Rights, Responsibility, and Respect

Teaching About Passover and Easter

Dr. Margaret Hill

The Jewish observance of Passover, or *Pesach* in Hebrew, and the Christian holiday of Easter are major religious celebrations for many public school students. Easter is linked to the Jewish Passover by much of its symbolism, as well as by its position in the calendar. In many languages, the words for "Easter" and "Passover" are etymologically related. Both holidays vary by date each year.

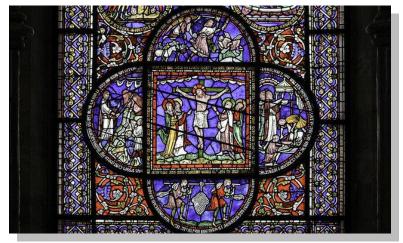
Passover is widely observed by Jews of all traditions, including many who consider themselves to be cultural Jews. The eight-day festival is celebrated in the early spring, from the 15th through the 22nd of the Hebrew month of Nisan. For Reform Jews and those within the state of Israel, it is a seven-day observance. Passover commemorates the emancipation of the Israelites from slavery in ancient Egypt and is rich in ritual and tradition drawn from the biblical story of the Exodus.

| Important Dates | |
|---|----------------------------|
| Passover | April 20-27, 2019/5779* |
| Easter (Western Protestant and Catholic churches) | April 21, 2019 |
| Easter (Eastern Orthodox churches) | April 28, 2019 |

^{*} The year written as "5779" comes from the Hebrew calendar, which is lunisolar, calculating the months according to the moon and the years according to the sun.

Easter is the central holiday in the Christian religious liturgical year. It marks the resurrection that established the Christian belief that Jesus is the Messiah, a foundational tenant of the Christian faith. The Council of Nicaea in 325 CE established the date based on a complicated lunar and solar equation that resulted in the variation of the date year-to-year. The Eastern and Western Christian churches calculate Easter's date using two different calendars (Julian and Gregorian, respectively). Most years, Easter is celebrated on a different date in the Eastern and the Western church.

Like Passover, Easter religious celebrations are based on sacred scripture but have become steeped in cultural tradition. In the Western world, customs such as egg-hunting and the Easter Bunny have spread out from the domain of the church, and often have a secular character. For example, historically many Christians in America bought or made new clothes for Easter that they wore to church. After church services, many went for walks around town. This led to the American custom of Easter parades in many towns and cities, such as the famous Fifth Avenue Easter Parade in New York City.



This stained glass window in the Corona Chapel of Canterbury Cathedral depicts the crucifixion of Jesus Christ in the central panel. (Flickr Commons/Lawrence OP, used under a CC-BY-NC_ND 2.0 license.)

The crucifixion of Jesus is observed on the Christian calendar a few days before Easter, on a day called Good Friday. This is a public holiday in more than a dozen states, and many schools and businesses throughout the U.S. are closed on this day.

How to Plan for the Challenges of Common Practice

The spring Jewish and Christian holidays of Passover and Easter can lead to challenges of common practice in public schools, particularly in elementary classrooms where observances of holidays are more common. As Passover and Easter near, it will help to review district and school policies related to the general issue of how to address religious holidays in public schools. The "Religious Holidays in the Public Schools" consensus guidelines found in Chapter 10 of *Finding Common Ground: A Guide to Religious Liberty in Public Schools* were endorsed by a broad range of religious and educational organizations (https://www.freedomforuminstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/10/FCGcomplete.pdf). They point out that the key distinction for educators to keep in mind is that between *teaching about* religious holidays, which is constitutionally permissible, and *celebrating* religious holidays, which is not.

When planning activities related to religious holidays, school leaders and teachers should ask the following questions:

- Does this activity in any way promote or inhibit religion?
- How does this activity serve the academic goals of the course or educational mission of the school?
- Will any student or parent be made to feel like an outsider, not a full member of the school/classroom community by this activity?
- Does the teacher or school plan activities to teach about religious holidays at various times of the year to learn about many faith traditions?
- Is the instruction accomplished in such a manner that information about the religious meaning of the holiday is aligned to California content standards and enriches student understanding of history and culture?



Matzo, or matzah, is unleavened bread that symbolizes the haste with which the Israelites had to flee Egypt. It is eaten during the Passover *seder*, or ritual meal. (Flickr Commons/paurlan, used under a CC-BY 2.0 license.)

