

פסח
Pesah

The Lord said to Moses and Aaron in Egypt,

2 'This month must be the first of all months for you, the first month of your year. 3 Speak to the whole community of Israel and say, "On the tenth day of this month each man must take an animal from the flock for his family: one animal for each household. 4 If the household is too small for the animal, he must join with his neighbour nearest to his house, depending on the number of persons. When you choose the animal, you will take into account what each can eat.

5 It must be an animal without blemish, a male one year old; you may choose it either from the sheep or from the goats. 6 You must keep it till the fourteenth day of the month when the whole assembly of the community of Israel will slaughter it at twilight. 7 Some of the blood must then be taken and put on both door-posts and the lintel of the houses where it is eaten.

8 That night, the flesh must be eaten, roasted over the fire; it must be eaten with unleavened bread and bitter herbs. 9 Do not eat any of it raw or boiled in water, but roasted over the fire, with the head, feet and entrails. 10 You must not leave any of it over till the morning: whatever is left till morning you must burn. 11 This is how you must eat it: with a belt round your waist, your sandals on your feet and your staff in your hand. You must eat it hurriedly : it is a Passover in the Lord's honour.

12 That night, I shall go through Egypt and strike down all the first-born in Egypt, man and beast alike, and shall execute justice on all the gods of Egypt, I, the Lord! 13 The blood will be a sign for you on the houses where you are. When I see the blood I shall pass over you, and you will escape the destructive plague when I strike Egypt.

14 This day must be commemorated by you, and you must keep it as a feast in the Lord's honour. You must keep it as a feast-day for all generations; this is a decree for all time.

15 "For seven days you must eat unleavened bread. On the first day you must clean the leaven out of your houses, for anyone who eats leavened bread from the first to the seventh day must be outlawed from Israel.

16 On the first day you must hold a sacred assembly, and on the seventh day a sacred assembly. On those days no work may be done; you will prepare only what each requires to eat.

17 You must keep the Feast of Unleavened Bread because it was on that same day that I brought your armies out of Egypt. You will keep that day, generation after generation; this is a decree for all time. 18 In the first month, from the evening of the fourteenth day until the evening of the twenty-first day, you must eat unleavened bread.

19 For seven days there may be no leaven in your houses, since anyone, either stranger or citizen of the country, who eats leavened bread will be outlawed from the community of Israel. 20 You will eat nothing with leaven in it; wherever you live, you will eat unleavened bread."'

(Ex 12:1-20)

The core of the first section of Exodus is the passage quoted above, indeed the whole Chapter 12. Its importance does not need to be stressed.

It is difficult to highlight all the different aspects of it, all the riches and beauty that it contains: I would probably need all of this year's Lectios, and maybe they would not be enough. However, I intend to give it all the room that is possible. This is the reason why we shall deal with it twice.

In this Lectio we will discuss in particular the Passover festival, its character of praise and thanksgiving ('eucharist'). While in the next one we will deal with the sacrifice of the lamb and the death of the first-born sons.

ORIGINS

The novelty of the new era, of the time characterized by freedom, is expressed by a festival which draws on ancient rites: the first of them is the Passover, פֶּסַח, *Pesah*, the second one is the Feast of the Unleavened Bread, אֶת-תֶּחֱן הַמַּצּוֹת, 'et haḡ *hammaṣṣôt*.

Both the Passover and the Feast of Unleavened Bread were ancestral rites originating from the time of nomadic life, and they are still present among some nomadic tribes who have the Feast of the Sacrificed Lamb.

It was a common practice among Semitic nomadic tribes to consecrate the first-born of the flock to a god, to keep it separate from the rest of the flock until it was one year old, to mark it by a distinctive sign, in order to offer it to the divinity at the time of first Full Moon of Spring.

The lamb used to be cooked and a meal used to be offered to all the members of the clan and to their guests: it was a peaceful and joyful festival.

The poles of the tents used to be sprinkled with the blood of the sacrifice in order to keep away the evil spirits and, above all, to protect the first-born sons from them.

