

Abrahamic House

Multi-Faith Holiday Guide

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Introduction

From Passover to Easter and Ramadan to Ridvan, the first month of multi-faith observance in the Abrahamic House was primed to be potent.

And yet, here we are in the midst of a global pandemic. Instead of being able to welcome guests into our home to share the best of the traditions we love, we find ourselves separated from our communities, deprived of everyday pleasures, left to do little more than tend our garden in the faith that new life will yet bloom.

Therefore, the Fellows of the Abrahamic House have created this resource--an e-zine, if you will--to share the history, significance, and practices of the religious observances we'd hoped to commemorate together with you.

We hope through these writings you'll be inspired to learn more about a new tradition and maybe even something new about your own.

Please share with us how you're observing this holy month and follow our journey on Instagram, Facebook, and at abrahamichouse.org.



PASSOVER

Passover is a seven day holiday that celebrates the story of Jewish peoplehood. It is based on the story in Exodus, where Jews were slaves to Pharaoh in Egypt and God liberated them through the prophet Moses. Through a series of negotiations, 10 plagues, and mass exodus, the Jewish people were freed from bondage and crossed the sea to the other side of redemption.

Therefore, every year Jews gather on the full moon of the Hebrew month of Nisan (April in the secular calendar year) to participate in a Seder - a ceremonial feast. The Seder literally means order and consists of 15 ritual steps woven throughout a celebratory dinner. We follow the readings of the Haggadah - one of the oldest Jewish texts that guides the Seder. A central aspect of the Seder is to remember ourselves as slaves and understand where we come from. The Passover Seder teaches that everyone must see themselves as if they personally left Egypt.

The night is filled with song, 4 cups of wine, praising God, and retelling our story of peoplehood. Themes of liberation and oppression are embedded throughout - from the food that we eat, the messages we reflect on and our modern day obligation to our communities.

While the Seder is only on the first night of Passover (and in the communities of the Diaspora also on the second), the holiday of Passover continues for 7 days with prayer practices, particular food restrictions and a spiritual spring awakening.



The holiday of Passover marks the identity of Jews from being individuals to becoming a nation. It is the foundational Jewish story of our history and on Passover we are commanded to retell this story to our children, each other and ourselves. This ancestral storytelling time is incredibly relevant to Jewish resilience of continuing a tradition that is over thousands of years old.

The major theme of this holiday is God redeeming the Jewish people from oppression and what it means to leave slavery for freedom.

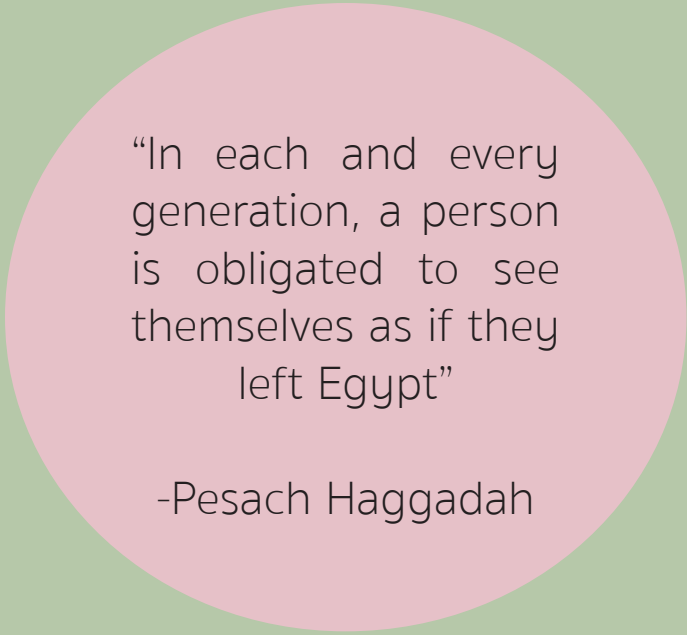


For typically a month before Passover arrives, we embark on an intensive spring cleaning. Everything in the house is deep cleaned for the arrival of spring and the holiday of Passover. We also clean out the kitchen and get rid of any chametz (leaven or food mixed with leaven) which is prohibited during the entire holiday of Passover. Instead, Jews eat matzah (made with flour that does not rise for more than 18 minutes) in remembrance of the Jewish people rushing out of Egypt who didn't have enough time to make bread.

The central aspect of the holiday of Passover is participating on a Seder on the first night of Passover. In this Seder, we share stories, sing songs, and eat specific foods like matzah, bitter herbs, and hard boiled eggs that serve as symbols for the wider teachings.

