

To Prepare for Pesach

The Freehof Institute for Progressive Halakhah

I. Introduction

A. Overview

If you ask someone about their favorite traditions, there is usually a story (or a few) about what they did in their childhood home. It is the home where our traditions tend to grow and develop, change, and become “new” traditions. It is precisely because Pesach is first and foremost a home-based holiday and observance (aside from being one of the most ritually complex and demanding of holidays), that Pesach captures the hearts, minds and practices of so many Jews to this day.

Though it falls towards the end of our secular school-work calendar, Pesach is actually the beginning of our Jewish ritual calendar. Why is this? It is because Pesach occurs in the first month of the Jewish calendar (not to be confused with Rosh HaShanah which occurs in the seventh month and is called a *new year*). Pesach is the first national holiday celebrated by the entire Jewish people (Israelites at that moment in our history). When our ancestors left Egypt, they were granted control over their lives once more, were thus free to worship God and then the Israelites entered into the covenant with God at Mt. Sinai. And, we have forever remembered and marked that moment with our yearly retelling and collective remembrance of that sacred act.

We remember this religious-historical moment with a yearly retelling of our liberation and its subsequent resulting creation of our collective identity as the People of Israel, passing it down from one generation to the next. This communal retelling of our story is not limited to Seder night, but begins with the weeks before that first evening; that is, this process begins with the preparations for Pesach. The process of preparing for Pesach is not homogenous within Reform communities. Some of us have grown up in Jewish households all our lives, others have converted to, and still more have made commitments to join with their spouses and families in helping to create Jewish homes. Therefore, this guide of preparing for the Pesach holidays is not an attempt to create one set of *minhagim* (communal norms) for our Reform communities, but to lay out the main points of Pesach preparation within the *ruach* (spirit) and rubric of Reform Jewish practice. For specific questions, please speak with your rabbi, as this guide will not be able to cover every situation that may come

up in your preparation for Pesach. Rather, seeing the need to provide learning and guidance for our Reform communities, we have created this guide in an attempt to fill that space, while still leaving room for personal observance.

B. Divisions of Part I - Preparing for Pesach

The first section of the guide is Preparing for Pesach, and is divided as follows: 1) The study of Pesach thirty days before the 14th of Nisan; 2) Defining chametz (forbidden leavened food items) as well as the custom of removing and selling it from one's home (known as *bi'ur chametz* and *m'keirat chametz* respectively; 3) Prohibited/Permitted Food; and 4) Kashering (making a kitchen ritually fit for Pesach)

II. Preparations for Pesach

A. Spiritual Preparation

Pesach comes thirty days after the raucous celebration of Purim. The shift in tone, observance, and preparation couldn't be more different. In the later, there is no mention of God, and in the former, it is about the absolute and unbreakable bond between God and the People of Israel. How is it that we are then able to make this transition - from near communal tragedy, to national restoration and celebration? We do this by taking moments in time during this month-long span to spiritually prepare ourselves for Pesach.

There is no mitzvah (commandment) of exactly when or how one should do this act of spiritual preparation. Instead, it has become a practice among many Jewish communities to take the thirty days before Pesach (some start on Purim, which is the 14th Day of Adar) to begin learning about Pesach. What does this learning entail? For some it is the ritual observances of Pesach (keeping kosher, the Seder meal, etc.), whereas for others, it may be rereading the Exodus narrative (*Sh'mot*/Exodus chapters 1 - 20), or even modern understandings of the Exodus, and its connection to modern day struggles. Whatever path you choose, taking moments to study and learn about Pesach will only enhance one's ritual observance and connection to Pesach.

B. What is Chametz?

Chametz is the focal point of our entire observance of Passover. It is through the act of abstaining from consuming or purchasing chametz during this time that binds (no pun intended...) us through time and space to our ancestors as well as Jews throughout the

world who are observing Pesach with us in the present. But what exactly does it mean when the Torah says “chametz?” According to the Torah, chametz is any one of the following five cereal grains that has then come in contact (or mixed with water) and then been allowed to ferment: oats, barley, wheat, spelt and rye. What distinguishes specially “kosher for Passover” foodstuffs from these leavened products? It is the act of not allowing these products to complete the fermentation process and “rising,” which creates what we call chametz. Though not chametz, we can still say the blessing of “*hamotzi lechem min ha’aretz*” (“who brings forth bread from the earth”) when we eat matzah made from any of these grains, but these products do not count as chametz, as they have not been allowed to rise and ferment.

With a clear definition of chametz, we can now turn to the prohibitions of chametz on Pesach.

According to the Torah, there are four mitzvot (commandments) relating to the prohibition of chametz on Pesach - three of which are “negative” and one that is “positive” These four commandments are as follows:

- One should not eat chametz (Exodus 13:3)
- Chametz should not be found in our homes (Exodus 12:19)
- One should not be able to see any chametz in one’s home (Exodus 13:7)
- One should act to empty one’s home of chametz (Exodus 12:15)

Taken together, these commandments from our Torah frame the rest of our observance of Pesach. How so? For it is through the act of removing oneself from chametz that allows one to become immersed in both the spiritual and physical experiences of Pesach. By abstaining from chametz, one is continually reminded of the sacred time that one is in, reinforcing the simultaneous connection to both the past and present of world Jewry and Jewish history.

