

# The Passover Story in a Nutshell

On Passover, Jewish people celebrate how God took them out of Egypt, where they had been suffered bitterly, enslaved by Pharaoh. With Moses as His representative, God brought ten plagues upon the Egyptians until they agreed to release the Jews (also called Israelites) from slavery and let them go free.

## Arrival in Egypt



Jacob and his children had arrived in Egypt to be close to his son Joseph. Joseph was second in command to the Pharaoh. Through his ingenuity the people of Egypt, and many of those from neighbouring countries, had been saved from death by famine. Jacob and his children were settled in the city of Goshen and prospered wonderfully — their numbers grew and grew.

As long as Jacob's sons were alive, the Children of Israel were honoured and respected. After Joseph died, things changed. A new Pharaoh rose up. He didn't appreciate what Joseph had done for Egypt and he feared the Israelites. He wanted to find a way to stop the Jewish people becoming more powerful than Egyptians.

## Enslavement



Pharaoh's way of dealing with his "Jewish Problem" was to enslave the Israelites. They were all forced to do backbreaking labour, compelled to make bricks to build cities of treasure houses for Pharaoh. But still, the Jewish communities continued to grow. This frightened Pharaoh. To put an end to this, Pharaoh summoned the Jewish midwives, Shifra and Puah, and commanded them to kill all Jewish new-born males. This, he thought, would put an end to the Jewish people. When the midwives defied his order, he commanded that they cast all the new-born males into the River Nile.

## The Birth of Moses



At this time a Jewish woman called Jocheved gave birth to a son. For a while she hid him but eventually she had to find another way to keep him safe. When she could no longer hide him, she built a small waterproof cradle and put her child among the reeds in the Nile. The child's sister, Miriam, hid close by to watch the child.

Soon after, Pharaoh's daughter came to bathe in the river and spotted the floating cradle. She realised the baby was a Jewish child, but her compassion led her to resolve to take the baby home. She names him Moses - he who was drawn from the water.

Moses' sister, Miriam, approached the princess and offered to find a nurse for the baby. When she accepted this offer, Miriam brought her Jocheved. Pharaoh's daughter hired Moses' own mother to nurse and care for him. When Moses grew older, he was returned to the palace, where Pharaoh's daughter raised him like a son.



## Moses Is Appointed Leader



As a young man, Moses grew up with a life of great comfort. When he left the palace, he discovered the hardship his brethren were suffering. On seeing an Egyptian cruelly beating a Jewish slave, Moses intervened. The Egyptian man died and Moses fled. He joined up with a distant tribe, became a shepherd and married a woman from this tribe.

The Israelites suffered more and more, praying to God to help them.

As Moses was shepherding his flock one day, he saw burning bush, in which God appeared to him. God instructed Moses that he was to lead the Israelites from slavery. He was told to go to Pharaoh and say, "Let My people go, so that they may serve Me." Back in Egypt, Moses and his brother Aaron assemble the elders of Israel to tell them that the time of their redemption has come: God was about to save them and release them from slavery. The Jewish people have hope but Pharaoh refuses to let them go. He decided to make things even worse for the Israelites. To make their work much harder, Pharaoh commanded their taskmasters to stop bringing the Israelites straw to make the bricks. His new rule stated that the slaves must travel to the fields to collect the straw themselves, while maintaining the same quota of brick production.

Moses could no longer bear the pain inflicted on his brethren. In anger, he turned to God asking, "Why have You done evil to this people?" God speaks to him, promising that the redemption is close at hand, replying, "Now you shall see what I will do to Pharaoh; for with a strong hand shall he let them go, and with a strong hand shall he drive them out of his land."

God then promises Moses that He will take out the Children of Israel from Egypt, deliver them from their enslavement, redeem them and acquire them as His own chosen people at Mount Sinai. He will then bring them to the Land He promised.

## The 10 Plagues



Moses and Aaron repeatedly came before Pharaoh to demand in the name of God, "Let My people go, so that they may serve Me in the wilderness." Pharaoh repeatedly refused. Aaron's staff turned into a snake and swallowed the magic sticks of the Egyptian sorcerers to prove that God is more powerful than their magic.

But Pharaoh still refused to let the Jewish people go free. Moses warned him that God would punish Egypt unless he agreed to release the Israelites. Pharaoh remained impervious. God began to send a series of plagues upon the Egyptians. In the throes of each plague, Pharaoh

promises to let the Children of Israel go; but he every time he went back on his word as soon the affliction was removed and the plague was over.

As Moses warned Pharaoh, the plagues started to afflict Egypt. First, Aaron struck the Nile, and the waters turned to blood. Then the land became overrun with swarms of frogs. After that, lice infested all men and beasts making everyone itch. Still, Pharaoh remained stubborn. Hordes of wild animals then invaded the cities, followed by a pestilence, a disease, that killed the domestic animals. Then painful boils break out on the Egyptians' skin. As soon as they passed, Pharaoh once again insisted he would not allow the Israelites to leave. Things continued to get worse. Fire and ice combined to descend from the skies as a devastating hail.

The people of Egypt, having suffered so much already, begged Pharaoh to let the Jewish slaves go, to make their own suffering stop. When Moses came to warn Pharaoh of the eighth plague, Pharaoh tried to bargain, saying, "You say that you want to go serve your G-d? I'll let the men go, as long as the women and children stay behind." Moses turned down this bargain, telling Pharaoh, "We must all go, men women and children, cattle and herds." But once again, with a heart of stone, Pharaoh refused.

As Pharaoh was warned, the next plagues descended upon Egypt. First, a swarm of locusts appeared, devouring all the crops that were growing to feed them. And then a thick darkness enveloped the land. But still Pharaoh refused Moses' request.

God spoke to Moses, telling him to instruct the Israelites to bring an offering to God. A lamb or kid was to be slaughtered and its blood sprinkled on the doorposts and lintel of every Israelite home, so that G-d should pass over these homes when He came to kill the Egyptian firstborn. The roasted meat of the offering was to be eaten that night together with matzah (unleavened bread) and bitter herbs. And then God brought the tenth and most horrible plague to Egypt. Pharaoh was warned again, but remained stubborn in his refusal to release the Israelites from slavery. And so, at the stroke of midnight of the 15th of the month of Nissan, an angel of death came to take the lives of the firstborn of every family. Only the Israelites who had painted blood onto their doorframes were spared or 'passed over'. There was devastation in the land of Egypt. Even Pharaoh's own son passed away.

# The Exodus



The catastrophic death of the firstborn finally broke Pharaoh's resistance and he begged the Children of Israel to leave his land. Following God's command, they departed hastily; so hastily that there was no time for their bread dough to rise. Before leaving, they asked their Egyptian neighbours for gold, silver and garments, compensation perhaps for their decades of suffering.

Soon after allowing the Israelites to leave, Pharaoh changed his mind. Perhaps seeing his work force leave hurt more than the loss of his son, he ordered his armies to chase after the Israelites, to force their return. Hurrying after, the army had soon nearly caught up. The Israelites found themselves trapped between Pharaoh's advancing armies and the sea. As the people started to despair, God told Moses to raise his staff over the water. Miraculously, the sea split apart, a path of dry land appeared. The Israelites hurried through. The pursuing Egyptian army followed but sadly for them, the walls of water came back together and washed them all away. Moses and the Israelites sang a song of praise and gratitude to God.

God commanded His people to observe the anniversary of the Exodus each year, eating no risen bread but only matzah, and re-telling the story of their suffering and eventual redemption. This practice continues to this day as the festival of Pesach (Passover).