During this festival, all the tribe was gathered for the rite. They all begged for protection in the search for new routes and new pastures. In fact, it was the Spring festival of the seasonal migration of the flocks, a propitiatory rite for the fecundity of the sheep.

The unleavened bread was a very ancient tradition too, originating well before the Exodus, at a later stage of the development of the people, when the tribes became sedentary, and passed from sheep-raising to agriculture. This festival celebrated bread, or the harvest of cereals bread was made of.

Prior to this festival, at the end of winter all people had to clean their houses from any traces of the old yeast. The seven days of the Feast of Unleavened Bread are the seven days necessary to produce new yeast, the yeast which would be used all

year long to make bread. It was the sign of the renewal of all things at the beginning of the new year.

Pesah

In the Book of Exodus those two ancient traditions belonging respectively to the nomadic and the agricultural worlds, traditions which used to be part of a sort of ‘natural’ religiosity, were merged into one Feast, and they got a new meaning coming from a specific historical event: one history, one rite, one people.

These two ancestral festivals were merged by Mosaic faith into one feast, as well as radically transformed into the Feast celebrating the Exodus, celebrating the God of Exodus, the God of the oppressed, the God of history, the one and only God called יהוה, *’ādōnay*, the Lord.

From that moment onwards the Feast of the Passover referred to the unique historical event of the night of the liberation from Egypt: that event is the summit of the cycle of the plagues, the night that makes it possible for the Jews to go out of Egypt and to cross the sea, the summit of the Passover.

The Lord is the one and only author of that event.

Moses talks with Pharaoh on his own, on God’s behalf. Of the people we learn that “they believed”, but they did not do anything to fulfil the dream, and nothing was demanded of them. The Israelites participation in the event is nonexistent, given that God is the only one who is responsible for the Exodus of His people from Egypt.

To paraphrase *Pesah’s haggādâh*,
if God did not let our ancestors go out of Egypt, we and our children and our grand-children would still be slaves of Pharaoh in Egypt.

The Passover is therefore celebrating a unique historical event, undeserved and that cannot be deserved, fulfilled by God once and for all, an event of pure grace.

The only participation which is possible is *to give thanks, to bless, to recount*. The prayer of the Passover ritual is the *b^erākâh*, the blessing prayer, that is, *to give praise, to give thanks* (in Greek, ‘eucaristi,a’, *eucharistía*) to the One who, *once and for all, for our sake*, was *the one* who chose His people and freed it by working wonders.

The Passover is the festival of salvation, the story, the *haggādâh*, of the wonders that God worked for His people. It is therefore a festival which has lost its propitiatory character, and whose aim is just to give thanks and praise: the Passover supper is the *b^erākâh*, that is, the praise, the Passover *b^erākâh*.

Therefore it is our duty to pay homage to, to praise, celebrate, glorify, exalt, magnify, commend the One who worked all these wonders for our forefathers and for us all, who took us out of slavery into freedom, from subjection to redemption, from

*sorrow to joyfulness, from mourning to a festival, from darkness to His wonderful light. Let us then say in front of Him: Alleluia!
(Passover Seder, Second cup of wine)*

THE UNLEAVENED BREAD

The Unleavened Bread festival gets an additional meaning in the night of the Passover too, and this new meaning is destined to become the only one that the Jewish tradition will pass on from generation to generation.

According to the teachings of the Talmud and the Jewish mystics, the yeast, the *ḥāmēš* , חָמֵץ, which leavens, represents vanity, pride, the swelling of one's ego. Egypt is the symbol of pride and arrogance. God keeps Himself away from it – and from them – and the People of Israel must get rid of them too, during *Pesah*:

He (the proud one) and I cannot dwell in the same world. (Talmud)

In order to get into the spirit of the Feast of *Pesah*, every little bit of *ḥāmēš* must be thrown away from one's own house, as the sign that one wants to free his life from what the *ḥāmēš* signifies.

