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Families prepare for Passover

By [HEMA EASLEY](#)

THE JOURNAL NEWS

(Original Publication: April 2, 2007)

Ellyn Cohen remembers Passover Seders from her childhood as being very traditional and very boring.

Family elders led the ceremony in unfamiliar Hebrew. She recalls sitting around the table with her cousins, fidgeting and waiting for the Seder to end.

For this year's Passover, which begins tonight, Cohen is planning changes to the Seder that would include some innovations while preserving the essence of Passover.

"People are torn today," said the New City resident, who is taking a break from a career in public relations. "We want to stick with tradition that is 4,000 years old, but we also want to make it relevant in today's world."

Passover commemorates the flight of Jews from bondage under Egypt several thousand years ago. It also celebrates the coming of spring and is a reminder of the desire for freedom and people's willingness to fight for it.

Cohen plans to ask her 20 Seder guests to discuss some part of the Passover story that resonates with them so that it becomes more than just rote. She also plans to include discussions about the 10 plagues that God brought upon the Egyptians and find modern parallels, such as genocide in Darfur and human rights violations around the world.

As a recognition of the long fight for women's rights, Cohen plans to add another cup of wine on the Seder table to honor Miriam, Moses' sister, who is considered a heroine in Jewish lore.

When Jews around the world prepare for Passover tonight, they are marking the holiday in different ways.

The Monsey Jewish Center has organized a public burning of chametz, all leavened bread and fermented grains, at their offices in Monsey early today. The town of Ramapo also has planned a chametz burning at the Monsey Park and Drive on Route 59.

The Torah prohibits consumption and ownership of chametz during Passover. Observant Jews spend weeks before the holiday cleaning their homes of all bread, cookies, pastries and alcohol made from grain to ensure it is ritually pure for Passover. Only unleavened bread, or matzo, is allowed during Passover.

Others do not physically burn chametz but will symbolically sell it to a designated non-Jew through a rabbi. The chametz is then returned to the Jewish home after the holiday.

For the past two weeks, Rabbi Chaim Z. Ehrenreich of the Chabad Jewish Enrichment Center in Chestnut Ridge has been collecting signatures from Jews who have given him responsibility to sell their chametz. So far, he said, several hundred people have signed up for the free service.

Ehrenreich likened leavened bread to ego and matzo to humility.

"There is a very significant message there," said Ehrenreich. "The lesson is that we have to be very careful with ego. We have to be disconnected from ego."

As one of the requirements of Passover is to teach children the story behind the celebration, Jewish schools across the county familiarized students with holiday traditions and their significance.

At the Orangetown Jewish Center last week, second- and third-grade students took part in a Seder where they substituted ceremonial food like bitter herbs and wine with chocolate and chocolate milk.

About 40 children participated, Principal Sandra Peck-Borowsky said.

"It was a way to teach the children our traditions in a creative way, while still having fun," Peck-Borowsky said.

At the Reuben Gittelman Hebrew Day School in New City, nursery students last week dressed as slaves, pharaohs and princesses sat and heard the story of Passover. They had been preparing for the holiday for several weeks, said Nadine Alperin, their principal.

Jack Holden, a New City resident, was at the school to watch his 4-year-old son, Joshua, participate in the Seder. Several other parents also were present, and took pictures.

"Josh came home every day telling us what he was doing in school," said Holden, who came to the school with his wife, Melissa, and daughter, Zoe. "Last night he told me the Passover story. He's only 4. It was amazing."

"It's important that he understand his culture, he understands where he came from and he understands what the family is doing when we have our own Seder," he said.
