

A BASIC GUIDE TO SEDER NIGHT

PREPARING FOR THE SEDER

The Seder cannot begin before nightfall in any event, so one should have everything ready ahead of time in order to start immediately at that time. Much of this can be done during the afternoon of Erev Yomtov.

- Open the bottles of wine
- Prepare a bowl of salt water
- Prepare Karpas vegetables – parsley, peeled boiled potato, celery, radish
- Shred horseradish for Marror. It should be sharp—keep it in a jar to retain its sharpness.
- Prepare romaine lettuce for Marror
- Prepare the Charoses—Ashkenaz ingredients: apples, ground almonds, sweet red wine, cinamon; Sefardic ingredients: a thick mixture of figs, apples, nuts and pomegranates, sweet red wine, cinnamon and ginger
- Prepare a broiled/singed chicken bone or broiled/singed shank bone (not to be eaten)
- Prepare the boiled egg in its shell and then broil it until the eggshell browns
- Prepare long Yom Tov candles that will last throughout the entire meal
- Open matza boxes in preparation for the seder

THE SEDER PLATE

The items that are placed on the Seder plate are placed there in a very specific order.

Starting from the bottom, and going clockwise, the order is: Chazeres (lettuce), Karpas (vegetable), Beitzah (roasted egg), Zero'ah (roasted bone), Charoses—and in the center is Marror (bitter herbs).

The reason for this order is "*Ain ma'avrin al hamitzvot*" -- we shouldn't "pass over" any mitzvah that is in front of us. The Seder plate is arranged to follow the order of the Haggadah-- so that whatever you need next will be located closest to you, to avoid having to skip over any item.

The bowl of salt water should be placed on the table, near the Seder plate.

Three matzos should be placed on the table -- either under or in front of the Seder plate. They should be covered and separated from each other by a napkin or cloth.

For the Seder, the minhag is to use handmade shmurah matzah. This type of matzah has been carefully guarded against any contact with water from the time of reaping, grinding, kneading and baking.

The source for using shmurah matzah at the Seder comes from the pussuk in the Torah, "U'shmartem es hamatzos"

THE SEDER

The 15 steps of our Seder were composed in the 11th century.

There are seven mitzvot that we perform at the Seder.

Two of them are Torah mandated:

- telling the story of Yetzias Mitzrayim
- eating matzah

The other 5 mitzvot are mandated by the rabbis:

- eating Marror (bitter herbs)
- eating the Afikomen (as a reminder of the Pesach offering)
- saying Hallel
- drinking the four cups of wine
- demonstrating acts of freedom - using a cushion to lean on; leaning while we eat and drink; beginning the meal by dipping karpas into saltwater.

KIDDUSH

The Seder should begin right on time, so that the children will be awake to ask questions.

In some households, the seder leader makes Kiddush for everyone at the table. But many follow the custom of having everyone make their own Kiddush separately, while others all say it together out loud together.

Some say kiddush while standing, and others sitting (to demonstrate freedom). Have in mind to fulfill two mitzvot—the mitzvah of Kiddush that we say on every Shabbos and Yom Tov, plus the special mitzvah to drink four cups of wine at the Seder – the kiddush cup will be the first of the four cups

When saying She'hechyanu, one should have in mind all the various mitzvot of Seder night—Matzah, Marror, and the telling of the story of the Exodus.

The lady of the house does not say She'hechyanu, as she already said it when lighting the candles—but she should answer “Amein”. (She should have all the mitzvot in mind when she says She'hechyanu at candlelighting.)

When Seder night falls on motzei Shabbos, the Havdallah brachot are included in the text-- and we use the Yom Tov candles as the Havdallah flame.

THE FOUR CUPS OF WINE

At the Seder, every person must drink four cups of wine corresponding to the four expressions of freedom mentioned in the Torah (Shemot 6:6-7).

- The first cup represents our physical removal from the geographical boundaries of Egypt.
- The second cup represents our delivery from Egyptian slavery.
- The third cup represents our creation as an inherently free people, immune to any future possibility of enslavement.
- The fourth cup represents our election as God's chosen people at Sinai.

Nobody should pour his own wine, but rather each person should pour for another -- as one would with royalty.