The Talmud explains that the command to look for the *ḥāmēš* at night by candlelight derives from the following line of the Book of Proverbs:

The human spirit is the light of the Lord, searching the deepest self. (Pr 20:27)

We must look for the *ḥāmēš* in our own hearts:

To highlight our own ḥāmēš, that is, each and every kind of idolatry inhabiting our hearts, so that in this holy night the Lord might pass, pull us away with Him and thus, give us the strength to renounce them: this is the deep meaning of the Passover preparation.

(Rabbi Pinkas of Koretz)

The Exodus, as a new Creation, looks like a work of separation between Israel and Egypt, evoked by the gesture of getting rid of *ḥāmēš* from each and every house. Egypt vanishes from Israel's horizon, exactly like the yeast. Israel is the unleavened bread, Egypt is the yeast, as a metaphor of pride and vanity. On the contrary the *mazzâh*, מַצֵּה, the unleavened bread, thanks to its slimness and friability is the symbol of modesty, humility and submission. The yeast swells, puffs up like Egypt which swelled with pride, and it must be thrown away. The unleavened bread represents Israel, characterizes it as morally pure, able to recover its purity by giving itself to God, by giving praise to Him, by sacrificing to Him and by observing His commandments.

The feast of the Unleavened Bread is the sign of a new era: everything starts afresh with the pure, the impure has been discarded. This is the reason why the text

stresses that the feast is opened by a holy assembly, and that everybody must take part in it in a state of legal purity.

To celebrate the feast of Pesah, the Unleavened Bread week, in a state of legal purity, means to evoke the final Shabbath, when all of us will be one with God in the purity and truth of man as God willed it, a never-ending Shabbath.

*Blessed are You, Lord our God, King of the world who redeemed us, who redeemed our forefathers in Egypt, and led us to this night so that we could eat unleavened bread and bitter herbs. In the same way, Lord, our God and God of our fathers, let us reach some more solemn festivals healthy and happy for the restoration of Your city and joyful because we can worship You. There we shall partake of the sacrifices of Passover Lambs, whose blood we shall sprinkle on the walls of the altar, if so it is pleasing to You, and we shall offer You a new song for our redemption and our ransom: Blessed are You, Lord, the Redeemer of Israel.
(Passover Seder – Second cup of wine)*

The days of Unleavened Bread are the days in which the house is purified from every single bit of yeast: this is a figure of the purification of the heart and mind, which is necessary to be able to celebrate the feast.

*Throw out the old yeast
so that you can be the fresh dough,
unleavened as you are.
For our Passover has been sacrificed, that is, Christ;
let us keep the feast, then, with none of the old yeast
and no leavening of evil and wickedness,
but only the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth.
(1 Co 5:7-8)*

St Mark the evangelist says that the decision to kill Jesus was taken right on the eve of the festival of the Unleavened Bread.

*It was two days before the Passover and the feast of Unleavened Bread, and the chief priests and the scribes were looking for a way to arrest Jesus by some trick and have Him put to death.
(Mk 14:1)*

‘By some trick’, ἐν δόλω, *ěn dólō*. This word occurs in Chapter 7 of St Mark’s Gospel, in the list of evils which make man impure, of what emerges from the heart.

‘...For it is from within, from the heart, that evil intentions emerge: fornication, theft, murder, adultery, avarice, malice, deceit [δόλος : dólōs], indecency, envy slander, pride, folly. All these evil things come from within and make a person unclean.’

(Mk 7:21-23)

They make their hearts and lives impure by acting ‘with tricks’, exactly when legal purity should be recovered;

and in order to save the Torah they break the same law which forbids putting someone to death on festival days and on the Shabbath,

and to save the nation they condemn the Son given for the salvation of the world.

TO GO OUT DANCING: THE MEANING OF PESAH

Then the text proclaims the institution of the rite of the Passover, in Hebrew, *Pesah*. This word has three different meanings.

The first one is connected with the verb פָּסַח, *pāsaḥ* (same consonants but different vowels), which means ‘to pass over’:

The blood will be a sign for you on the houses where you are. When I see the blood I shall pass over you, and you will escape the destructive plague when I strike Egypt.

(Ex 12:13)

The sacrifice of the Passover lamb is a reminder of the fact that on that occasion God passed over the houses of the Jews and did not exterminate the first-born sons that were in them.

