Rabbi explains Passover service to Mobile Christians

Mobile, Saturday, March 26, 1983

Mobile Press Register photo by Victor Calhoun

Steven L. Jacobs

Rabbi Steven L. Jacobs of Mobile is quoted in The New York Times this week as saying the Passover Seder can be used to educate non-Jews about Jewish tradition.

EVEN AS the story appeared, the Mobile rabbi was busy doing what he had talked about — educating Mobilians about the Seder ceremony.

New York author Roy Hoffman, a native of Mobile, wrote the story in The Times Wednesday entitled "Passover Tradition in the South," in which he quotes Jacobs, spiritual leader of Spring Hill Avenue Temple.

The rabbi is quoted: "Many Seders in the South are attended by non-Jews as well as Jews. Southern Jews have a sensitivity to the larger, non-Jewish community and a desire to educate that community. The Seder can act as part of that education."

THIS WEEK Jacobs explained the Seder to local groups including the Mobile Area Jewish-Christian Dialogue.

The rabbi, who spent two hours explaining the service, said the Seder could last longer. For example, the rabbi's father, who grew up in Germany, participated in Seders that lasted three or four hours.

The Seder is a service that will be conducted in Jewish homes during Passover, which begins at sunset Monday. The service commemorates the biblical story of the freeing of the Jewish people from Egyptian enslavement.

Because Jews "come out of a patriarchal context, men conduct the Seders in their homes," Jacobs said.

ASKING ALL men attending the Jewish-Christian Dialogue to remove their coats and ties, the rabbi said, "This celebration is a celebration conducted in freedom. The notion of conducting a Seder in a coat and tie would really be the antithesis of the experience."

Those in attendance received books called the Haggadah, in which proceedings of the service are printed.

If the service had been in a home, a guest would be present, Jacobs said, "the reason being that only a free man can invite a guest to his table."

WHILE CHRISTIANS generally regard the Last Supper of Jesus with his disciples as a Passover Seder, Jacobs said, "not every scholar is convinced that the Last Supper was a Seder. "There is still significant debate within the scholarly community. The overwhelming majority do maintain that it was a Passover experience, but it is not universal."

Noting further that some churches now are conducting Seders, the rabbi said, "I have no hangup if a Christian group wants to do a Christian Seder after having experienced a Jewish Seder. My feeling is first do it as it was meant to be done and then ... make your own modifications."

JACOBS SAID the service begins with a symbolic handwashing by the leader.

Those at the dialogue session were seated at tables with plates of symbolic foods for the service.

The participants lighted candles on their tables. "Light in Jewish tradition is a dominant metaphor for the presence of God," said Jacobs.

The rabbi and the participants read blessings, or benedictions, in connection with their actions.

"My favorite blessing in Jewish tradition," the rabbi said, is a traditional blessing of joy which is read early in the service, praising God for life.

TRADITIONALLY the blessing has been used in times of joy, including times past when a Jew who lived in a ghetto in Europe earned "enough money to buy a suit."

Early in the service the participants drank a cup of wine or grape juice, according to choice. Both the wine and the juice are acceptable in Jewish tradition, the rabbi said.

Totally, the service includes the drinking of four cups of wine "because when the Exodus story talks about the liberation from Egypt there are four Hebrew words that are used," Jacobs said.

THE FOUR words translated into English are bringing out of bondage, deliverance from servitude, redemption from all dependence in Egypt, and selection as the people of the Lord.

Each dialogue participant dipped a sprig of parsley, a symbol of life, into a cup of salt water and ate the green vegetable.

"You dip it into the salt water because our people have learned early on in our historical experience that whatever else life is it is a mixture of joy and sadness, and the salt water is a symbol of the tears that the Jewish people have shed, initially in the enslavement in Egypt, but in all the historical experiences," said Jacobs.

On each table at the dialogue was a plate of three matzos, or unleavened bread. The rabbi teasingly called this food "cardboard squares."

A LEADER at each table removed the middle matzo and broke it in half, returning half to the plate.

In a real service, the rabbi said, the other half would be hidden for children to find.

"This is an experience to keep your children happy. There must be children present. This is an experience for children sometimes more than for adults. This is the kind of experience that brings children into the excitement of the Jewish tradition."

A dialogue participant read a blessing which the rabbi called one of the most important of the service. The blessing referred to the unleavened bread "that the children of Israel ate as they escaped from Egypt, not having time for dough to rise."

MEMBERS OF the audience read four questions, which traditionally are read in homes by children.

Said the rabbi, "This is a shield. This is a setup obviously. The leader is setting the child up to teach the story of the Passover experience."

The questions, which seek reasons for eating unleavened bread and bitter herbs dipped into salt water and for conducting the service generally may be chanted in Hebrew by the children.

Other questions are asked and statements made in the names of four sons — the wise son, the wicked son, the simple son, and the son who is unable to inquire.

"This is what we call in Jewish tradition a Midrash. This is an interpretation of the Passover experience through four literary types," explained the rabbi.

THE QUESTIONS allow the leader to tell the Exodus story.

The service included an explanation of the pesah, or lamb bone, which traditionally is on each plate.

Holding a bone, the rabbi explained it symbolizes the sacrificial system of Jews in their ancient temple. Since the destruction of the Jewish Temple in Jerusalem in the year 70, Jews have "moved into a new understanding of our religious tradition whereby prayer, study and the performance of ethical deeds become the Jewish way to God," said the rabbi.

Explaining a cup of horseradish on the table before each person, Jacobs said this food reminds Jews of their bitter experiences.

