the Seder Table

This plate includes the order of the ritual.

To prepare for Passover, Jewish households must remove all chametz, or leavened bread. This signifies how the Israelites left Egypt with no time for bread to rise. Instead, matzah (unleavened bread) is eaten. During the seder, matzah is broken to signify the brokenness of the world. The larger part of the broken matzah, called the afikomen, is hidden in a napkin for children to find later in the evening to celebrate the joy of liberation.

Over the course of the seder, participants drink four glasses of wine. An extra cup of wine is left on the table for the prophet Elijah, symbolizing hope for the future and anticipating redemption. A modern-day addition to the seder, Miriam's Cup is filled with water to represent Miriam's well that provided water for the Israelites in the desert, and brings attention to the contributions of women. Both cups welcome the ancient prophets in a symbolic act of open invitation.

## Behind the Plate

President Barack Obama and First Lady Michelle Obama host a Passover Seder dinner in the Old Family Dining Room of the White House, April 3, 2015. (Official White House Photo by Pete Souza, [courtesy of the White House Archives.](#))



Eric Lesser, Herbie Ziskend, and Arun Chaudhary, three staffers on Barack Obama's primary campaign for the Democratic ticket in 2008, hosted a small seder in the basement of a Pennsylvania hotel using the seder plate featured above. Senator Obama joined the celebration, and, at the end of the meal (after the traditional saying "Next year in Jerusalem"), added "Next year in the White House." Sure enough, Obama would go on to win the primary and then the presidency. The Obama family continued to host a private seder at the White House each of his eight years in office. Note the plate in the photo above.

## Questions

1. The haggadah traditionally instructs Jews to view the Passover story as if they personally were the ones led out of Egypt. What could this mean?
2. Some traditions, like Miriam's Cup, are modern additions to the seder, added by activists to be more inclusive. What would you add to your seder plate, and why?

## Learn More

- "[Passover 101](#)," MyJewishLearning.
- "[The White House Seder started in a Pennsylvania basement. Its legacy lives on.](#)" Article by Olivia Haynie published in The Forward, March 31, 2025.
- Educator Resource: [The Freedom Seder Haggadah](#)
- [Search](#) the Capital Jewish Museum Collections Archive to view more historic haggadot and Passover Judaica.

## Item Description

Seder Plate used by the Obama Family during the sederim they hosted in the White House. The Seder plate was originally purchased at the gift shop of Temple Emanuel in Houston, TX by the Moser family. Gift of Jane Moser, Capital Jewish Museum Collection. Object ID: 2021.01.

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