Teaching about religious holidays should focus on how and when they are celebrated in various cultures, the origins and histories of the holidays, and their generally agreed upon meanings. A fair and balanced curriculum will include study about a variety of religious and cultural traditions throughout the school year. Therefore, the study of the origins and meaning of Easter and Passover would simply be part of a broader coverage of world religions and the impact of these faiths on society. Teachers and administrators should remember that under the First Amendment they may not use the study

about religious holidays as an opportunity to proselytize or otherwise inject personal religious beliefs into the discussion.

Here are additional points related to holidays for educators to keep in mind:

- Schools may not sponsor religious practices but may *teach about* religion.
- Schools may teach about religious holidays if the purpose is to provide secular instruction about religious traditions, rather than to promote a particular religious tradition.
- The study of religion and holidays should be embedded in the study of different cultures and communities, history, arts, or literature.
- Teaching about religious ideas should be done through attribution (e.g., "many Buddhists believe that...").
- Religious symbols may be used as temporary teaching aids, but not be displayed beyond the duration of the lesson or unit of study.
- Students may choose to create artwork or music with religious symbols but it should not be assigned.
- Sacred music may be sung or played as part of an academic study of music. School concerts that present a variety of selections may include religious music. Concerts should avoid programs dominated by religious music, especially when these coincide with a particular religious holiday.
- Art, literature, or music with religious themes may be used if it serves the academic goals of the school but not be used as a vehicle to promote religious belief.
- Students may be excused from discussions related to religion, but this should not be used as a rationale for school sponsorship of religious celebration.

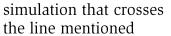
How to Avoid the Pitfalls of Teaching the "Cultural" Side of Religious Holidays

Confusion always seems to pop up around how to treat the so-called "cultural" side of religious holidays in a public school. In response to pressure from parents and communities to celebrate Easter and Passover as culturally important aspects of American society, teachers and administrators should remember that many non-Christian parents and students see these cultural expressions as religious in nature. At

the same time, many Christians don't view colored eggs and bunnies as appropriate ways to represent the real meaning of the Christian holiday. Many Jewish parents find that distributing a matzo snack for students to eat during Passover is an equally inappropriate representation of their ancient traditions. The best solution is for schools to focus on their educational role by teaching about Passover and Easter and other

religious holidays in ways that are accurate and academic.

The distinction of being "academic" is derived from both the sources used and the types of activities implemented in the classroom. One of the most treacherous mistakes educators can make is the use of simulated religious rituals. For example, having students participate in a class seder (the ritual meal of Passover) is a





The Passover seder plate contains a number of symbolic foods for the ritual meal. (Flickr Commons/slgckgc, used under a CC-BY 2.0 license.)

above between practicing a religion and learning about religion. Learning about the seder through a film or piece of children's literature, on the other hand, is not only constitutional but recommended.

Other activities that are problematic in schools include mindless coloring pages of bunnies and eggs with "Happy Easter" emblazoned on them. Though eggs and chicks have come to symbolize the new life of spring, for some Christians the egg also is a symbol of the rock tomb out of which Christ emerged upon resurrection. Other Christians consider these symbols of Easter as pagan. Kids learn none of these distinctions when they are simply applying yellow crayon marks.

Sources for Easter and Passover

Sources used in the classroom to teach about religion should be from secular publishers. The source might include art, films, websites, nonfiction texts, and children's literature. For example, a valuable source for teaching about Passover and Easter is the History Channel website.

The Bible and Its Influence by Cullen Schippe and Chuck Stetson is a book that discusses why the Exodus story was important in African American history and how the "Death with Meaning" story of Jesus influenced literature in Dickens' *Tale of Two Cities*.

Children's literature is also an appropriate tool for learning about religious holidays, especially for younger children. In the beginning, stick with nonfiction books from

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mainstream publishers that have solid reviews from organizations like the School Library Journal. It is also a good idea to set up a local review committee of educators with an understanding of the principles outlined in this article. The cautions described above, however, should not deter schools from the study of Passover and Easter in the classroom. It is certainly not improper to also include the study of other religious holidays observed in the spring, such as the Buddha's birthday and the Hindu holiday of Holi. Nor is it a problem to study seasons and the symbols of spring such as flowers and baby animals. Learning about the

diversity of religious and nonreligious beliefs is important to development of multicultural understanding. It is also fundamental to appreciating how the First Amendment has helped Americans live peacefully with their deepest differences.