The second meaning to which the word *Pesah* refers occurs in Is 31:4-5:

*As a lion or lion cub
growls over its prey,
when scores of shepherds
are summoned to drive it off,
without being frightened by their shouting,
or cowed by the noise they make,
just so will the Lord Sabaoth descend
to fight for Mount Zion and for its hill.
Like hovering birds,
so will the Lord Sabaoth protect Jerusalem;
He will protect it and it will be saved;
He will spare it and it will be delivered.*

The root is the same, but in Isaiah’s times the current meaning had changed: ‘to spare’.

This connection between *Pesah* and *pāsaḥ-to spare* highlights that the Passover lamb reminded and reminds Israel that on that day the ‘destroyer’ passed over them, and spared the homes of the Israelites and their first-born sons, recognizing them thanks to the blood of the lamb on the lintels of the doors. It is the ‘Passover of the Lord’, that is, the Lord will pass and spare the homes of the Jews in the night of the great massacre, thus saving their first-born sons.

But the main meaning of the verb, in its root, refers to dancing: it means ‘to move on one foot’, that is, ‘to hop’. The primitive dance which mimicked the movements of the flock searching for spring pastures now became the mime of the exodus from Egypt, the setting off of an entire people towards the land of freedom:

First of all, the verb means ‘to move on one foot’, that is, ‘to hop’, and we can suppose that during the ancient nomadic feast a hopping dance would be performed, perhaps by children masqueraded as goats. In addition to that, the word *ḥaḡ*, ‘feast’, means in fact ‘dance in circle’.

Your song will be like that on a festal night, (Is 30:29) the prophet Isaiah says about Adonai’s imminent judgment on the Assyrians, thus making use of the image of the judgment of Pesah on Egypt.¹

And it means that a sacred circular dance will be performed. Here the reference is to the ancient circular dance of the shepherds which has been turned into a mime.

This is how you must eat it: with a belt round your waist, your sandals on your feet and your staff in your hand. You must eat it hurriedly : it is a Passover in the Lord’s honour. (Ex 12:11)

Of the Feast of Pesah has been aptly said that it represented the Exodus. Perhaps those who were seated at the table would rhythmically beat their feet or clap their hands. However, this new mimic character may have been given to the feast in the very moment of the historical occurrence of the event. There are some war dances where the desired result is represented over and over again, until the mime suddenly becomes reality. We can guess therefore that a symbolic representation of the Exodus might have turned into a real departure.

Martin Buber²

And as in the ancient rite the children masqueraded as lambs and he-goats would dance and mimic the exodus of the flock towards new pastures, so in Egypt at the rhythm of dancing the families would go out of their houses, and leave slavery and learn to be free.

¹ Isaiah’s line goes: “Your song will be like that on a festal night, / and there will be joy in your hearts / as when to the sound of the flute people make a pilgrimage / to the mountain of the Lord, the Rock of Israel”. Is 30:32 adds that the Lord will wage battle against Assyria “with uplifted hand”, “to the sound of tambourines and harps”.

² Buber, M., ‘Mosè’, Marietti, Genova, 2000, pp. 65-66.

The years spent in slavery had weakened the tribal bonds; the memory of the traditions they belonged to had become blurred; the moral life and faith had learnt to 'cohabit' with a foreign, polytheistic culture (cf Ezk 20:7; 23:8). Through the institution of this feast, of this rite, Moses led a group of semi-nomadic tribes, which had been enslaved for the past 400 years, towards a land of freedom, and he led them as a people belonging to God, as a unity, a people bond together by a strong identity.

So that they could recover unity of feelings, of destiny, of readiness and willingness, a common symbolic action was needed: a ritual language in which each and everyone could mirror themselves, a rite renewing the covenant among the tribes and with God, before God and within a divine event, through the signs belonging to ancient traditions that everybody did know and could recognize.

Thus the gestures of the individuals became the gestures common to all.

Each family took a lamb.

Each family killed it.

Each family roasted it.