Passover continues for 7 days and just like most week long Jewish holidays, the first and the last days are the most holy. Meaning that on these days we refrain from work and participate in communal meals. The in-between days are called Chol Hamoad (weekday of the festival) and while they are still part of the holiday and the same

food restrictions apply, you are allowed to work. Typically people go on nature adventures as Passover is connected to the springtime (Passover is one of the original pilgrimage holidays based on the agricultural seasons).



“In each and every generation, a person is obligated to see themselves as if they left Egypt”

-Pesach Haggadah

“Therefore we are obligated to thank, praise, laud, glorify, exalt, lavish, bless, raise high, and acclaim God who made all these miracles for our ancestors and for us: God brought us out from slavery to freedom, from sorrow to joy, from mourning to celebration of a festival, from darkness to great light, and from servitude to redemption. And let us say a new song before God, Halleluyah!”

- Passover Haggadah

Jewish people have a lot of holidays (typically at least once a month!), but Passover is the most fundamental of them all. Most Seders are quite large as the whole extended family is typically invited. In some aspects, Passover is seen as more important than your wedding day. I grew up with the tradition of buying a new outfit specially for Passover (usually something white or light colored) and preparing to participate in a 7 hour long ritual with my entire family. There is so much wisdom held in the song, the stories, the history and each year the learning gets deeper. I am grateful to have a time during the year that teaches me where I come from and guides me in values of justice. Every year this holiday connects me to my Jewish roots and shows me another piece of what it means to move from oppression to liberation.

May your Passover celebration be filled with joy and remembrance of the past in service of the future!



RAMADAN

Ramadan is a month long period of fasting, remembrance and reflection that Muslims observe as one of the foundational practices of Muslim worship. Ramadan is a reset of the body, mind and soul.

“Oh you who believe! Fasting is prescribed for you as it has been prescribed for those who have believed before you, so that you may be ever God-fearing”

- Quran 2:183

Ramadan is the ninth month of the Islamic (Hijri) calendar, during which, physically capable adult Muslims refrain from food, drink and carnal desires from sun up to sun down for the duration of the month.

Fasting, in conjunction with extended prayers and focus on one's actions over material desires, is meant to bring worshippers closer to God. This is also a time of reflection and establishing a closer connection to God and His divine words (the Quran).

Ramadan is also a time of gratitude. Abstaining from food and water acts as a reminder of the struggles endured by those who do not have consistent access to food and encourages greater generosity and empathy.

Fasting is a practice in self discipline. If we can refrain from that which is good for us (food, water, sleep) for the pleasure of God then we can be disciplined in other aspects of our life as well.

Ramadan is the ninth month of the Islamic (hijri calendar) and since the calendar has 354 days in a year, the months rotate throughout the year. This means that Ramadan falls at different times of the year, cycling through the seasons (making a full cycle every 33 years). This is significant because it means Muslims experience fasting both long (summer) days and short (winter) days respectively throughout their lives.

“It was the month of Ramadan in which the Quran was first sent down as guidance for all people, having in it clear proof of divine guidance and the criterion for right and wrong. So whoever amongst you bears witness to the month shall then fast it”

- Quran 2:185

Ramadan is the holiest month of the year and the time in which the first revelations of the Quran (the direct word of God) was revealed to the Prophet Muhammad (peace and blessings be upon him). Muslims fast primarily to fulfill God's commandment, in addition to the numerous social, community and personal benefits.

It is encouraged to break the fast immediately after sunset with dates (known for their nutritional value) and water. Since the fast begins before the light of the morning sun enters the sky, Muslims wake when it is still dark to eat a pre-dawn meal. It is recommended to eat foods that are hydrating, energizing and healing (like dates, watermelon, cucumber, water, blackseed, pomegranate, grapes, figs, eggs cheese). Muslims fast during the day and pray at night. In addition to the five daily prayers, Muslims gather each night to recite 1/30 of the Quran as part of an extended congregational prayer. This allows the community to read the Quran in its entirety during the month of Ramadan. It is encouraged to recite the Quran and perform additional prayers on one's own as well.

Muslims often gather to break the fast in community. It is considered a very lofty reward to feed the fasting.

Ramadan is ushered in with the sighting of the new moon. Communities gather at a place of high elevation to sight the moon and acknowledge the start of Ramadan together. Muslims exchange the greeting “Ramadan Mubarak” (blessed Ramadan).

The last ten days and nights of Ramadan are considered especially holy and call for increased acts of worship. Within these ten nights is the “The Night of Decree”, the night in which the first revelations came to Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) through the angel Gabriel. During this holiest night of the year Muslims spend the night in extended prayers, seeking the mercy of God.

