Remarks on Pesach/Easter

01.04.2026 | Debbie Weisman

I want to thank the ICCJ for giving me the opportunity to wish my friends and colleagues best wishes for healthy and happy festivals.

I'm glad that we're using the name Pesach rather than Passover, although Passover is easier to pronounce. We use the name "Ramadan" rather than looking for some English equivalent. Pesach connects with the Greek Pascha. Certainly, Pesach shows a lot of Greco-Roman influence but, perhaps somewhat ironically, two festivals which show the influence of Persian culture on the Jewish people are Purim and Pesach. Pesach has a lot in common with the Persian celebration of Nowruz, the New Year. Nowruz was a pre-Islamic celebration for Persians and is still celebrated today, throughout the world.

Pesach is a celebration of spring (and here, I apologize to our friends in the Southern hemisphere.) It is a festival of renewal, rebirth, and liberation. The first night of Pesach is the first full moon on or after the spring equinox.

The liberation comes after a period of hard work and preparation. Cleaning, shopping, cooking—but also spiritual preparation.

In general, Pesach is a time of stress and fatigue, but, of course, this year, here in Israel, more than ever. We are all hoping and praying that we will be able to sit at our Pesach Seder and not have to run to a shelter.

But I'm afraid that the extremist elements in the Israeli government will try to exploit this period and this war to push through two pieces of very problematic legislation. The first is a bill to expand the authority of the rabbinic courts. I am a religious Jew and Halakha, Jewish law, is a major part of my life, but I don't think it should be pushed on a pluralistic public. The second is the death penalty for Arab terrorists. I oppose the death penalty in general, but I also think that we have Jewish terrorists, too, especially on the West Bank, and that this is racist legislation.

We Jews, especially as we go into Pesach, should be cognizant of the need for balance between particularism and universalism. Pesach celebrates the exodus from Egypt which is a particular collective memory for the Jewish people, yet one that holds universal significance.

I have a practical suggestion for people listening to our conversation: if you have contacts in Israel, Palestine—and perhaps in Iran?—drop them a note, saying, "Thinking of you." We are all feeling lonely and isolated. Whether you agree with the war or not, it doesn't matter—people are involved. Let them know that you care.

I hope you all have meaningful and joyous celebrations.

Dr Deborah (Debbie) Weissman (Jew, Israel) is a retired educator who has lived in Jerusalem since 1972. She taught Jewish studies and women's studies at the Hebrew University and many Christian institutions. Her involvement in interreligious dialogue, both locally and internationally, culminated in her serving two terms as President of the ICCJ from 2008 to 2014.

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