"FOR MY father, who was a refugee from Nazi Germany who lost his entire family, this experience was contemporary. The Passover was not the experience of Egypt for him. It was his own personal journey."

A passage that was read in the service and called "the heart of the Passover experience" by the rabbi was interpreted by him: "In every generation an individual is obligated to see himself as if he or she came forth out of Egypt. The experience of the Passover for the Jewish people is not historical. It's contemporary. In this context, as a member of the dialogue community, you too are obligated to understand the experience as contemporary, going on the assumption that if there exists anywhere in this world a people who is enslaved then you too are not free. Every generation must look at the experience of freedom as the priceless heritage that God can bestow on any people."

AFTER A second cup of wine, the dialogue participants ate matzo sandwiches. The filling was moror — bitter herbs or horseradish — and haroses — a mixture of apples, almonds and raisins symbolizing the clay the Jews used in making bricks while enslaved in Egypt.

At this point in the Jewish home, supper would be served.

After the meal, children would seek and find the hidden matzo called aphikomon, and the family would sing together.

If people anywhere enslaved, 'you too are not free,' says rabbi

A third cup of wine was drunk by the dialogue participants.

At this point in the home a child would open a door for Elijah to enter symbolically.

THE RELIGIOUS reason is that traditionally Jewish teaching has been that if the messiah is to come he will be preceded by Elijah the prophet, according to Jacobs.

He noted, however, that some scholars say the tradition arose when Israel was occupied by Rome from the year 63 B.C.E. (Before the Common Era, or before the Christian period) to the year 70 C.E. (Common Era, or the Christian period).

Someone at the table would get up to be certain no informers were outside "to tell the Romans the Jews were celebrating Passover."

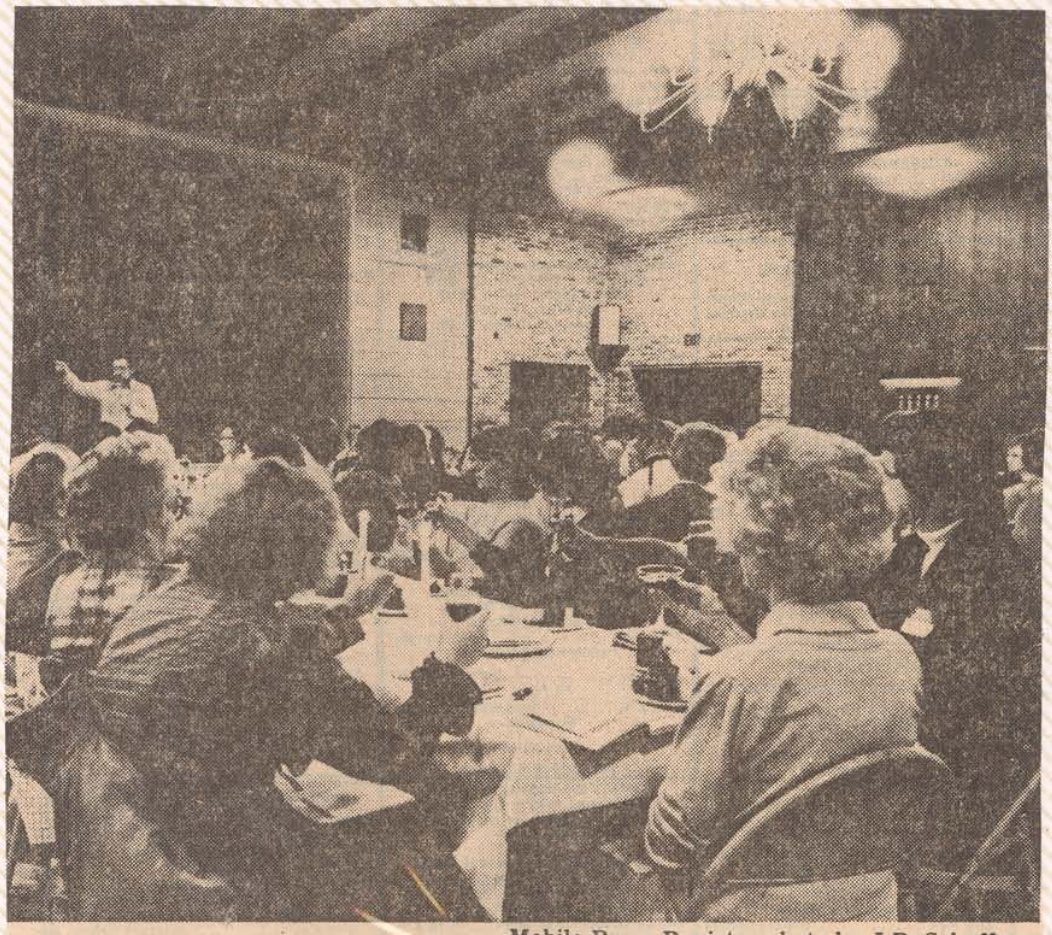
The dialogue participants drank a fourth cup of wine and read together rhymes intended to entertain children.

JACOBS SAID the Haggadah used in the dialogue program does not have a traditional ending.

The service ends with the Hebrew words, "Next year in Jerusalem."

Between the years 70, when the Jerusalem Temple was destroyed by the Romans, and 1948, when the modern state of Israel was created, the last statement in the Passover service "was really a Jewish statement of faith," Jacobs said.

He said the statement also symbolizes "that day when my children will not worry about dying (being killed) because they are Jews."



Mobile Press Register photo by J.P. Schaffner

Learning about Passover in Mobile