But what exactly does this separation from chametz look like within the Reform Jewish community? If you’re reading this as a member of such a community, you’ve surely observed that the customs and practices of your fellow community members span the spectrum of observance. This of course is part and parcel of being a part of a Reform community. While on the one hand we create a set of standards for the synagogue, our homes still remain our *mikdash m’at* (little sanctuaries) and remain our personal and private ritual domain. Using the traditional categories of *b’dikat* and *bi’ur chametz* as well as *m’khirat chametz* (the search, destroying and selling of chametz), these options are explored below:

- *B’dikat and Bi’ur chametz* (The search for and destroying of chametz)

- It is the practice that on the evening of the 14th of Nisan (the night before Pesach begins) one conducts a symbolic “search” of chametz throughout one’s home. This is traditionally done via candlelight and with a wooden spoon to “scoop” up the chametz. In many Reform homes, one should feel free to conduct this customary candlelight search or through whatever lights one is comfortable (e.g. flashlight). The idea is to express one’s desire to truly rid one’s home of chametz. The ritual begins with reciting the blessing *Baruch atah Adonai Eloheinu Melekh ha’olam, asher kidishanu b’mitzvotav v’tzivanu al bi’ur chametz* (Blessed are You Adonai our God, ruler of the universe, who sanctifies us through mitzvot and commands us concerning the destruction of chametz)
- The morning following this night search (still the 14th of Nisan), one recites a declaration that one has done all that one can to eliminate any and all chametz in one’s home. The wording is: “All chametz and leaven in my possession that I have not seen and have not eliminated shall be nullified and become ownerless, like the dust of the earth.”
- The following day, one recites an additional declaration and can then engage in a final and symbolic act of removal of chametz. The formula is “All chametz and leaven in my possession that I have seen and that I have not seen, that I have destroyed and that I have not destroyed, shall be nullified and become ownerless, like the dust of the earth.” One can then flush, crumble or even burn a piece of chametz to demonstrate one’s fulfillment of this act.
- What happens when then the festival begins on *motz’ei Shabbat*, a Saturday night - that is, when the 14th of Nisan, the day before Pesach, falls on Shabbat? We do not conduct the search or the removal of chametz on Shabbat. So the search for chametz should take place on Thursday night, the 13th of Nisan, with the chametz eliminated on Friday morning, still the 13th.
- If we have eliminated all our chametz by Friday morning, how can we have bread or challah at the Shabbat meals? It is not appropriate to eat matzah on the day before Pesach, so we don’t use matzah on Friday night when the seder is the next night. The most common suggestion is to save some small rolls for Friday Shabbat dinner, making sure to consume them entirely at the meal. Any remaining crumbs can be gathered and disposed of properly.

- *M'khirat chametz* (selling of chametz)
 - It is entirely possible that one may not be able to remove all leavening and chametz products from one's home. Furthermore, it may be a huge financial loss to try and remove the products, and then to repurchase after the seven or eight days of Pesach. The traditional solution to this situation is the selling of one's chametz. In many communities, individuals make a declaration/sign a document, enabling the rabbi to sell all the chametz of one's home to a non-Jew (as a Jew should not be "owning" any chametz during the celebration of Pesach). While the chametz "belongs" to the non-Jew, in all reality, the chametz stays in one's home, usually in an area where one cannot see the chametz during Pesach (some have the custom of tapping cabinets and pantries shut that contain the chametz, so as not to inadvertently open them during Pesach). Please speak with your rabbi about the availability of this ritual in your community.
- Modern innovations regarding the removal of chametz
 - For many modern Reform Jews, selling chametz seems foreign and, in light of our commitment to Tikkun Olam, and emptying one's home of perfectly usable food does not seem to align with our Reform values. Therefore, many Reform Jews have the custom of holding a Pesach food drive in their communities, where the chametz products are collected and then donated to a local food bank. Others simply donate directly from their home to their local charity. For a detailed discussion of the various ways to remove chametz see the CCAR responsum no. 5756.9, "Pesach Kashrut and Reform Judaism," part 2, "The Removal of Chametz," at the [CCAR website](#). And see our own discussion [here](#).

In concluding this section, it is clear that there are varied practices and observances with regard to these central commandments of Pesach and so one may be compelled to ask "how does one know what to observe or what ritual to take on?" While it is not possible to provide a simple answer in these paragraphs, there is a lesson from Exodus that suffices for the moment.

In the Exodus, when the People of Israel were wandering, and preparing to accept the mitzvot, they said to Moses and before God, “we will do, and we will understand.” As this guide now delves deeper into the ritual practices and observances of Pesach, one may wish to keep such a philosophy in mind - do, and then understand. It is a continually reinforcing cycle, and throughout, one may pick up, put down and then pick up a practice again. The first step is choosing to learn, and this guide does that and more - it provides one within the Reform community the knowledge and understandings to embrace Pesach observance and ritual.

