

The Story of Passover

Many years ago, the Jewish people suffered from a great famine and were forced to leave the land of Canaan that had been their home for generations. Many of them traveled to Egypt in search of food and a home. The Pharaoh of Egypt knew of the Jews from his trusted advisor, Joseph, a Jew who had saved his kingdom from famine. For this reason, the Pharaoh welcomed the Jews and let them share in the wealth of the kingdom. Many years passed and the Jews flourished and prospered in the land of Egypt.

Eventually, however, a new Pharaoh became the ruler of Egypt; one who did not know of Joseph, and who feared and hated the Jews. This Pharaoh forced the Jews into slavery, making them work all day building cities and palaces for him. But he was still afraid that one day, the Jews would rise up and seize the kingdom. So he decreed that no Jewish boys should be allowed to live. Not long after this decision, a Jewish woman had a baby boy, and she hid him from the Pharaoh's soldiers to protect him. But she could not hide him forever, so she asked her daughter, Miriam, to make a special basket for him and to place the basket in the river.

When the Pharaoh's daughter, who was at the river bathing, retrieved the basket, she was so captivated by the baby within that she resolved to take him home and raise him as her own son. Pharaoh's daughter named the baby Moses, which, in Hebrew, means "brought out of the water." Miriam, who had been watching, ran to tell her mother the good news.

Moses grew up pampered in the palace of the Pharaoh, but he was not happy. He knew he was the son of Jews, and everywhere he went in the kingdom, he saw how hard the Jewish slaves worked, and how cruelly they were treated. One day, when he saw one of Pharaoh's guards beating a Jewish man, Moses became angry and cried out to him to stop. The guard would not, and enraged, Moses killed him. He knew then he must leave the kingdom, so he fled into the desert, vowing one day to return and set his people free.

For many years, Moses could not find the courage to return, until God promised to support him and his people. He returned to Egypt, accompanied by his brother Aaron, and went to the palace to demand that Pharaoh free the Jews. "Let my people go!" he said. But Pharaoh refused and instead made Jewish life even more miserable. Moses warned the Pharaoh that the Jewish God would punish the Egyptians if he did not let the Jews go free, but Pharaoh still refused to let them go, and the punishment began. Moses returned again and again to demand the freedom of his people; each time the Pharaoh refused, and each time a horrible plague befell the people of Egypt. Finally, the last, most terrible punishment descended — one morning, Egyptian families awoke to find their firstborn sons had died in the night, yet the Jewish children had been spared. God had *passed over* the Jewish houses.

At last, Pharaoh gave in and allowed the Jews to leave that very night. Fearing that Pharaoh would change his mind once again, the Jewish people packed up their belongings quickly, and departed early in the morning. Soon after they left, Pharaoh did indeed change his mind, and sent his soldiers on horses to bring them back. The Jews kept going forward until their path was blocked by the Red Sea. Moses begged God one more time for help, and he responded — the Red Sea parted, and the Jews were able to pass through to the other side; then the Red Sea closed behind them, preventing Pharaoh's troops from following. The Jews were free at last.

But freedom is not easy; it takes hard work to make a community and a society, and the Jewish people struggled after they left Egypt for forty more years before they were able to enter the land of Israel.