

HOLIDAYS AND FESTIVALS

Passover

From the sweet Bsisa that welcomes the month of Nisan to scallions at the seder table, the many ways Sephardic and Mizrahi families retell the story of freedom.

WHEN

Passover begins on the 15th of the Hebrew month of Nisan, in March or April. It lasts seven days in Israel and eight elsewhere.

THE STORY

The Exodus: the Israelites' journey from slavery in Egypt to freedom, retold each year at a festive meal called the seder.

CUSTOMS

Removing leavened food, eating matzah, and reading the Haggadah, the book that guides the seder.

SPECIAL TO THIS EXPLAINER

Bsisa, a home ceremony of Tunisian and Libyan Jews, held two weeks before Passover and traditionally led by women.

At the Passover seder, Jews around the world read the same core text and eat matzah and bitter herbs. Yet in Sephardic and Mizrahi homes, from Morocco to Iran, the evening also looks, sounds, and tastes different from community to community. Families lift the seder plate over the heads of their guests, act out the departure from Egypt, sing in Judeo Arabic or Ladino, and fill the table with their own *haroset*. For Jews of Tunisia and Libya, the season begins even earlier, with a sweet ceremony called Bsisa.

Bsisa: welcoming the month of Passover

Bsisa takes place at home on Rosh Hodesh Nisan, the first day of the month in which Passover falls. Tradition holds that the *Mishkan*, the Tabernacle the Israelites built in the desert, was completed on that day, and the ceremony recalls that celebration in every household.

The family gathers around a deep bowl filled with cooked wheat and barley, date honey, almonds, dried fruit, and spices such as fennel and coriander. Wheat, barley, and oil were the ingredients of offerings in the Mishkan and the Temple. Each person rests a finger on the bowl while the head of the household, traditionally the mother, turns the house key in the mixture and pours in olive oil. A blessing is recited in Judeo Arabic; its opening line has been translated as "You, who opens without a key." Then everyone takes a turn with the key, the mother blesses each person, and all taste the Bsisa.

Customs varied. Some women added gold jewelry to the bowl, recalling the gold women gave for the Mishkan. Some families read the Torah passage about its completion (Exodus 38 to 40), and the evening often ended with a couscous meal, the last before Passover.

A women's tradition, revived

In Tunisian and Libyan homes, Bsisa was traditionally led by women, with mothers blessing each family member in turn. The Jewish Women's Archive suggests the custom may echo an ancient Land of Israel tradition that counted the new year from the first of Nisan.

In 2014, Jerusalem's First Station hosted Israel's first public Bsisa.

At the seder: telling the story with the whole body

The Haggadah teaches that in every generation, people should see themselves as if they had left Egypt. Writer Rahel Musleah notes that many Sephardic Haggadot read *l'harot*, "to show," where Ashkenazi texts read *lir'ot*, "to see." Many Sephardic and Mizrahi customs do exactly that:

- **The plate over our heads.** Moroccan families lift the seder plate and pass it over the heads of everyone at the table, declaring that they have left Egypt. Tunisian families hold a reed basket, recalling baby Moses's basket, over each guest's head.
- **A traveler at the door.** In Libyan and Tunisian homes, a man with a stick and a bundle on his shoulder knocks. Those at the table ask, "Where are you from?" "From Egypt." "And where are you going?" "To the Land of Israel."
- **Scallions at Dayenu.** Persian and Afghan Jews playfully tap one another with green onions or leeks during the song *Dayenu*, recalling the taskmasters' whips.
- **Breaking the matzah.** Tunisian Jews break the middle matzah and say, "This is how God split the Red Sea." Baghdadi Jews rest their hands on the matzah as they declare, "This is the bread of affliction."

Rice on the table

For about 700 years, many Ashkenazi Jews have avoided *kitniyot*, a category that includes rice, millet, and legumes, during Passover. Many Sephardic and Mizrahi Jews never adopted this custom, so rice and beans often appear on their Passover tables. Customs still vary by family and community.

Before Passover, Kurdish Jews washed their rice, lentils, and other legumes several times so that no grain or insect remained.

The Haggadah in Jewish languages

The Haggadah is written in Hebrew and Aramaic, but for centuries families read it in the languages they spoke every day. In Judeo Arabic, a tradition of word for word translation called *sharh* included the Haggadah. A handwritten Haggadah now in the Iraqi Jewish Archive, probably made by a young man in Baghdad, gives each Hebrew paragraph followed by its Judeo Arabic translation. Haggadot were also printed in Hebrew and Libyan Judeo Arabic. Ladino Haggadot were printed from the 1600s on, including editions from Belgrade and Salonika, and Seattle's Sephardic community has produced a Ladino Haggadah of its own. Today the Jewish Language Project offers a free Haggadah supplement with phrases and songs in 20 Jewish languages, including "Who Knows One?" in Ladino.