C. Prohibited and Permitted Foods

As discussed above, all of the food issues surrounding Pesach revolve around the issue of chametz. Therefore, when shopping and preparing one’s home for Pesach, one should carefully look to ensure that the products one is purchasing do not contain chametz. What does this process look like in reality? Well, it’s slightly more complicated in the Reform community, when one looks at the various understandings of kashrut that are practiced and observed in Reform communities. For example, some may be comfortable with checking ingredients, and may not feel compelled to look for a kosher certification on products that would require a “Kosher for Passover” label (hereafter referred to as a KP label)¹ whereas others would only purchase KP labeled products for such items. In an effort to cast as wide a net as possible, the guide provides a range of food guidance, spanning products that never require a “KP” label all the way to those that would always require a “KP” label. By providing such a spectrum, one can then tailor one’s understanding and personal observance based upon the information provided.

- Products that never require a KP Label (even if purchased on Pesach)
 - Eggs
 - Fresh fruits and vegetables
 - Fresh or frozen meat
 - Fresh fish
 - Unflavored tea bags
 - Unflavored regular coffee
 - Extra-virgin olive oil
- Products that do not require a KP Label (if purchased before Pesach)
 - Plain milk (i.e. non-flavored, chocolate, etc...)

¹ Note that there is no “universal” kosher for Passover label. Kosher certifications are known as a *heckscher*. There are many different kosher certification companies that provide certifications for Passover. If you’re unsure about a certain certification, please check with your rabbi.

- Frozen fruit
- Sugar
- Quinoa
- Products that always require a KP Label
 - Any and all baked goods (e.g. cookies, cakes, pastries, etc...)
 - This also includes any and all “matzah” products, as many are not kosher for Passover and are produced all year-round
 - All frozen processed foods
 - Candy
 - Following Dairy Products
 - Cheeses, Milk (both flavored and plain), Yogurt, Butter, Margarine
 - Decaf coffees and teas
 - Soda
 - Vegetable oil, olive oil, peanut oil, etc...
 - Liquor
 - Wine

One final note about food - the issue of eating *kitniyot*, specifically rice on Pesach. It has been a long-standing minhag (practice) of Ashkenazi Jews to refrain from the eating of rice and *kitniyot* (legumes) on Pesach. However, the CCAR Responsa Committee in [Responsum 5756.9](#) ruled that consuming rice and *kitniyot* on Pesach is permitted (please see the responsum for a detailed explanation of the decision). What does this ruling mean in terms of observance? It means that should one choose, one can feel free to purchase and consume rice, beans, soy, and other products that are considered *kitniyot* (some are even sold with a Pesach certification) for consumption during Pesach.

D. Kashering One's Kitchen

The process of preparing one's kitchen can be a complex and consuming endeavor. In keeping with the theme and spirit of this guide, what follows are the general guidelines towards making one's kitchen ritually fit for Pesach observance. From there, one may, in keeping with Reform practice, adopt and use the practices to one's ritual and spiritual comfort.

- Items made fit via a simple “rinse”
 - Drinking glasses and glass dishes on which only cold food was served
- Items made fit via “boiling water” / *bag'alab*
 - The following items can be made kosher for Passover. Generally, one does not use these items for a 24hr period before commencing with the kashering. Once the items have remained unused for 24hrs., it is customary to immerse them in a large metal pot of boiling water, or if the item is a pot or able to hold water, said item is filled with boiling water until the water boils over the sides (traditionally, one does this by placing a hot stone into the pot, which then causes the boiling water to flow out and onto the pot)
 - Metal items, such as pots, pans, silverware, metal sinks, glass dishes (on which hot food was served) and cookware, as well as Tupperware
- Appliances
 - Oven (including convection ovens) and ranges are cleaned first by hand, and then having them run through a self-cleaning cycle. If the appliance does not have a self-cleaning cycle, it is then put on the hottest and safest cycle and left at this temperature for approximately one hour and then wiped down once more after it has cooled to a safe temperature
 - Glass top ranges and stove tops are cleaned first by hand. Then, one should turn the stove top/range to the maximum setting, shut off, and then one should pour boiling water onto the range.
 - Microwaves are cleaned by hand and then one places a cup (approximately 8oz) into the microwave. The microwave is then run on high until a majority of the water (approximately 6oz) has evaporated (do not run to empty the cup entirely and be sure to stop and raise cup midway through the cycle, so as to allow the built up heat to escape, and then resume said process)
 - Dishwashers are cleaned first by a thorough hand cleaning and then emptying of any and all filters The dishwasher is then left unused for 24hrs, which is then followed by running the dishwasher on the highest possible heat setting.
 - Refrigerators and Freezers should be thoroughly cleaned by hand. Some will take an additional step of then covering refrigerator shelves

with tinfoil (one should create small holes within the tinfoil for sanitary purposes)

- Kitchen surfaces (countertops, tables, etc) should all be thoroughly cleaned. Some maintain that they should then be covered by paper, tinfoil, or another **non-porous material** suitable for such purposes.