

Pilgrim Festivals

THINGS TO THINK ABOUT

From ancient times to the present, Jews have celebrated the pilgrim festivals. The first of these holidays, Passover, is celebrated for eight days from the 15th to 22nd of *Nisan*. This festival commemorates the Exodus from Egypt. In preparation for this event, all leaven is removed from the house – a formal search takes place on the 14th of *Nisan*. The first night of Passover is observed at home to fulfil the Biblical commandment to relate the narrative of the Exodus to one's son. During the *seder*, those present traditionally lean on their left sides as was customary in ancient times for freemen. The symbols placed on the *seder* table are related to Egyptian bondage, God's redemption, and the celebration in the Temple in ancient Israel. Of central significance in the observance of Passover is the injunction to eat *matzot* (unleavened bread). At the *seder* meal four cups of wine are drunk and various foods, including bitter herbs, parsley and *haroset* (a mixture of fruit, spices, wine and *matzah* meal) are eaten.

The second pilgrim festival, *Shavuot*, is commemorated for two days on the 6th and 7th of *Sivan*. '*Shavuot*' means weeks: seven weeks are counted from the bringing of the *omer* (first sheaf of the barley harvest) on the second day of Passover. This festival recalls the giving of the law on Mt Sinai. The third pilgrim festival, *Sukkot*, is celebrated on the 15th of *Tishri*, symbolizing God's protection of the Israelites during their wandering in the desert. According to tradition, Jews are commanded to construct a *sukkah* (booth) for this festival as a reminder that the people of Israel dwelt in booths when they fled from Egypt. When reflecting on these pilgrim festivals, which commemorate historical events in the life of the Jewish nation, you should consider whether there is any historical foundation for the events they recall. Did the

Exodus in fact occur as recorded in Scripture? Did the ancient Israelites actually wander in the desert for forty years? Did Moses receive the Torah on Mt Sinai? For thousands of years Jews have accepted the historicity of the Biblical account. But, in the light of modern historical scholarship, is there any evidence to support such a claim?

THINGS TO DO

- If possible, attend a Passover seder.
- Build a *sukkah*. For information on how to do this go to Google.com and look up websites dealing with *Sukkot*, such as www.jewfaq.org/8holiday5.htm.
- Go to Google.com. Search for websites dealing with these Jewish festivals, such as www.jewfaq.org/holiday0.thm.
- Stay in Google. Click on images. Type in 'Passover', '*Sukkot*', and '*Shavuot*'. You will find a wide range of illustrations dealing with these festivals.

TIPS FOR TEACHERS

- If possible, take your class to a Passover seder.
- Hold a Passover *seder* for your class. Go to Google.com and search for websites which explain about the *seder* such as www.jewfaq.org.

- Have a debate about the Biblical account of the Exodus. One side should argue that there is no historical evidence to support the belief that the Exodus ever occurred; the other side should argue the opposite.
- Build a *sukkah*. Go to Google.com for information how to do this, such as <www.holidays.net/sukkot/sukkah.htm>.
- Bring *matzah* to your class. Explain about its religious significance.