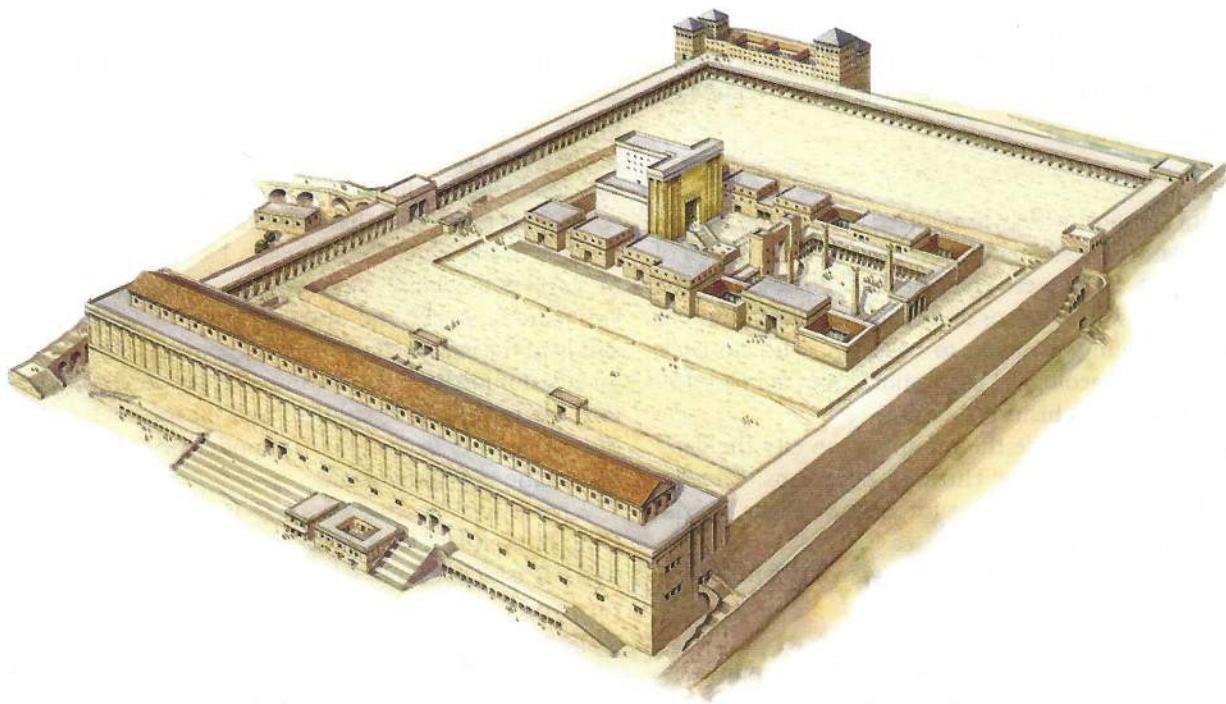


# Pesach and the Second Beis Hamikdash



WHAT WAS THE FIRST YOM TOV OBSERVED IN THE SECOND BEIS  
HAMIKDASH AFTER IT WAS BUILT? AND WHAT WAS THE LAST ONE  
OBSERVED THERE RIGHT BEFORE IT WAS DESTROYED BY THE ROMANS?  
ANSWER: PESACH.

BY PROFESSOR LAWRENCE H. SCHIFFMAN

THE BOOK OF EZRA (6:16-22) RELATES HOW THE CONSTRUCTION OF THE SECOND BEIS HAMIKDASH WAS COMPLETED IN ADAR 515 BCE AND IMMEDIATELY FOLLOWED BY THE CELEBRATION OF PESACH. KOHANIM, LEVIIM AND THOSE JUDEANS WHO HAD COME UP FROM THE EXILE IN BABYLONIA JOYOUSLY MARKED THE REDEDICATION OF THE BEIS HAMIKDASH WITH NUMEROUS SACRIFICES. THE PRIESTLY AND LEVITICAL ROTATIONS WERE REINSTATED, AND THE WORSHIP WAS CONDUCTED IN ACCORDANCE WITH THE TORAH'S COMMANDS. THE ACCOUNT OF EZRA STRESSES THE PURIFICATION RITUALS, AS WELL AS THE FACT THAT SOME OF THE JEWS WHO HAD REMAINED IN ERETZ YISRAEL AFTER THE DEPORTATIONS OF 597 AND 586 BCE JOINED IN OBSERVING PESACH. AS EXPECTED, CHAG HAMATZOS WAS OBSERVED FOR SEVEN DAYS.