The Night of Decree is better than a thousand months. Therein do the angles and the Spirit of Gabriel descend, by the permission of their Lord, with every divine commandment.” - Quran 97:3-97:4

The day after the end of Ramadan is a three day long holiday called Eid Al-Fitr (the Celebration of breaking the fast). It is at this time that God rewards those who fasted for their devotion during the month. The celebration involves dressing up in new clothes, attending a prayer in thankfulness for being able to complete the month, good food and gifts for children.



I look forward to Ramadan every year. It is a time to recenter God in my life and establish my relationship to the divine. It allows me to reset, brings me deep clarity and helps me assess my priorities and develop a more conscious relationship with my own body (which God has blessed me with as a vessel for my soul).



There is a deep serenity that comes from being awake in the wee hours of the night and in more consistent conversation with God. In my practice, Ramadan has a strong community aspect and is a binding force when people gather to worship and remember God and serve the community. In the current health and economic crisis and time of isolation communities are finding creative ways to stay in touch but also reminding each other that this is a time when we have the space and time to look inward and develop a greater connection with God on a personal level and for this I am thankful. In our fast paced, production centric reality that time for pause and reflection is fleeting. I am thankful that my faith builds those times of reflection into my life (through our many daily practices and a larger overall rest with Ramadan). This year, without the community gatherings, Ramadan will look and feel very different but other aspects of the month may be heightened. I am interested to see how the community will be creative and find ways to stay accountable to each other as we fulfill our religious obligation to stay home and help prevent the spread of disease and observe Ramadan.



RIDVAN

Ridvan is a twelve day festival observed by Baha'is all over the world that celebrates Baha'u'llah, the prophet founder of the Baha'i faith, declaring his mission as a messenger from God. The name "Ridvan" (pronounced "rez-vawn") means "paradise." The name comes from the Garden of Ridvan, outside Baghdad, where Baha'u'llah stayed for twelve days after being exiled from Persia. It was in the Garden of Ridvan where Baha'u'llah announced that he was the promised one of all ages.

"The Divine Springtime is come, O Most Exalted Pen, for the Festival of the All-Merciful is fast approaching. Bestir thyself, and magnify, before the entire creation, the name of God, and celebrate His praise, in such wise that all created things may be regenerated and made new."

- Baha'u'llah, Gleanings from the Writings of Baha'u'llah, p. 27

In an account by Nabil, an early believer in Baha'u'llah's message, he describes what it was like being in the garden:

I saw Him issue from His tent, pass by the places where some of His companions were sleeping, and begin to pace up and down the moonlit, flower-bordered avenues of the garden. So loud was the singing of the nightingales on every side that only those who were near Him could hear distinctly His voice. He continued to walk until, pausing in the midst of one of these avenues, He observed:

“Consider these nightingales. So great is their love for these roses, that sleepless from dusk till dawn, they warble their melodies and commune with burning passion with the object of their adoration. How then can those who claim to be afire with the rose-like beauty of the Beloved choose to sleep?”

- Adib Taherzadeh, The Revelation of Baha'u'llah, Vol. I, p. 276



Ridvan is a twelve day festival, ordained by Baha'u'llah as "The Most Great Festival." Baha'is refrain from working and going to school on the first, ninth, and twelfth days of Ridvan, because these days are considered to be especially holy. They commemorate the days that Baha'u'llah arrived at the garden, the day his family arrived, and the day he departed the garden. They are typically celebrated by communal gathering and prayer.

On the first day of Ridvan, Baha'is annually elect nine-member local spiritual assemblies. Baha'i elections are unique in that there is no campaigning allowed, only prayerful consultation. Participating in these elections is considered a sacred, spiritual obligation. There are no clergy in the Baha'i faith, and being a member of an elected body is considered an act of service, rather than an accumulation of power. Baha'is participate in elections by submitting a nine-person list of people they see as having appropriate quantities for serving on a local assembly, and the nine people with the most votes are the people selected for serving on the assembly.

The Baha'i faith does not have any ordained rituals, so celebrations of holy days and holidays look different depending on where in the world you are. Since Ridvan is rooted in a historical event that we know took place inside a tent in a rose garden, celebrations of Ridvan typically include tents or white cloth to emulate the feeling of being in a tent, as well as incorporation of roses.





EASTER

A locked church

Ah my dear Lord, the church is locked
but let my heart be open to your presence;
there let us make, you and I,
your Easter garden;
plant it with flowers,
and let the heavy stone be rolled away.

by Alan Amos

Easter is the annual commemoration of the passion, death, and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth. It is sometimes called “Resurrection Sunday” in evangelical traditions or “Pascha” in Orthodox ones (Orthodox “Pascha” falls on a slightly different date).