The California Three Rs Project is co-sponsored by Constitutional Rights Foundation, California County Superintendents Educational Services Association, and the Religious Freedom Center of the Freedom Forum Institute. This and other resources of the California Three Rs Project are available at ca3rsproject.org. Special thanks to CRF Board reviewer, Peggy Saferstein.

WEB RESOURCES

Celebrating the Easter Holiday (About.com)

http://christianity.about.com/od/easter/u/easterup.htm

Easter – Articles, Videos, Pictures, and Facts (History Channel)

http://www.history.com/topics/history-of-easter

This page discusses the history of Easter, the Christian story of resurrection, how the date for Easter is determined and how it differs in the Eastern and Western church traditions, and the pagan origins of some Easter traditions.

Easter (Religion Facts)

http://www.religionfacts.com/christianity/holidays/easter.htm

Passover - Articles, Videos, Pictures, and Facts (History Channel)

http://www.history.com/topics/passover

Here viewers learn about the history of Passover, the festival of Passover, the seder and its rituals, and the history of Moses and the Exodus that is commemorated during Passover.

Passover (Pesach): About the Jewish Holiday of Passover (About.com) http://judaism.about.com/od/holidays/a/Jewish-Holiday-Passover-Pesach.htm

Pesach: Passover (Religion Facts)

http://www.religionfacts.com/judaism/holidays/pesach.htm

CHILDREN'S LITERATURE

Books About Passover or Pesach

But This Night is Different: A Seder Experience (1980) – Judith Gwyn Brown. Using a simple text, this large picture book retells all the reasons that Passover is different, answering "Why is this night different from all other nights?"

Celebrating Passover (2000) – Diane Hoyt-Goldsmith.

This colorful book includes numerous photographs that tell the history of Passover, followed by showing how a modern family celebrates.

Happy Passover, Rosie (1990) – Jane Breskin Zalben.

Rosie, the bear, is the youngest in her family, and is preparing to say the Four Questions at her family's seder in this charming picture book.

Hooray! It's Passover! (1996) – Leslie Kimmelman.

With a very simple text, this light-hearted book depicts a close-knit family as they enjoy celebrating Passover together with songs, games and special foods.

Passover Journey: A Seder Companion (1997) – Barbara Goldin.

Goldin tells the story of the Exodus and explains the traditions of the Passover seder.

Shelmiel Crooks (2009) - Anna Olswanger.

Based on a news story from St. Louis in 1919, Olswanger describes the experience of her great-grandfather, who sold kosher wines. While Reb Elias is at synagogue leading a Talmud discussion about the first Passover, thieves broke into the wine shop to steal the Pesach wine and were chased by the neighbors.

Stone Soup with Matzoh Balls: A Passover Tale in Chelm (2014) – Linda Glaser. An old man walks into the town of Chelm asking for food. The townspeople claim they have nothing to share, but the man explains that he can make enough food for everyone with just a stone. The townspeople are intrigued and watch the man as he creates a pot of delicious matzoh ball soup.

Books About Easter

Easter (1993) - Miriam Nerlove.

Rhyming text follows two children as they celebrate Easter with their family by decorating eggs, enjoying Easter baskets, going to church, and returning home to an egg hunt and Easter dinner.

Easter Parade (1998) – Eloise Greenfield.

a backdrop of fear for the fate of the father of the family who is fighting overseas in World War II.

Easter: Parades, Chocolates, and Celebrations (2004) – Elaine Landau.

This little chapter book describes both religious and secular celebrations of Easter.

Festivals and Faiths: Easter (2011) – Catherine Chambers.

What do the symbols of Easter, both secular and religious, really mean? How are they related? This book includes chapters on "Good Friday," "Spring is Here at Last," and "Easter Feasts."

Legend of the Easter Egg, The (1999) – Lori Walburg.

In *The Legend of the Easter Egg*, young Thomas learns the deeper meaning behind Easter eggs and the Easter story itself.

Lilies, Rabbits, and Painted Eggs (2001) – Edith Barth.

Barth traces the history of the Easter symbols and shows how they reflect feelings shared by people throughout the world.

Story of Easter (1998) – Aileen Fisher.

This book offers basic facts about the history of Easter, Passover, the Easter Bunny, Easter eggs, and other forms of religious and secular symbolism of the season.

The material above is available at the California Three Rs Project (CA3Rs) website at http://ca3rsproject.org. For further information contact the CA3Rs office:

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