

Jews Trek to the Mojave Desert for Passover

More than 3,000 years ago, the Israelites escaped bondage in Egypt and made themselves into a nation in the Sinai Desert. This **Passover**, a group of their descendants will camp in California's Mojave Desert to viscerally experience the story of liberation.

Passover celebrations typically involve a ritual Seder meal in which participants recount the 10 plagues visited on the Egyptian oppressors, God's parting of the Red Sea, and the Israelites' 40 years of desert wandering as chronicled in the Book of Exodus.

But for some Jews, there is a more intense Passover experience to be had—one that requires them to leave their smartphones at home and head for terrain much like that of the Sinai Peninsula.

"While it's important to tell the story of Passover at the Seder table, we offer the opportunity to have a 'felt' experience of Passover," said Zelig Golden, who is organizing the sixth "Passover in the Desert" this year for the Berkeley-based Wilderness Torah, which aims to meld nature and Jewish spirituality.

The desert, Golden said, is a place where "we can get in touch with our personal liberation and where we can connect with the natural world. It can open our hearts to spirit."

More than 100 Jews of varying levels of religious observance have signed up for "Passover in the Desert" this year. Starting Thursday, they will live for four nights and five days as part of a makeshift village centered around a Tent of Meeting, an open air structure that takes its name from the one the Israelites built in the wilderness.

Participants—who in past years have ranged from preschoolers to octogenarians—will ritually cleanse themselves in a canyon river, venture solo into the wild as Moses did, and pray for deliverance from the burdens of their modern lives.

Rabbi David Bauer, a spiritual counselor in San Francisco, made the trek to the desert last **Passover**, and said that while Seders bring a family together, time in the wilderness can bond strangers in sometimes surprising ways.

“Last year we got hit by a monsoon and everybody had to cope with not falling manna but falling rain. We all talk about community building, but this was instant community,” Bauer said. “Within just a matter of hours you feel bonded with the people around you.”

Then there’s the stark beauty of the Panamint Valley, the part of the Mojave to which Golden’s group will return this year.

“When we think about the Israelites traveling through the desert, we never stopped to think that we would have looked up and noticed the scenery,” Bauer said. “That’s the other thing you don’t get at a Seder table—honest to goodness grandeur.”

Last year, rabbinical student Mia Cohen of Ashland, Ore., went with her mother, and found that tensions between parents and their adult children disappeared in the clear desert air.

Passover in the desert, when the landscape is beginning to bloom, forces a question, Cohen said. Do you want to live in conflict, or to experience the freedom and renewal that surrounds you?

“We are literally seeing rebirth and making that choice for ourselves,” she said.

Like Cohen, most of the other Passover in the Desert participants have strong connections to Judaism, but people with only a nominal tie to their Jewish heritage have signed

up, and returned with an intention to involve themselves more, Golden said.

Shabbat in the desert is respected as it would be in an observant Jewish home—no fires may be lit from Friday night to Saturday night, and the camp's generator will be turned off. All meals on the trip are kosher, but also, for this environmentally and health-conscious group, "organic, local and sustainable!" as the trip's website promises.

There will be singalongs and meditation circles and group **prayer**. Women can retreat to a "red tent" if they like, just as the ancient Israelite women did during their menstrual periods.

"It's awesome! ... so they tell me," said Golden.

On an open fire, the group will bake matzo, the flat unleavened bread eaten during **Passover** to remember that the Israelites had no time for their dough to rise as they fled Egypt.

This year, the cost of Passover in the Desert ranges from \$325 to \$475. Most food is provided, but the packing list suggests bringing a tent, warm jacket (temperatures can fall into the 40s or lower at night), 12 to 15 gallons of water and a Hebrew prayer book "if you use one."

Wilderness Torah's Passover in the Desert is not the only such program. Colorado Rabbi Jamie Korngold — also known as the "Adventure Rabbi"—is taking a group to Israel's Negev Desert this year. And about 60 people are driving to the Panoche Hills, two hours south of San Francisco, for their fourth annual Passover desert experience.

Golden said it's not hard to understand why enrollment has tripled since Wilderness Torah began offering their trip six years ago.

“When we go to the Panamint Valley, it feels like southern Israel, and a lot of people have very deep experiences,” he said. “This is what it feels like to be an Israelite wandering in the desert.”