Each family ate it,

each one in their own house,

hurriedly, with a belt around their waist and a staff in their hands.

Each and everybody ate the same meal at the same time.

Each and everybody sprinkled the lintels with the blood of the lamb, a sign through which all the families consecrated themselves to God and ransomed the first-born son who belonged to God.

Thanks to the participation in that sign, a natural gesture such as eating becomes an act of communion and as such dedicated to God. It is for Him that they eat, dance, go out.

The pastoral feast turns into the feast of a people, but at the same time it remains a family feast. Now the families, reunited in a national community, in a people, are the protagonists of the sacred celebration, in fact they are the place where the presence of the Most Holy manifests itself.

What is now happening in multiplicity, on Mt Sinai will manifest itself as unity.

THE ALTARS OF EGYPT

Rabbinical thought highlights that the text of Exodus dealing with the Passover is somewhat puzzling: is it a Passover sacrifice, or is it an ordinary family meal?

In fact, there is no hint that this meal is a sacrifice, of the likes of Noah's, Cain's or Abel's, Abraham's, Jacob's, or of the likes of those performed in the Temple, given that the people are simply commanded to take a lamb, kill it and eat it:

there is no altar, there is no offer; consequently, if nothing is being offered, there cannot be any sacrifice.³ It all looks like a family reunion on a feast day.

However, helped by the Jewish reading of the text, we find out that this Passover in the land of Egypt has its own sacrifice, altar, and holy temple.

The lamb is the sacrifice:

- *It must be an animal without blemish, a male one year old (Ex 12:5);* this is a typical request for a sacrifice.

- *You must not leave any of it over till the morning: whatever is left till morning you must burn. (Ex 12:10)* This prohibition similarly derives from the law regulating sacrifices; it cannot be referred simply to a family feast.

- *Do not eat any of it raw or boiled in water, but roasted over the fire, with the head, feet and entrails. (Ex 12:9)* This phrase occurs only once more in the Torah, in the laws regulating the sacrifice for sin (cf Lv 4:11).

The houses of the Israelites are the altar:

- *Then take a bunch of hyssop, dip it in the blood that is in the basin, and with the blood from the basin touch the lintel and both door-posts. (Ex 12:22)*

These words are similar to Lv 9:9, where the 'service of blood' performed within the Tent of the Meeting on the eighth day from its consecration, is being described.

The children of Israel had no altars in Egypt, but the blood marked the door-posts and the lintels of the doors (cf Ex 12:7) as if they were the corners of the altar:

Rabbi Joseph teaches: There were three altars in Egypt: the lintel and both door-posts of doors. (Pesachim 96a)

The house where the lamb is eaten is a substitute for the altar on which sacrifices used to be offered.

And in the same way as the meat should not be removed from the altar until everything had been fulfilled, so the lamb had to remain in the house till morning (cf Ex 12:46)

And in the same way as it was forbidden to place some leaven on the altar (cf Lv 2:11), so God forbade the presence of leaven in the house, which replaced the altar in Egypt. (Ex 12:15)

And in the same way as in many passages the meat for sacrifices was offered and eaten with unleavened bread (cf Lv 2:4-5; 6:9; 7:12; 8:2 and so on), so the lamb was eaten with unleavened bread and bitter herbs in the houses which had become altars.

Again, the altar is a safe place, protection from violence and danger. One does find refuge at the altar, the guarantee of God-sent justice (cf 1 K 1:50ff; 2:28ff).⁴ In the same way, the house protects its inhabitants from the plague afflicting Egypt.

If the house is an altar, it is transformed into divine space.

The house-altar is no longer simply a human property, but becomes a land belonging to the Most High.

³ Of course this question refers only to the Passover of the people of Israel in Egypt. On the contrary, in Dt 16 the prescriptions refer to sacrifice.

⁴ In Ex 21:14 this privilege is not granted to those who have wilfully killed. Apart from that case, the altar is a safe refuge for the guilty.

This is why the Destroyer cannot go in and strike (cf Ex 12:22-23). The house has become an altar and its inhabitants eat the sacrifice by taking part in the meal of the feast. This rite assigns to the house a unique statute of holiness. Whoever leaves that holy place can be destroyed.

