PESAH, in the Bet haMiqdash

The eve of Pesah, Nisan 14th, was a very busy day in the times of the Bet-haMiqdash. Hundreds of thousands of Jews came to Yerushalayim from all towns of Israel, and were ready to offer the qorban Pesah (=a lamb which was sacrificed in the afternoon, roasted and consumed at night). Those who came from outside of Yerushalayim were staying with relatives or acquaintances, or many times, in a stranger's home. In general all houses in Yerushalayim were open for all who needed a place to stay, and when there was no more room available, a red cloth would be hanging above the door.

People gathered in family groups called "Haburot" (singular "Habura"). Each Habura, which could consist of 50, 60 and up to 100 people, shared one qorban. The lamb was carried by the evening of 14 Nisan to the Bet haMiqdash by one or two representatives from each Habura, and was sacrificed there. Then the animal was roasted in one piece. At night, already Nisan 15th, people would have the Seder, much like we do today. They read the Haggadah, the Ma Nishtana questions were made, a lot of food was served, including other qorbanot as Hagiga, and all accompanied, of course, by Matsa, and maror. People sat reclined on cushions, like noblemen and aristocrats. Four cups of wine were served to celebrate our salvation, redemption, freedom, and assignment as the chosen people . Finally dinner was served and before midnight, the qorban Pesah was eaten as afiqomán (last meal, or "dessert"). The roasted lamb was distributed among all members of the Habura. Everyone had to eat from that qorban at least a piece the size of an olive (kazait). After eating the qorban Pesah, the Habura recited the Birkat Hamazon, the blessing to thank HaShem for our food.

Around midnight, everyone went up to the terraces of Yerushalayim, and from there, looking at the Bet haMiqdash, which was lit by a full moon, all the people sang the Hallel (Psalms of Tehillim recited in gratitude to HaShem for having taken us out of Egypt). The voices of millions of Yehudim singing the Hallel, all at once, filled the city with an unparalleled melody. The Gemara says that those voices were so powerful that people felt that the terraces of the city were shaking.

After the destruction of the Bet haMiqdash, we have the tradition to put on the tray of Pesah, or que'ará, a shank-bone (among Ashkenazim, a chicken leg) to remember the qorban Pesah. At the end of the Seder we also eat an additional portion of Matsa, the Afiqoman, in memory of qorban Pesah, saying: "[We eat this Matsa] in remembrance of the qorban Pesah, which was eaten once one is satisfied". We also recite the Hallel, at the end of the Haggadah, after eating the Afiqomán. We recite the Halel twice: first in the synagogue and then at home.

There is another beautiful custom that very few people practice today, which was made in remembrance of that famous Halel that was recited in the Bet haMiqdash. Do you know when people used to bake the Matsot that were used for the Pesah Seder? On Nisan 14th, Pesah eve, in the afternoon. Exactly when the qorban Pesah was sacrificed. This is the ideal time for preparing the Matsot, which is the time the Halot are prepared in a normal Friday. And while preparing the Matsot on the eve of Pesah, people used to sing the Hallel! Today, this tradition is virtually lost, except in some Jewish communities in Yemen and Kurdistan.

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Read this great article from the New York Times, where a chef DAN BARBER, writes about Matsa Shemura. The Jewish chef, astonished by the special flavor of this Matsa, discovers that the taste is due to the quality of the grain, which is supervised from before the harvest.