

Passover marked by traditional meal

500 Jewish residents of developmental center have seder

Like thousands of Jewish families on Staten Island, about 500 Jewish residents of the Staten Island Developmental Center sat down at sundown yesterday for the traditional seder marking Passover, the festival of deliverance and freedom.

Once a time to remember shepherds and farmers, Rabbi Philip Goldberg, a chaplain at the Willowbrook center for 23 years, told the residents the rites of Passover have been transformed into a commemoration of the Jewish exodus from the land of the pharaohs. During the time, according to the Old Testament, God passed over Jewish homes as he slew the first-born sons of Egypt.

Seated at long tables lining the auditorium in Building 3, the mentally retarded residents relived the exodus, it being the 14th day of the Hebrew month Nisan.

All of the traditional foods, each bound in symbolic meaning, were placed on the dinner table for the start of the seder.

Rabbi Goldberg, telling a visitor that "Solomon said that everyone should be taught according to his capacity," explained to the residents the significance of:

¶ The quickly baked matzoh, cooked and eaten to get out of Egypt in a hurry, replacing the customary leavened

bread that have been cleared from Jewish homes.

¶ The bitter herbs, declared to be reminders of the Jewish lot in Egypt, and the salt water, of tears shed.

¶ The charoseth, a mixture of apples, nuts and wines, symbolic of the mortar mixed by Jews when they were enslaved by tyrannical rulers.

"And it shall come to pass," the Bible intones, "when your children shall say to you, 'What do you mean by this service?'"

One resident said, "It was Passover, the time when you eat matzoh." Another explained that for him, it made him feel "proud to be a Jew."

But for Philip Green, a former resident of the institution now living in a community home, this Passover held special meaning. For in keeping with Old Testament Scripture, he posed the traditional four questions as to the meaning of the evening's customs.

And his surrogate father, Rabbi Goldberg, answered, beginning with the words:

"We were slaves unto pharaoh in Egypt. And the Lord, our God, took us out from there with a strong hand and an outstretched arm.

"Now, if the Holy One, blessed is he, had not taken us out from there, then we, and our children, and our children's

children, would still have been enslaved unto pharaoh in Egypt."

A somewhat abridged version of the service was read from the Passover haggada, because, Rabbi Goldberg explained, "the residents get hungry."

For dinner, they partook in a strictly kosher meal, including matzo ball soup and a main meal consisting of chicken, carrots and potatoes. There was also wine (mixed with grape juice) in abundant supply.

Among special guests at last night's service were foster parents and state

workers helping those residents who could not feed themselves. Also in attendance were the institution's director, Elin M. Howe, and a deputy director, Fran Ryan, as well as the institution's Catholic chaplain, Father Edward J. Banks, and its Protestant chaplain, Arnold E. Ostlund

Last night's seder was prepared by Rabbi Goldberg, who said he enjoys teaching the residents about Judaism, "not to try to turn them into professors, but to give them a feeling of attachment and belonging."

— SYDNEY FREEDBERG