The first word that God told Moses at the burning bush comes to my mind. It hints at something extraordinary indeed:

The place where you are standing is holy ground (Ex 3:5)

כִּי הַמָּקוֹם אֲשֶׁר אַתָּה עוֹמֵד עָלָיו אֲדַמַּת־קֹדֶשׁ הוּא:
kî hammāqôm 'ăšer 'attâ' 'ômēd 'ālāyw 'admat qodeš hû'

Most people think holiness of the ground comes from the presence of God within the burning bush. However, the text could be rendered also in a different way: “The place is holy because you are standing there, because I have made of you a holy ground”.

One has to take off his sandals in order to be part of, drink from, receive, become one with that unfiltered holiness.

The houses of Israel are holy lands.

The lamb is a sacrifice,
 the house is an altar,
 its inhabitants are God's temple.

There is a statute of holiness about the lamb
 and the place where it is eaten.

And, in the end, a statute of sacredness, of holiness for all those who take part in the Passover sacrifice, because this participation consecrates them to God.

In the Passover rite, the people dedicates itself to God,
 and by it, it renews its covenant.

And it has always been so: the Passover is the event one has to go back to in order to find the origin of our own belonging to God, of the awareness that we are part of His people and the object of His salvific action. The celebration of Passover marks all the important stages of history.

It is so in the Book of Joshua, which relates about the first Passover celebrated in the land of Israel:

The Israelites pitched their camp at Gilgal and kept the Passover there on the fourteenth day of the month, at evening, in the plain of Jericho. On the very next day after the Passover, they ate what the land produced, unleavened bread and roasted ears of corn. The manna stopped the day after they had eaten the produce of the land. The Israelites from that year onwards ate the produce of Canaan and had no more manna.

(Jos 5:10-12)

The celebration of the Passover marks the passage between the end of the journey in the desert and the entrance into the land of Israel: when the manna stops, for the first time the people eat the corn of the land of Israel. In the years of their nomadic life they were supported by the miracle of the manna; from now onwards they will have to plough, sow, harvest.

The observance of the Passover marks the transition from being a nomadic people dwelling in the desert to inhabitants of an independent country: within the rite and through its language, Israel takes on a new identity before God.

In the Second Book of Chronicles, Hezekiah, the king of Judah, convokes a Passover celebration in Jerusalem, while renewing the Temple and purifying it from any previous contamination. As part of the national process of religious renewal, the king commands that the whole nation might come to the Temple for the Passover sacrifice (cf 2 Ch 30:15ff).

In the rite of the Passover the people consecrates itself to God, proclaims and guarantees that it is ready to welcome the novelty coming from God.

King Josiah too, in order to give meaning and bear witness to his renewed observance of the Lord's Torah, convoked all the people for the Passover sacrifice. That Passover was really extraordinary:

No Passover like this one had ever been celebrated in Israel since the days of the prophet Samuel, nor had any of the kings of Israel ever celebrated a Passover like the one celebrated by Josiah, the priests, the Levites, all Judah and Israel who were present, and the inhabitants of Jerusalem.

(2 Ch 35:18)

Once again the Passover sacrifice is the occasion for the Israelites to declare that they are the people of God (2 ch 35:1ff): they become one while consecrating themselves to Him.

In the land of Egypt the Israelites eat the meal of offering in their own homes "made holy land", substituting the altar, and therefore – the rabbis say – transform themselves into the *Š^ekînâh*, the place of the presence of God.

It is a transformation, yes, but also a discovery, the realization of what the true soul of this people is.

LET US BRING BACK RITE INTO OUR LIVES

We must bring back rite into our lives, which means that we must be able to place reality into the dimension of the divine, and also to find its origin, its direction:

we are waiting for the Kingdom of God to come and we are getting ready to welcome it.

Rite gives us back that identity that we have before God, as single individuals and as a community: it becomes the place where we can meet one another as we really are, acknowledging that truth which comes to the fore only before God and which derives from Him. Through rite we can see reality in God, we can perceive the ray of hope illuminating it, the mystery dwelling in it, the future it is destined to, the life it belongs to.

