

When does Passover begin?

Erev Pesach, Pesach, and Chag Ha-Matzot

Seder Guide ►



Introduction

It might be a bit confusing to understand exactly *when* Passover begins, at least from a traditional Jewish point of view. Does it begin on Nisan 14 or Nisan 15? In order to find an answer to this question, we first need to make a distinction between *zman shechitat korban Pesach* (the time of the slaughter of the Passover lambs) and then consider the commemoration of the holiday that was later instituted as the "Passover Seder."

The Passover in Egypt



The original sacrifice of the Passover (in Egypt) was of an unblemished male lamb that was selected on Nisan 10 and kept until the evening of the 14th, when it was sacrificed and its blood applied to the two doorposts and upper lintel of the house using a bunch of hyssop (Exod. 12:2-7, 22). The door to the house was then sealed and no one was permitted to leave until the following morning (Exod. 12:22). The blood on the doors would function as a sign for God to "pass over" the house

when He descended to slay all the firstborn of Egypt later that night (Exod. 12:13). Within the sealed house - during that very night (*לילה*) - the lamb would be roasted over a fire and eaten with unleavened bread and bitter herbs (Exod. 12:8). This sacred meal was to be commemorated as a feast to the LORD throughout all the generations and retold during the Passover seder service (Exod. 12:14, 25-27). Moreover, to commemorate the haste in which the Jews were brought out of Egypt, for seven days - from the evening of Nisan 14 until the evening of Nisan 21 - only unleavened bread was to be eaten and no leaven was to be found within any of the houses (Exod. 12:17-20).

[Editor's comment: Notice in the diagram above that the **seven days** of unleavened bread **include the 22nd**, which is in direct contradiction to **Ex 12:18** that states "you shall eat unleavened bread **until the twenty-first day of the month at evening.**" Notice that this same word "until" is used in Ex 12:6, which clearly refers to the evening that begins the 14th!]

Passover at the Temple

During the time of the Temple, *zman shechitat korban Pesach* (the time of the slaughter of the Passover lambs) was performed during the afternoon hours of Nisan 14, in observance of the commandment: "In the first month, on the fourteenth day of the month, between the evenings (i.e., *bein ha-aryaim*: **בין הערבים**), is the Passover for the LORD" (Lev. 23:5). Note that the time of the lamb's sacrifice is described as "bein ha-aryaim," usually translated as "between the evenings" or "between the settings." To the sages, the "first setting" of the Sun occurred at the beginning of its descent after noon, and the "second setting" referred to sundown or twilight. Hence "bein ha-aryaim" would mean sometime after noon but before twilight, or more simply, "the afternoon."

The sacrifice of the Passover lambs on the afternoon of Nisan 14 agrees with Jewish Oral Law and tradition. As Maimonides wrote, "It is a positive commandment to slaughter the Korban Pesach on the fourteenth of Nisan after midday" (*Hilchot Korban Pesach*). There is some discussion among the sages, however, as to whether the sacrifice of the korban Pesach occurred before or after the second set of tamid (daily) offerings made at the Temple (Exod. 29:38-42, Num. 28:1-8). In general, however, most of the sages agreed with Maimonides who clearly stated: "The Korban Pesach is not slaughtered until *after* the Tamid of the afternoon." In other words, the slaughter of the Passover lambs occurred on the late afternoon of Nisan 14.

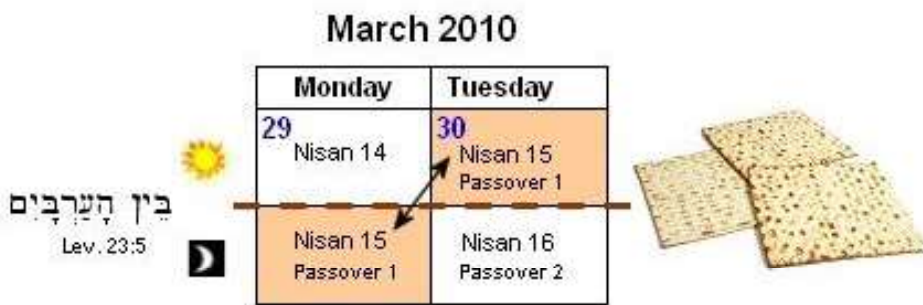
Note that though the sacrifice of the Passover lamb occurred on the afternoon Nisan 14, the ceremonial *eating* of the meal, or the "seder," would begin later, just before sundown and continue throughout the night. This agrees with Exod. 12:8 which states clearly that the Passover meal was consumed during the night: "They shall eat the flesh [of the Pascal lamb] *that night*" (i.e., *ba-lailah hazeh*: **בלילה הזו**). And since the Jewish day begins after sundown (when three stars are visible in the night sky), the traditional Passover Seder would begin just before sundown on Nisan 14 but would *continue* into the new day of Nisan 15, which is *also* the start of the seven-day festival of *chag ha-matzot* (**חג המצות**), the "Feast of Unleavened Bread" (Lev. 23:6).

In light of all this perhaps you can better appreciate why Jewish tradition regards "Passover" as an *eight day holiday*, since it links the times of the korban Pesach, the Seder meal, and the seven days of unleavened bread together as a whole.

[Editor's comment: Notice the definition of "**between the two evenings**" is mistakenly set by "the sages" as from "**noon to sunset**" during the daylight portion of the 14th. This is in direct contradiction to the command to **not** leave any of the lamb leftover until the **morning** of the **14th** (Ex 12:10; Deut 16:4)! And the Hebrew word for **morning** here is the same word used for morning in Gen 1:5 (Strong's 1242), stating "*And there was evening and there was **morning**, one day.*", so the "two evenings" must be from sunset to dark- twilight!]

Passover Today

Today the traditional Passover Seder begins on "Erev Pesach," meaning just before sundown on Nisan 14 and running into the first hours of Nisan 15 (outside of Israel a second seder is often held the following evening as well). The date of Passover can be somewhat confusing if you look at a Jewish calendar to see it listed simply as "Nisan 15." Again we must remember that the Jewish day begins on the *night before* it is listed on the calendar. For example, if the calendar says that March 30th is Nisan 15 (i.e., Passover), then you must understand that Nisan 15 actually begins at sundown on the night *before*, i.e., on March 29th:



Unfortunately, most Jewish calendars refer to the previous evening as "Erev Pesach" without indicating that the first "day" of Passover *spans* the end of Nisan 14 and carries over to Nisan 15.

In answer to our original question, then, (i.e., "Does Passover begin on Nisan 14 or Nisan 15?"), the answer is that while the Passover sacrifice was made on the afternoon of the 14th, the Passover Seder will span *both* the 14th and 15th! I realize all this might be a bit confusing, but it's just the way the Jewish calendar works!

Addendum:

The important point in all of this, of course, is that Yeshua is the "Lamb of God" who was sacrificed and raised from the dead according to the Scriptures (1 Cor. 15:3-5). As for the precise calculations involved in all this, including the time of His early Seder with His disciples, the exact hours of His crucifixion, and so on, there are numerous questions, though I completely trust that Yeshua 100% fulfilled the types and prophecies concerning the meaning of the Passover.

[Editor's comment: This article seems to indicate that Christ and the Jews were keeping the 14th **on the same date that year**, but with the Jews mistakenly keeping their **Passover meal** on the evening starting the **15th (Jn 18:28)**, after the lambs were *traditionally* sacrificed on the afternoon of the 14th.

But, now, does this mean that Christ observed the **first visible crescent** as the **New Moon, as the Jews did that year**, since they both kept the **14th**? This needs more research...]