**O**ur earliest post-Biblical record of Pesach observance comes from a document dated to 419 BCE from a Jewish military colony in the service of the Persian Empire. These Jews were living in a place variously called Elephantine, Assuan or Yeb, located on an island in the Nile River in southern Egypt. This colony existed from the sixth through fourth centuries BCE. Numerous papyri (documents written on "paper" made of pressed reeds glued together) and ostraca (inscriptions on broken pottery shards) from this community, the earliest of which dates to 495 BCE, were found in the residential quarter of Elephantine.

The book of Yirmiyahu (43:5-7) attests to the fact that some Jews lived in Egypt. This Jewish military colony was set up after the conquest of Babylonia and most of the Near East by Cyrus the Great, king of Persia and Medea, in 540 BCE. Its function was to defend the Persian Empire from attacks from Nubia in the south. The latest document we have is from 390 BCE, earlier than the conquest of the Near East by Alexander the Great (the Talmud's

Alexandros Mokdon) in 334 BCE. It is in this period that we get a brief look at the observance of Pesach in this community.

One of the documents, known as the Passover Papyrus, indicates that a certain Hananiah, sent from outside the community, was able to secure an order from King Daryavesh II (423-404 BCE) to compel the local ruler Arsames to allow the Jews to observe their upcoming Yom Tov of Pesach. The text provides for purification before the holiday, observing the *seder* at twilight after the 14th day of Nissan, not doing work on the first and seventh day of the Yom Tov, abstaining from *chametz* from the 15th to 21st of the month, including not drinking beer, eating *chametz* or allowing it to be seen in their houses. They are told to lock it up in storage rooms and seal them during this period.

All of these laws are formulated as Aramaic paraphrases of Biblical passages almost reminiscent of Targum Onkelos, itself based on a long tradition of Jewish translation of Biblical passages into Aramaic, for many Jews their spoken language. However, these Jews seem to have taken the commandment of *bal yeiraeh* literally, making sure that none of their leaven could possibly be seen during the week of Pesach.





## Josephus

We next encounter Pesach in the works of Josephus, the first-century CE Jewish historian. He tells the story of the Exodus and later explains the laws of the celebration, essentially paraphrasing the Torah. He calculates that the walls of Jericho fell on the last day of the Yom Tov. When at one point he describes the Yom Tov as lasting eight days, he is referring to Erev Pesach, observed as a sort of holiday, and the seven days of Yom Tov that follow. He also recounts the celebration of the Yom Tov by Kings Chizkiyahu and Yoshiyahu, and by the Judeans immediately after the rebuilding of the Beis Hamikdash in circa 515 BCE, essentially paraphrasing the Biblical accounts.

For the years that followed, Josephus provides all kinds of fascinating information. Perhaps the most important contribution he makes is his discussion of the enormous scale of the Pesach observance at the Beis Hamikdash. In 66 CE, immediately after the outbreak of the Jewish revolt against Rome generally

known as the Great Revolt, the Roman legate Cestius Gallus wanted to inform the Emperor Nero of the number of Jews who participated in this Yom Tov. In the process, Josephus tells us that the slaughter of the sacrifice took place from 3:00 until 5:00 p.m. and that at least ten people and 20 at most were counted for each sacrificial animal. (Because these lambs were actually quite small, other festival sacrifices provided the rest of the meal, along with the matzah and *maror*. Between ten and 20 people could just about get a *kezayis*, a piece of meat the size of an olive. The *korban Pesach* was eaten at the end, as symbolized by our *afikoman*.) The priests found that the number of sacrifices was 256,500, and the total number of participants was therefore calculated at 2,700,200. Josephus notes that this only included those who were pure and able to participate in the sacrifice, excluding those who were ritually impure and foreigners who came to participate. Some have argued that these numbers are impossible, since the population of Jerusalem at that time would have been approximately

60,000. But this, of course, does not take into account that Pesach was one of the *shalosh regalim*, the three pilgrimage festivals, and Jews from all over the world, as well as some non-Jews, came to the city to remember and celebrate the Exodus from Egypt.