Community by community

Morocco

The seder plate travels over every guest's head. As in other North African homes, the middle matzah is broken into the shape of the Hebrew letter *hey*. Haroset is often rolled into small balls of dried fruit and nuts. Passover ends with Mimouna, explored in JIMENA's explainer on Mimouna and Seharane.

Sources: My Jewish Learning; Rahel Musleah, Distinctions

Tunisia and Libya

Bsisa opens the season on Rosh Hodesh Nisan. At the seder, a Libyan woven tray called the *sabadj* holds the ritual foods, and a costumed "traveler from Egypt" knocks at the door with the *afikoman* wrapped in a cloth on his shoulder.

Sources: My Jewish Learning; Jewish Women's Archive; National Library of Israel; Jewish Language Project

Iraq

Haroset is *halek*, dates cooked down into a dark syrup and mixed with chopped walnuts or almonds; in Baghdad it was also called *silan*. Families made enough to last the year. Almond macaroons called *hajji badam*, scented with rosewater and cardamom, are a Passover favorite.

Sources: The Noshers (My Jewish Learning); Jewish Language Project; National Archives

Iran and Afghanistan

Green onions come out during *Dayenu*. In Tehran, haroset was called *halegh*, and some Persian families make it with 40 ingredients for the 40 years in the desert. A National Library of Israel article notes echoes between Passover and Nowruz, the Persian new year, such as a thorough spring cleaning of the home.

Sources: My Jewish Learning; National Library of Israel

Yemen

Instead of one plate, the whole table becomes the seder plate, decorated with vegetables. Yemenite haroset, called *dukkih* in Sana'a, is a richly spiced paste of dates, raisins, nuts, and sesame with pepper, cardamom, cloves, and ginger.

Sources: My Jewish Learning; Jewish Language Project

Syria

Some Syrian Jews break the middle matzah into the shapes of the letters *dalet* and *vav*, whose values add up to 10, for the ten plagues. Families also share a playful, theatrical exchange called *mish'arotam*.

Sources: My Jewish Learning; Jewish Language Project

Ottoman Sephardic (Turkey, Greece, the Balkans)

In Turkey, the head of the family tosses grass, for the reeds of the sea, along with coins or candy for children to gather. Haroset is rich in raisins and citrus. Families in Greece and Turkey bake *mina de cordero*, a lamb filled matzah pie, and sing Passover songs in Ladino.

Sources: My Jewish Learning; Jewish Language Project

Kurdistan and India

Before Passover, Kurdish Jews painted the walls of their homes; after it, they celebrate Seharane. In India, Bene Israel families lift the seder plate and say, "In haste we left Egypt," and in Calcutta, Baghdadi Jewish families also make date *halek*.

Sources: My Jewish Learning; Rahel Musleah, Distinctions; Jewish Language Project

Common misconceptions

- **"All Jews follow the same Passover food rules."** Avoiding rice and legumes is an Ashkenazi custom. Many Sephardic and Mizrahi Jews eat them, and in 2015 the Conservative movement also lifted the restriction.
- **"Haroset is apples and walnuts."** That is one recipe. Others use date syrup, spiced fruit paste, or dozens of ingredients, and the dish has many names: *halek*, *halegh*, *dukkih*, *harosi*.
- **"Bsisa is part of the seder."** It is a separate home ceremony held two weeks earlier, on Rosh Hodesh Nisan.
- **"The Haggadah was only ever read in Hebrew."** For centuries, families also read it in Judeo Arabic, Ladino, and other Jewish languages.

Words to know

Bsisa *Tunisian and Libyan Judeo Arabic*

A sweet grain mixture, and the home ceremony that welcomes Nisan.

Rosh Hodesh Nisan *Hebrew*

The first day of Nisan, the month of Passover.

Mishkan *Hebrew*

The Tabernacle, the portable sanctuary of the desert.

Seder *Hebrew*

"Order." The ritual meal on Passover night.

Haggadah *Hebrew*

"Telling." The book that guides the seder.

Kitniyot *Hebrew*

Rice, legumes, and similar foods that many Ashkenazi Jews avoid on Passover.

Halek (halegh, hilq) *Judeo Arabic and Persian*

Haroset made from dates; in Iraq, a date syrup.

Dukkih *Yemenite Judeo Arabic*

Spiced Yemenite haroset.

Sharh *Judeo Arabic*

A word for word translation of a Hebrew text, such as the Haggadah.

Sabadj *Libyan Judeo Arabic*

A woven basket tray for the seder foods.

Bringing Passover to life

In the public school classroom

- Teach the Exodus as a story of freedom that many peoples have drawn on, and explore how communities adapt shared traditions.
- Use primary sources: the handwritten Baghdadi Haggadah at the National Archives and the Haggadot gallery of the Jewish Language Project.
- Compare haroset recipes and names on a map, following allergy rules (many use nuts and sesame).
- Describe customs such as the plate over the heads or the scallions; do not hold a model seder, Bsisa, or reenactment with blessings or prayers.

