

Why Does Passover Have Four Names?

Category: Holidays, Pesach

A strange element of Jewish tradition is the many names we give holidays. But when we take a deeper look, they all are linked together.

Too Many Names

Many of the Jewish holidays have more than one name. In fact, a few have several names. Rosh Hashanah, for example, is referred to by scripture as “Yom Teruah.” The Men of the Great Assembly, the compilers of the Machzor would call it “Yom haZikaron.” It is also known as “Yom Hadin” and nowadays we use the name given by the Talmudic sages: Rosh Hashanah.

Sukkot is called “Chag Ha’asif” in the Torah, “Zman Simchaseinu” in the prayers and “Sukkot” by our sages.

Pesach also has several names. Torah mainly calls it “Chag haMatzot” which brings to mind the hurry with which the Jewish people left Egypt leaving without time to bake proper bread. They rushed because the Egyptians literally chased them out! This name also brings to mind the strong faith that the Jewish people displayed at that time, as they followed Moses into the desert not knowing where they were going and without having proper provisions.

Pesach is also called “Chag haAviv” because the festival must always be in the springtime. The Torah tells us, “You shall keep Chag haMatzot... each spring, for it was then that you left Egypt.”

“Zman Cherusaeinu” is one of the names used in the prayers and in the Kiddush.

This name reflects the Jews’ newfound freedom from slavery in Egypt.

Finally Pesach is called “Pesach” or Passover, by our sages, in commemoration of G-d’s passing over the Jewish houses when He set out to kill every firstborn in Egypt.

No other group gives more than one name to its holidays. We must therefore assume that when our sages have assigned four different names to one holiday, there must be a lesson for us to learn in each.

The Rebbe explains:

Pesach marks the birth of the Jewish people and the commencing of our journey to become ever closer to G-d. Each of the four names of Pesach demonstrates another step of this never-ending journey.

Chag Hamatzot:

Everyone knows the difference between chametz and matzah. Both are dough made of flour and water, only the chametz dough is set out to rise, while matzah dough isn't given a chance to rise. The symbolism is that chametz represents ego and pride which rise up inside a person, and Matzah represents humility.

A Jew must approach his service of G-d with a humble attitude. He must bear in mind that Torah is absolutely true and whether or not he understands the logic behind the laws he must keep the mitzvah nonetheless, for this is G-d's will. This humility was displayed at the foot of Mt. Sinai when the Jews cried out, "Everything that G-d commands us to do we will do!"

A Jew should not come to a Torah class armed with his own opinions and a bag full of attacks which — he thinks — discredit Judaism. Instead he must approach Torah study with a humble attitude and an open mind, ready to hear what Judaism has to say.

Chag haAviv:

Spring is a time when everything is in bloom. Plants and trees are getting their colors back and the whole world explodes with a new excitement and joy. When a Jew learns Torah, he suddenly discovers that so many of the things he had been doing all his life without knowing why, have reasons and meaning.

I'll give you just one example from the Pesach Seder. Why do we place three Matzos on the Seder table?

The most well-known reason is that each matzah represents one type of Jew – Cohen, Levi and Yisroel. There is another reason though. The three matzot remind us of the three matzot Sarah made in honor of the angels who came to tell them about the future birth of Isaac. Yet a third reason is that the three matzot represent the three patriarchs Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

In addition, there is a halachic reason which explains why we need three matzot. At the Seder we break the middle matzo before reading the Haggadah because the haggada must be recited on Lechem Oni – poor man’s bread (represented by the broken piece). Still, just like every Shabbat and festival, we must recite the Hamotzi over Lechem Mishna – two full loaves of bread. Hence we need three Matzot on the Seder plate.

So you see, here is something that every child knows from when he’s three years old that never really seemed to have a reason. But when we start to learn Torah suddenly everything has reason!

Zman Cheruseinu:

What is true freedom? Is doing whatever you want really freedom? Was our redemption from Egypt true freedom? G-d took us away from serving Pharaoh so we could serve Him. We were freed from Egyptian slavery just to be commanded with 613 “don’t do this”s and “must do that”s, and this is what we call “The Time of Our Redemption”?

Most people are ridden with worries. People worry about making enough money to keep up with the Joneses. Every little pain sends people running to the doctor for x-rays to make sure they haven’t invented a new terminal illness. All of these worries bring stress and stress brings back aches. People are slaves to their own worries and most people can’t free themselves from themselves.

But when a Jew learns Torah, he sees that he is not the center of the universe. He learns that G-d created the world and He created us upon the earth so we could serve Him. Once you know that, all of a sudden it doesn’t matter so much whether your house is the biggest on the block or whether your teeth are perfectly white in a straight row. The important thing is that he should fulfill his purpose on Earth by doing mitzvos.

Suddenly he has other worries. He has to worry whether the mitzvah he did was done in the best way. He has to make sure that the house is free of even the smallest particle of chametz. He worries if he has all of the stuff for the Seder plate. He worries that others should have the means to buy matzah and wine for Pesach. The Torah causes him to forget about himself for there are more important things to worry about.

This is true freedom - when one is freed from "himself."

Chag haPesach

Pesach means to jump or to skip, literally to pass over something. When a Jew learns Torah, he eventually develops a belief and faith in G-d that he could not reach through logical deductions. The depth and reach of this new faith cannot be described or explained logically - he believes because he believes! This is what we would call a "leap of faith", for to reach this level of faith one needs to leap (pass over) into the unknown, not thinking, not calculating. It is to this highest level each Jew must strive to reach.

The four names of Passover represent this spiritual journey.

If you start out like a matzah (Chag Hamatzos) - humble and low, you will reveal the springtime (Chag Haaviv) aspect of Torah - a new beauty; a new excitement. Getting excited over the beauty of Torah and Mitzvos sets you free from your personal bondage (Zman Cheirusainu) which allows you to reach that ultimate level, that leap of faith. Pesach. And all of this we learn from the four special names of our favorite holiday - Passover.