It is best to use red wine, as this alludes to the blood spilled by Pharaoh, the blood of the Ten Plagues, and the blood the Jews put on their doorposts. Low-alcohol (7%) wine or wine diluted with grape juice is fine to use. If one is allergic to wine or extremely tired one can use grape juice instead of wine.

Everyone should have his own wine cup that holds a minimum of 3.3 oz. (86cc).

It is preferable to drink the entire cup you are using, whatever the size. Or one should at least drink the majority of the cup. And if not that, then at least a 3.3 oz.

LEANING

As an expression of freedom, one should lean to the left while drinking each of the Four Cups—and while eating the matzah. It should be enough of a lean that if the object on which you are leaning were to be pulled away, you would fall over.

Even left-handed people should lean to the left (to avoid food going down the windpipe.)

Don't lean onto your own arm or your body. Lean most of your body—not just your head—onto a chair, wall or another person.

Women are not chaviv to lean, although Sephardim do.

No leaning is done during the reading of the Haggadah, while eating the meal or bentching.

URCHATZ

Everyone at the Seder who will be dipping the karpas now washes their hands in the manner of washing for bread -- pouring water from a cup, twice on each hand-- but without a bracha.

We do this because any detached food dipped into one of seven fluids named in the Talmud (water, wine, blood, dew, milk, olive oil, and date honey) makes the food susceptible to tumah (ritual impurity). If the food will be eaten with the hands, washing is required.

KARPAS

Karpas must be a vegetable whose bracha is “Borei pri ha-adamah” when eaten raw, but a vegetable not useable for Marror. Options include celery, radish, parsely or potato.

Take the Karpas vegetable and dip it in salt water. Have in mind that the bracha will also cover the Marror.

One should try to avoid triggering the possible need to say a bracha achrona, which could occur if one eats more than a kezayit (15 grams). But if one inadvertently eats more than a kezayit, one does not need to say a bracha achrona.

YACHATZ

The leader of the Seder breaks the middle matzah in two. The smaller piece is put back in between the other two matzos, to be eaten later at Hamotzi. The larger piece is wrapped up and becomes the Afikomen.

According to the gemara, children should try to “steal” the Afikomen to encourage them to remain awake during the Seder.

MAGGID

It is important to have a good translation of the Haggadah so that one can understand what is being said. The first paragraph of the Haggadah is Aramaic.

THE FOUR QUESTIONS

Pour the second cup of wine.

The minhag is for the youngest person at the Seder to recite the Four Questions. If there are no children present, an adult should ask them.

One must translate the questions and explain them.

“AVADIM HAYEENU”

The declaration, “We were slaves in Egypt” is the essential answer to the Four Questions.

V’HEE SHE’AMDA – WE HAVE AND ALWAYS WILL OUTLIVE OUR ENEMIES

In an expression of joy, the matzos are covered and the wine glasses are raised while reciting this paragraph.

THE TEN PLAGUES

Every time one of the plagues is mentioned, we dip our finger in the wine and spill a drop. This reminds us that our cup of joy is not complete because people had to die for our salvation.

You should spill a total of 16 drops -- three for “blood, fire and pillars of smoke,” 10 more for the plagues, and another three for Rabbi Yehudah’s abbreviation.

LE'FEECHACH

Cover the matzos, raise the cup of wine, and recite the paragraph aloud and joyfully.

SECOND CUP

When you drink the wine, don’t forget to lean. So important is this expression of freedom, that if one forgets to lean while drinking the second cup, one must drink it again.

If we already made the bracha over wine on the first cup, why do we make a new bracha here again? Because of the significant timelapse between the two cups.

RACHTZAH

The hands are washed in the normal manner for bread, with the bracha, “al netilat yadaiyim”.

From this point on, be careful not to talk until you’ve eaten the matzah.

HAMOTZI

It is a Torah ordained mitzvah to eat matzah on Seder night.

Unlike when we make “Hamotzi” on Shabbat, on Pesach we do not dip the matzah in salt. It is a special mitzvah to taste the matzah itself.

Before the leader recites the bracha, everyone should have enough matzah in front of them to fulfill the mitzvah properly.

EATING MATZAH

The leader lifts all three matzos—covered or uncovered—says “Hamotzi”, then drops the bottom matzah. He now makes the special bracha—“al achilat matzah”. Then he breaks both matzahs together, so there is minimal interruption between the brachas and the eating.