Rite, liturgy, are of paramount importance for us to become one body, the place where we can find a Presence who is ‘other’ from me, from us, and who stays with us along all the events of our life and of history, and who gives meaning to what we have already passed through.

We need to get back the festivals, the feast of days,
we need to celebrate the important turning points of our life before God,
so that we can acknowledge them,
and relate them in that symbolic language – made up of signs, smells, songs,
silence, listening and participation, presence and Presence – the liturgy is made of.

Before God we need to say our ‘Yes’ once again, as single individuals and as a community. It is not history that provides us with the reasons why we should adhere to God. On the contrary, we can get them by listening in depth to what comes from Him, from His Word which is beyond history and which allows us to perform prophetic signs within history, such as:

to erect an altar in a foreign and occupied land like Abraham, and to call it “God’s house”;

to dream about a land where Jacob is a runaway, lonely, frightened, fragile, and learn that no place can contain God, but God “is the place of the world”;

to eat a festival meal proclaiming liberation in a land where we are still enslaved;

to start dancing , after crossing the sea, in a land which is still desert, but is the way to the promised land.

DIRECTIONS FOR PRAYER

If we chose to go through the Book of Exodus, we chose to share the experience of the witness: therefore we must explore the meaning of both Pesah and the Feast of the Unleavened Bread.

1) To celebrate the Passover means to start giving thanks and praise, acknowledging God's deeds, and in particular what He did for us – and, very often, in spite of us.

We can start giving praise also by using the liturgical texts of the Easter Vigil, the prefaces, the collects, the prayers of the liturgy of the Easter season.

A very beautiful text that can help us pray is the *Nišmat* prayer, which is recited after the Hallel psalms in the *haggādâh* of *Pesah*. It could also be a substitute, in its entirety or just a part of it, for the Vesper intercessions on the day of the retreat, praying it all together or entrusting its different parts to different readers.

*May the soul of any living creature bless Your name, O Lord our God,
and the spirit of any creature glorify and exalt Your memory, our King, all the time.
From eternity You are God, and we know no other God apart from You,
no other redeemer, no other deliverer who can ransom us, free us, grant us
and who can take pity on us every time we are anxious and in difficulties;
we have no other king who can help us and who can come to our help apart from
You.*

*O God of beginning and of end,
God of all creatures,
Lord of all beings,
worthy of limitless praise,
who govern the world by Your goodness and Your creatures by Your mercy;
O Lord who are always awake,
who do not sleep nor slumber,
who, on the contrary, wake up all those who are sound asleep or drowsy,
bring back to life the dead, heal the sick,
give sight back to the blind,
straighten those who are bent down,
give back speech to the dumb,
reveal what has been concealed,
You, You alone do we praise!*

*Even if our mouths were full of hymns as the sea is full of water,
our tongues full of songs as numerous as the waves of the sea,
our lips full of praises as the firmament is wide;
our eyes as luminous as the sun and the moon,
our arms as wide as the wings of the eagles in the sky,
and our feet as swift as the deer's,*

*we would not be able to thank You enough, O Lord our God,
and bless Your name, our King,
for one of the hundreds and thousands of benefits and wonders
You did for us and for our forefathers along our history:
From Egypt You freed us, O Lord our God,
from slavery You ransomed us,
in famine You fed us,
You provided for us in plenty,
You saved us from the sword,
You preserved us from plague,
and made us immune from numerous and severe illnesses;
Your mercy helped us thus
and Your goodness did not desert us;
therefore let the members which You put in our bodies,
let the breath that You breathed in us,
let the tongue that You placed in our mouth thank You,
bless You, praise You, exalt You, sing to Your name, our King, for ever,
for every mouth shall thank You
and every tongue shall praise You,
every eye shall look at You
and every knee shall bend in front of You:
whoever is standing, shall lie prostrate in Your presence.*

*All hearts shall fear You;
all our being shall sing hymns to Your name,
as it is written: "My very bones will all exclaim,
Lord, who can compare with you
in rescuing the poor from the oppressor;
the needy from the exploiter?" (Ps 35:10)
You listen to the moan of the wretched,
You hear the cry of the poor and You save them,
as it is written: "Shout for joy, you upright,
praise comes well from the honest" (Ps 33:1).*

I advise you to schedule a meeting, which must be exclusively spiritual, devoted entirely to 'dreaming', to relating what the Lord did and is doing in the Institute, trying to focus on the signs of His presence, the suggestions of the Spirit who is calling us to tread new paths, to read the signs of the times.