Easter is preceded by a 40-day preparatory season of Lent for Christians who follow a liturgical calendar, and many Christians refer to the week before Easter as “Holy Week,” which begins on Palm Sunday, the Sunday before Easter, and includes services for Tenebrae, Maundy Thursday, Good Friday and the Easter Vigil.

With Christmas, it’s one of the major festivals of the Christian year, celebrating the miraculous emergence of new life out of death and darkness, a central Christian theme.

The story goes: At the height of Jesus' ministry (approximately 33 CE), Jesus and his disciples go to Jerusalem to celebrate Passover. Word of their arrival has spread and many want to witness Jesus's arrival into the Holy City at this most auspicious time. The occupying Roman authorities are especially concerned about the crowds this radical teacher from the provinces has been known to attract and the threat his liberatory message poses to their authority.

Jesus enters the city riding on a humble donkey and is greeted by crowds waving palm branches and crying out, "Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the Name of the Lord."

That night at supper, Jesus blesses the bread and the wine as per usual, but then goes further, predicting that very soon his body will be broken and his blood spilled and that one of the twelve seated at this very table will be the one to betray him to death. He then goes on to wash the feet of his betrayers and deniers.

Later that night, while praying in the garden, Roman guards, led by one of Jesus' disciples arrest Jesus and take him to Pontius Pilate to be tried.

In one of the great switcheroos of all literature, once arrested and brought low, Jesus's disciples deny they know him and the crowds that swarmed his arrival now anticipate his crucifixion.

While Pontius Pilate sees little reason to kill Jesus, keeping the peace in a city that has swelled to many times its normal population is key, and dispatching this powerless Nazarene seems a simple way to do it, so he has Jesus crucified.

Not being from Jerusalem or a man of means, Jesus' body is buried in a borrowed tomb.



Three days later, some of Jesus' female disciples go to the tomb to tend to Jesus' body. They're worried about what they'll find; how they'll move the giant stone. . . but, wait, the stone has been rolled away and the tomb is empty.

An Angel appears to them and tells them that Jesus is indeed not lying dead in the tomb, nor has his body been stolen, but that he is alive, and that they should go tell the others.

And from that moment even up to today, followers of Jesus through time and space have gone out to spread the good news that Christ has died, Christ has risen, and Christ will come again.

While many might think of the Easter Bunny and Easter eggs as key symbols of Easter, they have little to do with the Biblical narrative or early Christian remembrances of the Resurrection. Eggs have been used as fertility symbols for generations before Christianity existed. While it's true later Christian communities dyed eggs red to symbolize Jesus's blood or hollowed them out to symbolize the empty tomb, today, they're mostly used as colorful spring accessories. The Easter Bunny, likely originated with German Lutherans in the 18th century as a spring-time analogue of Santa Claus: an anthropomorphized hare whose purpose was to judge whether children were deserving of Easter treats. In antiquity, hares were often used to represent the Virgin Mary as it was believed they could reproduce without mating.

In some Christian communities it has become popular to fashion a Good Friday seder as part of their Holy Week observance. While the Easter story certainly resonates with Passover, Christian appropriation of Jewish practice has a long and painful history and should not be encouraged. Christians who are curious about Passover should seek out a Jewish seder, not make it their own.



Most Holy Week and Easter observances are church-based, so it's especially exciting, in this year of sheltering-in-place, to reimagine these traditions for our homes. Some ideas:

On Palm Sunday read the Passion of Christ according to Matthew (Matthew 26-28) and/or listen to Bach's setting (BWV 244).

For Maundy Thursday, have an Agape Feast, or lovefest. On the Thursday before Easter, gather your beloveds and break bread together in remembrance of Jesus's last supper and in the model of the earliest Christian communities that gathered in homes. Instead of washing each other's feet, maybe it makes sense this year, to really give everybody's hands a good 30 second scrub?

For the Saturday night Vigil, if you can stand it, stay up all night, and at the break of dawn, kindle a flame to mark Christ's trampling down death by death.

And on Easter, get yourself some nice new duds (or just breakout the brightest you've got), roast a nice joint, and celebrate life!

The Resurrection of Christ is central to Christian belief and practice. It reminds us that out of death there is life, that darkness cannot overcome light, and that God is, has been, and will be present through it all.

The central act of Christian worship--Communion, Eucharist, The Great Thanksgiving, The Last Supper--was instituted by Jesus on the night before he was crucified, and now is a reminder to Christians that Christ gave himself up as a sacrifice for many and that through his conquering of death, we all may find eternal life.



However you celebrate this month, may the month of April be filled with joy and spring renewal.

Happy Holidays!

- The Abrahamic Fellows