This account fits perfectly with *Mishnah Pesachim* (chapter 5). There we learn that the afternoon *tamid* (daily) sacrifice was usually completed by 2:30 p.m. so as to offer the *korban Pesach* afterwards. The large number of Jews who attended, each offering his Paschal lamb, were divided into three groups that entered one after the other. Long lines of *kohanim* would quickly pass the gold and silver vessels with the sacrificial blood to be spilled on the *mizbeiach*. During the process, *Hallel* was sung. After the three groups were all finished they fanned out throughout the city to roast their animals and celebrate the *seder* with their families and friends, also described in detail in the Mishnah (chapter 10).

Josephus' report of the timing of the *korban Pesach* shows that the sectarian approach found in the Book of Jubilees (an early second-century BCE Jewish work) and in the Dead Sea Scrolls, claiming that the Pesach should be offered before the *tamid*, was rejected in favor of the view we find in *Chazal*: first the afternoon *tamid* and then the *korban Pesach*. We also see from Josephus and the Gemara that contrary to these sectarian works, women and children were included in the celebration, exactly as today.

Pesach is mentioned throughout Josephus' account of the history of the Second Beis Hamikdash period. In fact, he relates a story, also known from the Gemara (*Sotah* 49b, *Menachos* 64b, cf., *Bava Kamma* 82b) regarding the siege of the Beis Hamikdash when the two brothers Aristobulus (II) and Hyrcanus (II) fought over who would succeed their mother, Queen Shelomtzion, after she died in 67 BCE. (She had been the wife of the evil Alexander Janneus, Yannai Hamelech in the Gemara.) This struggle



led the Romans to conquer the country in 63 BCE, putting an end to the Hasmonean dynasty, the successors to Judah the Maccabee. During the struggle, Aristobulus, truly the heir to the spirit of Jewish self-rule fostered by the Maccabees, was besieged in the Beis Hamikdash Mount area by his brother Hyrcanus and an Arab chieftain. The story of the desire of those inside to lower money over the walls in return for sacrificial animals, as told by Chazal, is supplemented by Josephus' explanation that this took place during Pesach. In his view, the required animals were in order to fulfill the "custom" of the Jews to "offer a great number of sacrifices to G-d" at this time.

Before King Herod (Hordos in the Gemara, the Roman client king of Judea) died in 4 BCE he designated his son Archelaus to be his successor. Herod's tremendous insecurity, coupled with his horrible cruelty, led him to execute some of his own children, but he saw Archelaus as the best candidate to continue his rule after his death. This decision touched off widespread rebellion in Judea. In recounting this story, Josephus again tells us about the numerous sacrifices slaughtered by the Jews at Pesach, greater than at any other festival. He talks about the large multi-

tudes of people who came from both Eretz Yisrael and abroad to join in celebrating the Yom Tov.

## Eretz Yisrael

The Pesach season seems to have brought with it a desire to be delivered from Roman rule and its abuses. This happened in 4 BCE in the Beis Hamikdash area and led Archelaus to send troops to arrest some of the more rebellious followers of two sages, apparently *Perushim* (Pharisees), Yehudah and Matisyahu, who had been killed by Herod after they removed a golden eagle he had placed at the Beis Hamikdash entrance. The rebellious Jews stoned some of the Roman soldiers to death and the rest fled. That is when Archelaus sent his soldiers, who killed some 3,000 men. This was only the beginning of the kinds of disturbances against Roman rule that would take place around Pesach. The Romans eventually stepped in and returned the country to direct Roman rule.



## The Samaritans

In 9 CE Pesach was the occasion for a Samaritan attack on the purity of the Beis Hamikdash. The Samaritans, known in Talmudic parlance as *Kusim*, had by this time taken decidedly anti-Jewish positions

in dealing with the Romans. Moreover, the rabbis had ruled their entire territory (most of today's Shomron) as *tamei*, ritually impure. The Samaritans were essentially an amalgam of Israelites who were left in the country when Ashur (Assyria) exiled large numbers to northern Mesopotamia and farther east when the northern kingdom of Israel was destroyed in 722 BCE. They also brought in natives from a place called Gutium, east of Mesopotamia, to create a mixed population that would not seek independence. This group eventually adopted many features of Judaism, accepting the Five Books of the Torah but none of the other Biblical books and following a halachic system similar to that of the *Tzedukim* (Sadducees). By 9 BCE they had grown so separated from the Jewish people that on Pesach, when the gates of the Beis Hamikdash were open, they ran in and scattered human bones throughout the area. For this reason, the *kohanim* had to empty the entire *Beis Hamikdash* in order to purify it and prevent further actions of this type.