2) To celebrate the Feast of Unleavened Bread means to throw away the old yeast, to get rid of all that prevents us from growing, becoming more mature.

It would be important to say, first to ourselves and then to the others, what we need to get rid of in order to be free to respond to the Lord, as individuals and as a fraternity.

Very often we carry unbearable burdens on our shoulders, memories of death, disappointments, unresolved conflicts, envies, ambitions, subtle selfishness that prevent us and the others from living, and operate in us like a gangrene.

It is necessary and urgent to get rid of those burdens, to find the strength to ask for forgiveness, take off what we cherish as our 'richness', in order to be once again ready to welcome God and our brothers and sisters.

My suggestion is that you do that during a celebration, which would be much better than doing it during a meeting. During that celebration all that is 'old yeast', old man, old wine, which is missing, which has been lost, which is hardness of heart, which is illusion, which is a lie, which is sadness and death, must be given a name; we must get rid of all that stuff. And, at the same time, we must give a name to what is hope, fresh and transparent air, trust, what makes us grow, what makes us ready to act, what makes us hand over our 'weapons', what can make us start walking one again.

For instance:

You can start the celebration of Vespers with a request for forgiveness, chanting Kyre Eleison, as follows (it would be better that you find your own words; I give these just as an example):

For every hardness of heart,
for every intransigence,
for every intolerance, Kyre Eleison.

For every limit that we have imposed on other,
for every frailty that we have not welcomed,
for every richness that we have kept for ourselves, Kyre Eleison.

For every escape into falsehood,
for every 'dwelling' in untruth,
for not proclaiming the truth, Kyre Eleison.

When we chose death,
when we stand still,
when we do not hope, Kyre Eleison.

When we do not welcome novelty,
when we stop walking,
when we refuse to grow, Kyre Eleison.

Let us pray.
O God, true light of our conscience,

*we do know what is good only through You.
May Your Spirit save us from the dark night of evil
in which we would be prevented from working,
so that we can walk as children of light following in the footsteps of Your Christ.
He is God and lives and reigns with You...*
(Roman Missal, Collects for ferial ordinary time, Collect n° 17)

Then you can go on with the hymn and psalms of Vespers.
You can choose a suitable reading.

A song as a responsory and then the Magnificat.

Intercessions: you can invoke the Spirit with prayers composed by you, in which you acknowledge the paths of life and liberation, or with other texts such as the following one, or adapting Pope Francis' words: Veni Sancte Spiritus, Come Holy Spirit.

*Spirit of the Lord, come on us,
transform our hearts and get hold of them.
Burn our fears, unbind our resistance,
give us the ability to be just with ourselves and with others,
so that we can acknowledge and accept in everything the demands of truth.*

*May we be freed from nostalgia and regret,
but may we learn to open up with serenity and strength to God's surprises.
Give us faithfulness to the humble everyday life You put us in,
so that we can redeem with You and in You our 'today',
and make of it the Eternal Day...*

*You who make time holy
help us make of our path the place of the Advent;
where, even now,
in the gestures of love
and in the surrender of faith,
we can catch a glimpse of the dawn of the Kingdom, which You promised and which
we are waiting for in hope.
Amen! Alleluia!
(Bruno Forte)*

Final Oration

Holy Father of mercies,
who call back Your children to order with the power and tenderness of love,
break the hardness of our pride and create in us a new heart,
capable of listening to Your word
and of welcoming the gift of life in Your Son.
He is God, and lives and reigns with You...