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*Passover*  
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On the evening of March 31, Jews around the world will gather to begin the most widely observed Jewish festival, Passover. For almost 3000 years, the Passover celebration has commemorated the Israelites' escape to freedom from slavery in Egypt, as written in the book of Exodus.

The Bible describes God's instructions to Moses. One directs a father to tell his children, "It is the Lord's Passover, for he passed over the houses of the Israelites in Egypt when he struck the Egyptians and spared our houses" (Exodus 12:27). This teaching role of the family -- the father tells his children -- has been a key emphasis of the holiday from the beginning.

The central activity of the holiday has always been a combined dinner and ritual called a Seder (literally, the "order of the program") during which the story and the meaning of Passover are developed through readings, blessings, and song. The Seder takes place on the first, and sometimes on the second, night of the eight-day festival. Typically, extended families or even entire communities celebrate it together.

In the early years, the Passover story was told after the meal, and sometimes the narration would last until sunrise the next day. Later, during the Middle Ages, the order was changed, and a significant portion of the service occurred before the meal. While this helped the children stay awake and pay attention to the teachings, it also meant that the instruction was shorter, since everyone looked forward to the fine meal waiting for them.

To ensure that all the important elements of the story are told, Judaism developed a special guide for the Seder called the Haggadah

(literally, "narration"). The Haggadah is a combination prayer book and hymnal. It tells the Passover story and leads the gathered family and friends in ritual remembrance of God's actions on behalf of the people Israel. The story's main theme, one of universal significance, is the God-given right to freedom and liberty for all humanity.

The teaching highlight of the Seder features the youngest reader of the family who recites or sings The Four Questions. These questions ask why Passover is special, beginning with the first one, "Why is this night different from all other nights?" In response, the story of God's miracles and the people Israel's escape from slavery is read from the Haggadah.

Passover remains a centrally important holiday to Jews and others throughout the world. The holiday's major themes -- religious independence, freedom from slavery, and God's protection -- are ideas that all of us can embrace as we approach the new millennium.