

Sunday, May 3, 1981

# Jews, Christians



**ECUMENICAL PASSOVER** — In the photo at left, Rabbi Stanley Gerstein of Dauphin Street Synagogue, left, and the Rev. Alvin Harbour Jr. of Dauphin Way United Methodist Church sing during an ecumenical Passover service. In the middle photo, examining Jewish sacred objects are, from left, Aliza Gerstein and her husband, the rabbi; the Rev. Stephen Dill and his wife, Ruth, and Harbour, all of Dauphin Way Church. In the right photo are Ernest Todd Jr. and his wife, Evelyn, lay leaders of Dauphin Way Church. (Mobile Press Register photos by J.P. Schaffner)





# share Passover rites

## Heritage of both groups recounted

By SYLVIA HART  
Press Register Reporter

Acts of friendship toward Christian families are appropriate during Passover, a family ingathering time, said Rabbi Stanley Gerstein to Jews and Christians seated together at Dauphin Street Synagogue.

The rabbi and about 25 lay persons of the synagogue were sharing a Passover service with Dr. Stephen Dill and the Rev. Alvin Harbour Jr., ministers of Dauphin Way United Methodist Church, and about 25 members of the laity from that church on the last night of the eight-day Jewish festival last week.

**Joining the rabbi** in introducing the Christians to the service, Herman Maisel, president of the synagogue congregation, explained the Haggadah, or the written text for the service, was prepared in an abbreviated form especially for an ecumenical gathering. The Christians, however, would experience the essentials of the service, known as a Seder.

The men and women sat at dinner tables, and the men — Jewish and Christian — wore skullcaps, or yarmulkes, which always are worn by Orthodox and Conservative Jewish men during prayer as a sign of respect for the authority of God. The local synagogue is of the Conservative branch of Judaism.

**Christians and Jews** on this night had gathered to recount a biblical story which is part of the heritage of both religious groups: the leading of the Israelites (Jews) out of slavery in Egypt by Moses. The Christians and Jews would share in the reading of that story from the Haggadah.

"How deeply enslavements have scarred the world," read Sid Lederman of the synagogue. "The wars, the destruction, the suffering, the waste. Pesach (Passover) calls us to be free, free from the enslavement of poverty, free from the slavery of inequality, free from the enslavement of ignorance, free from the corroding hate that eats away the ties which untie all of us as brothers and sisters."

Harbour read, "What does Pesach mean? Pesach refers to the (roasted) paschal lamb our people long, long ago shared as families in ancient Egypt.... Then Pesach was linked to the 10th plague God sent against (the Egyptian) Pharaoh — the affliction of the first-born. That night the angel of death passed over the homes of the Israelites. They were spared, they were saved, and then they were freed."

**Candles burned** at the head table in the Mobile synagogue, and the rabbi's wife, Aliza, chanted words in Hebrew describing the candles as flames of hope.

The Jews seated around the tables recited together a Hebrew blessing known as the Kiddush, and all present drank a small cup of wine, recognized as the fruit of the vine created by God. The sweet, red grape wine was kosher, prepared especially for Passover in accordance with Jewish dietary laws.

Each Jew and Christian broke a bit of parsley from a sprig on the plate before him and dipped the parsley into a cup of salt water beside the plate.

The salt water is symbolic of the tears of all oppressed people. The green vegetable, known as karpas, dipped in the salt water represents the coming of spring.

Beverly Davis of the United Methodist church read, "There are three matzoth on the plate. We break the middle one in two parts and hide the larger part. It is called the afikomen. The afikomen must be eaten at the end of the ceremony. It is customary for the children to look for it. Whoever finds it gets a prize."

The rabbi displayed a three-tiered cloth at the head table for three matzoth, or unleavened bread, which appeared to be over-sized crackers containing no salt.

**In explanation**, the rabbi said the three matzoth represent the three ranks of Jews in ancient days: the cohanims, or the priests in the temple in Jerusalem; the levites, or the teachers and caretakers of the temple; and the general Israelite population having no official connection with the temple.

The rabbi removed all matzoth from the cloth except a piece for afikomen, or dessert. The dessert would be "the same poor bread the meal started with so that we remember our humble origins," he explained.

While no children were present at the ecumenical service, generally the afikomen is hidden for the children to find in order to hold their interest during the traditionally long service.

Substituting for children, the adults asked four traditional questions relating to the general question, "Why is this night different from all other nights?"

In response to the questions, the Christians and Jews recounted a part of the biblical story in which the Egyptian Pharaoh ordered that all Jewish boys be drowned in the Nile River. Moses, as a baby, escaped drowning.

"So was born a great leader who could save his people," recited all service participants.

**Playing a guitar** and singing, the rabbi was joined by others: "Go down Moses, way down in Egypt's land. Tell old Pharaoh, 'Let my people go!'"

According to the biblical story, after the Egyptians had experienced 10 plagues sent by God, Pharaoh relented and freed the Jews.

Gerstein poured 10 drops of wine, symbolic of the plagues, and he acknowledged that "our triumph is diminished by the slaughter of the foe" and the plagues and the unhealed that followed oppression.

Nicki MacDonald of the Methodist church read, "We eat matzah to remind us of the bread we had to eat when we were in a hurry to leave Egypt."

Mary Ann Olenky of the synagogue: "We eat bitter herbs to recall the bitterness of slavery."

Methodist Russell Terry: "We eat charoset to remind us of the mortar that was used in making bricks" (by the Jews in slavery).

Maisel: "We eat greens as a symbol of the fruits of the earth; the shankbone reminds us of the sacrificial lamb."

Reciting a blessing together, all present drank a second cup of wine.

Jean Getchel of the Methodist church read, "Two thousand years ago, Hillel, the great teacher (in Palestine), had a special way of celebrating the Seder. He put together the bitter herbs, reminding us of the slavery, and the charoses, which stands for the mortar they used for their hard labor in Egypt, and placed these between two pieces of matzah which stood for the bread of sorrow. And he ate these three."

**Service participants** mixed together bitter herbs known as moror with the charoses and ate them between pieces of matzah as in ancient times.

The moror was ground horseradish, and the charoses was a sweet mixture of ground apples, wine and nuts.

Said the rabbi, "Let us open the door for Elijah and fill the cup." While the rabbi did not actually open a door, the act has been performed traditionally in accordance with Jewish folklore that the prophet Elijah would come to announce the coming of the messianic age.

As part of the symbolic door-opening, the service participant drank a third cup of wine.

They then ate ground fish and roasted eggs, the eggs symbolizing ancient Passover meals as well as life and birth.

As the main course of the Passover meal was being served, the rabbi talked about the 6 million Jews killed in the World War I Holocaust, and he read poetry by Mobilians, Harry and Kel Zarembo. Zarembo is a survivor of the concentration camps.

Beginning the main course of the meal, the rabbi offered benediction over a fourth cup of wine.

**The meal included** matzah ball soup; roasted chicken; a mixture of glazed carrots, sweet potatoes and prunes; and a food prepared from crushed matzah.

The chicken was substituted for lamb, according to the rabbi because the biblical command is for the Passover sacrifice of the lamb to be in Jerusalem.

The two-hour program ended with guitar playing and the singing of lively, optimistic songs, including some hand-clapping.

"I still believe in man, and I still believe in you," the Christian and Jews sang together.