He must eat at least one kezayit from the top matzah, and one kezayis from the second (middle) matzah. A kezayit is approximately 45-50cc, which is roughly two-thirds of a square matzah-- or one half of the hand-made round matzah.

Halacha defines an act of “eating” as swallowing a kezayit within two to four minutes. Others say six minutes. At the very least, the matzah must be consumed within nine minutes. If this is difficult, one may sip some water while eating.

If each person at the table is making his own “Hamotzi” with three matzos in front of him, then he should do the same. If the ba’al habayis is being motzi everyone else, then each person should eat at least a small piece of both of his matzos—supplementing it with other matzos from the table.

According to the Vilna Gaon, a Jew fulfills a mitzvah every time he eats a kezayis of matzah during the week of Pesach.

Don’t forget to lean to the left while eating the matzah.

MARROR

Take an amount of Marror equivalent to the size of a kezayit. Even though many have the minhag of using horseradish, the gemara nevertheless includes chassa—lettuce—as a vegetable that may be used as Marror. (Its stalk becomes bitter if left in the ground for a long time.)

If Romaine lettuce is used, the leaves should total 8x10 inches—or about 25-29cc. Extreme care should be taken to check the lettuce, because often there are small bugs in the leaves.

If horseradish is used, it should be compacted into 1.1 fluid ounces-- an amount equivalent to half of a typical egg. It should be ground up before Yom Tov begins—and kept in a jar. If you must grind it up on Yom Tov, do it with a shinuiy—like holding the grater upside down.

Horseradish in jars bought from the store should not be used, because sweeteners are added to make them less bitter. Particularly problematic is red horseradish, which is actually a mixture of beets and horseradish.

Before making the bracha, the Marror should be dipped into the Charoset, and then shaken off. According to the gemara, the Charoset serves as an “antiseptic” to dilute the harsh effects of the Marror. When reciting the bracha, have in mind that the Marror will be eaten in the “Korech sandwich” as well.

You should not lean while eating the Marror.

KORECH

Take the bottom matzah (remaining from the original three) and make a sandwich with the Marror. For this mitzvah, it is okay to use smaller amounts.

Dip the sandwich into the Charoset, and then shake it off. Some have the minhag not to dip the Korech Maror into charoset.

Say the paragraph of “Zecher Lemikdash KeHillel” - There is no bracha.

Eat the sandwich while leaning to the left.

SHULCHAN ORECH

The festive meal is eaten. It is traditional to begin the meal with an egg, which symbolizes the Chagigah offering. This way, everyone starts the Seder meal with the same thing-- as in the times of the Beis Hamikdosh when everyone ate the Chagigah offering at the beginning of the meal.

The meal should preferably end before chatzot (midnight), in order to eat the Afikomen by that time. It is important not to eat so much that you will be too full to eat the Afikomen.

The custom is for the meal not to include any roasted meat, in order to distinguish our meal from that during the times of the Beis HaMikdosh-- when the korban Pesach was eaten roasted. (Dry-pan roasting is also a problem, because the juices produced are not sufficient for it to be considered "cooking" and not roasting.)

AFIKOMEN

The Afikomen should preferably be eaten before chatzo (midnight) -- but if eating it by that time will mean rushing through the Seder, then it may be eaten later.

The Afikomen should be eaten before you are completely full. If you are full to the point of being "stuffed", eating the Afikomen might not halachically be considered an act of "eating".

Everyone should try to eat a kezayit of matzah for the Afikomen.

After the Afikomen, nothing else should be eaten for the remainder of the night -- you may drink water, a hot drink, and of course the remaining two cups of wine.

The Afikomen should be eaten while leaning to the left.

BARECH

Everyone should fill up a cup with wine for the Third Cup, which will be drunk after bentching. The minhag on Seder night is for the head of the household to lead the bentching and say the zimun ("Rabbotai Nevarech").

THIRD CUP

It is desirable to drink the entire cup of wine. Otherwise, most of the content of the cup. Don't forget to lean to the left while drinking.

ELIYAHU HANAVI

Pour the Fourth Cup, as well as the extra cup for Eliyahu HaNavi. Open the door and recite "Shefoch Chamatecha". The custom is to use the wine from Eliyahu's cup for Kiddush the next day.

FOURTH CUP

A bracha achrona should be said after drinking the fourth cup.