## Beis Hamikdash Riots

In 50 BCE another riot occurred in the Beis Hamikdash around the Pesach time. In order to prevent violence, the Roman

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government had placed a large number of soldiers around the Beis Hamikdash, as had generally been done on the Jewish festivals. On the fourth day of Pesach, the third day of Chol Hamoad in Eretz Yisrael, a Roman soldier committed a terrible act of disrespect against the holiness of the Beis Hamikdash. Cumanus, the Roman procurator of Judea, was unable to calm the crowd that was shouting insults at him. He then called for reinforcements, causing the enormous crowd to flee. Because the exits were very narrow, many Jews were trampled to death by their own brethren. Josephus tells us that 20,000 people perished on this occasion. He speaks of how mourning and lamentation replaced the celebration, prayers and sacrifices that Pesach.

This affair was just one of many that led to increasing feeling on the part of many Jews that Roman rule was intolerable. Long-standing revolutionary movements, some deriving their spirit from the Maccabees in support of Jewish independence, others motivated by Messianic yearnings, still others finding the rapacious economic policies of the procurators to be intolerable, began to coalesce and rebellion was increasingly on the horizon. By 66 CE the procurator Florus had so alienated the people that Josephus tells us that no fewer than three million people came

to protest to the legate (governor) of Syria at Pesach time. The legate, Cestius Gallus, had himself come to Jerusalem for Pesach, perhaps assuming there might be trouble. He seems to have been on the right side, as he successfully quieted the people and instructed the procurator Florus to treat the Jews more decently. But this was simply out of character, and Florus' continued misdeeds helped to sow the seeds of the revolt that would begin shortly.

In fact, Pesach played a role in the final defeat of the Jews and the destruction of the Beis Hamikdash in 70 CE. Josephus provides extensive accounts illustrating the internal Jewish strife the Gemara tells us about in *Gittin*. This made it impossible either to be victorious or to reach some kind of an accommodation with the Romans, and is seen by *Chazal* as a major cause of the destruction of the Second Beis Hamikdash. Indeed, Josephus takes the same view, having started out as a commander in the army of the revolutionaries dispatched to the Galilee. Seeing the internal Jewish strife first-hand and faced with death himself, he surrendered and became a Roman mouthpiece, preaching the futility of the revolt and warning of its only possible end: destruction of the nation and its Beis Hamikdash.



In the spring of 70 CE there was something of a respite from the Roman attacks. When the priests of the zealot faction that was in control of the Beis Hamikdash opened it up to make it available for Pesach, another rebel group, led by Yochanan of Gush Chalav (who according to Josephus was not properly purified) entered with concealed weapons in order to seize it. The result was that the zealots fled. After taking control, Yochanan's followers immediately attacked the followers of another rebel leader, Shimon bar Giora. By this time the fourth rebel group, the Sicarii, had already escaped to Masada. One of their leaders, known as Abba Sikra (The Dagger Carrier), figures in the Gemara's narration of Jewish strife in the last days before the destruction of Yerushalayim.

Josephus tells us that during the Roman siege of Jerusalem 97,000 people were taken captive and 1,100,000 were killed. He explains this large number as resulting from the fact that the final assault took place around the time of Pesach, when so many Jews were present and were suddenly caught in the clasp of the Roman army. The final siege did indeed last from sometime in April through August, ending on Tishah B'Av. Pesach was the last festival observed in the Second Beis Hamikdash.

## Jewish Resistance

The combination of large crowds and the spirit of redemption promulgated by the festival of Pesach helped to fan Jewish resistance to Rome and often sparked revolutionary action. Ultimately, as the situation became more serious, it led to the Jewish revolt and the destruction of the Beis Hamikdash. There are great lessons to be learned from our history. Pesach is a time when we seek to come together as families and as a people. It is a time when we long for the rebuilding of the Beis Hamikdash and for its role as a unifier of the Jewish people. Clearly we see in our history how that role was beautifully fulfilled when millions of Jews came to the holy city to join together in celebrating Pesach. Yet that very same season was often the stimulus for internal Jewish strife and even violence.

As we enter our own *mikdashim me'atim*, small sanctuaries all over the world, to observe this Yom Tov, let us strive to be among those joining together in true *achdus* rather than those sowing strife and discord. *Lshanah habaah bi'Yerushalayim habenuyah!* Next year in rebuilt Jerusalem! ●

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