In Jewish schools and communities

- Hold a Bsisa celebration on Rosh Hodesh Nisan and invite Tunisian and Libyan families to lead it.
- Add a Sephardic or Mizrahi custom to your model seder, or learn "Who Knows One?" in Ladino.
- Use the Jewish Language Project's Haggadah supplement to explore Passover phrases and songs in many Jewish languages.
- Explore the Sephardi & Mizrahi Education Toolkit for year round ideas.

At home and with family

- Ask relatives: What was on our seder table? Which language did your grandparents use for the Haggadah?
- Make *halek* or a haroset from a community other than your own.
- Try a new custom at your seder, and explain where it comes from.
- Record an elder's Passover memories for JIMENA's oral history project.

Questions for discussion

- Why might families choose to act out the Exodus, rather than only read about it?
- In Bsisa, the house key is at the center of the ceremony. What might a key symbolize for a family, or for a people?
- What changes when a sacred text is read in the language people speak at home?

Learn more

Watch and listen

Multilingual Passover with Dr. Sarah Bunin Benor (JIMENA, 69 minutes)

youtube.com/watch?v=lb4MWCz6a0

Sephardic Seder Traditions with Rabbi Daniel Bouskila (JIMENA)

youtube.com/watch?v=S2FF9cOEtYE

Multimedia Passover Festival (Jewish Language Project, 2020)

vimeo.com/400294962

Read

***The Book of Jewish Food*, by Claudia Roden** (Knopf, 1996).

penguinrandomhouse.com/books/156485/the-book-of-jewish-food-by-claudia-roden/

***Encyclopedia of Jewish Food*, by Gil Marks** (John Wiley & Sons, 2010).

nli.org.il/en/books/NNL_ALEPH002748660/NLI

From Distinctions, JIMENA's journal

"Religious Rituals Lift the Abstract of Resilience from Conceptual to Tangible," by Rahel Musleah Baghdadi, Moroccan, Tunisian, Persian, and Indian seder customs.

distinctionsjournal.org/resilience-through-holiday-rituals

From JIMENA

Mimouna and Passover guide (PDF)

s3-us-west-1.amazonaws.com/tf-jimena-prd/pdfs/Mimouna-compactado.pdf

Culture and Holidays video collection

jimena.org/videos/culture-and-holidays

Sephardi & Mizrahi Education Toolkit (designed mainly for Jewish day schools)

sepharditoolkit.org

Oral history

jimena.org/oral-history

Explore online

Bsisa: A Tasty Tradition To Begin The Passover Season (My Jewish Learning)

myjewishlearning.com/2016/04/06/bsisa-a-tasty-womens-tradition-to-begin-the-passover-season

Israel Holds Its First Ever Public Bsisa (Jewish Women's Archive)

jwa.org/thisweek/apr/01/2014/israel-holds-its-first-ever-public-bsisa-women-ce
nterred-tunisian-jewish-ritual

10 Passover Customs from Around the World (My Jewish Learning)

myjewishlearning.com/article/10-passover-customs-from-around-the-world

Haroset from Around the World (The Nosh)

myjewishlearning.com/the-nosh/haroset-from-around-the-world

Kitniyot: Not Quite Hametz (My Jewish Learning)

myjewishlearning.com/article/kitniyot-not-quite-hametz

The Passover Seder as Live Action Role Playing (National Library of Israel)

blog.nli.org.il/en/seder_larp

Did We Borrow the Passover Seder From the Persians? (National Library of Israel)

blog.nli.org.il/en/nowruz_passover

Passover in Jewish languages (Jewish Language Project)

jewishlanguages.org/passover

Passover Around the World: A Haggadah Supplement (Jewish Language Project)

jewishlanguages.org/haggadah-supplement

Images of Haggadot (Jewish Language Project)

jewishlanguages.org/images-of-haggadot

Handwritten Haggadah with Judeo Arabic translation (Iraqi Jewish Archive, National Archives)

archives.gov/exhibits/ija/content/2921



About JIMENA

JIMENA, Jews Indigenous to the Middle East and North Africa, preserves and shares the history, heritage, and living culture of Sephardic and Mizrahi Jews. Explore more explainers, oral histories, videos, and teaching resources at jimena.org/cultural-heritage.

A note for educators

This explainer is written to support teaching *about* religion and culture. In public schools, present customs, texts, and prayers as subjects of study, and do not ask students to perform rituals, recite blessings, or take part in religious practice. Share your family's story with JIMENA at jimena.org/share-your-story.

Sources consulted include My Jewish Learning and The Nosh; the Jewish Women's Archive; the National Library of Israel blog; the Jewish Language Project; the Iraqi Jewish Archive at the U.S. National Archives; and Rahel Musleah in Distinctions. Links checked October 2026; jimena.org links point to JIMENA's new website. © 2026 JIMENA. May be freely shared and printed for educational use.