



UNIVERSITY OF
TORONTO

PASSOVER IN THE WORKPLACE

Inclusive Employer Guide

WHAT IS PASSOVER?

Passover, or *Pesach* (PEH-sach) in Hebrew, is a major Jewish holiday and one of the most widely celebrated. Passover takes place in early spring during the Hebrew calendar month of Nissan. This year, Passover begins at sundown on April 8, and ends the evening of April 16.

Passover commemorates the Biblical story of Exodus — in which God freed the Israelites from slavery in Egypt. The celebration of Passover is prescribed in the book of Exodus in the Torah. The Torah consists of the first five books of Moses which are the Foundation of Judaism. The story describes Moses going to Pharaoh and asking that he let the Jews go free from Egypt. Each time Pharaoh refuses, God sends a [plague](#) down on Egypt. The tenth and final plague is the killing of the first born by the so-called Angel of Death. In order to protect their first-born children, the Israelites marked their doors with lamb's blood so the Angel of Death would pass over them. Thus, the name Passover. The Israelites were ultimately freed from slavery but in their haste to leave Egypt, the Israelites were not able to let their bread rise and it remained unleavened. Any type of leavened bread or bread product is prohibited during Passover. Leavened products, known as *chametz*, include certain grain-based beverages and foods like breads, pasta, pastries, breadcrumbs, crackers made from grains including wheat, rye, barley, oats and spelt. Some in the Jewish community may also refrain from eating beans, rice, corn and peanuts. Unleavened bread or *matzoh* traditionally takes the place of *chametz* during Passover. Many who observe Passover may only eat food that is [kosher](#) for Passover.

The holiday is observed for eight days (seven in Israel), and incorporates themes of springtime, a Jewish homeland, family, remembrance of Jewish history, social justice and freedom — including recognizing those who are still being oppressed today. These aspects are discussed and typically are symbolically represented, during the Passover seder, a celebration with family and friends during the first two nights blending religious rituals, food, song and storytelling using a *haggadah*, a book that recounts the Exodus. Family and friends participate by reading and explaining the symbolism of the foods on the table. Traditionally, the first two and last two days of the holiday are considered 'full holidays' and many in the Jewish faith will refrain from work on some or all of those days.

HOW CAN WE CREATE AN INCLUSIVE ENVIRONMENT?

- 1 Get educated.** Ensure staff who supervise self-identified Jewish colleagues are aware of Passover and how they can be supportive.
- 2 Intentional planning.** Avoid booking meetings and scheduling events on Passover if possible.
- 3 Be flexible.** Accommodate requests for time off for religious observances. If shift work is the norm, staff may want to swap shifts to observe Passover. Look for solutions that suit all parties.
- 4 Be thoughtful.** If meetings or events are held during Passover, consult with Jewish colleagues on the food and beverages served, as they might have varying dietary restrictions.
- 5 Don't make assumptions.** For personal reasons, not all Jewish colleagues may take the time off, but they may still observe in various ways.