

Oranges, Keys, and Artichokes: Symbols & Seder Plates

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Inspiring
Jewish
Homes

Source 1: Pesach Haggadah, Magid, Rabban Gamliel's Three Things

In each and every generation, each person is obligated to see themselves as if they left Egypt, as it is stated (Exodus 13:8); "And you shall explain to your children that day: For the sake of this, did the Lord do [this] for me in my going out of Egypt."

Not only our ancestors did the Blessed Holy One redeem, but rather also us [together] with them did God redeem.

בְּכָל־דּוֹר וְדוֹר חַיֵּיב אָדָם לִרְאוֹת אֶת־עַצְמוֹ כְּאִלּוּ הוּא יֵצֵא מִמִּצְרַיִם, שְׁנֹאמֵר: וְהִגַּדְתָּ לְבִנְךָ בַּיּוֹם הַהוּא לֵאמֹר, בְּעֵבוֹר זֶה עָשָׂה ה' לִי בְיֵצֵאתִי מִמִּצְרַיִם. לֹא אֶת־אֲבוֹתַיִנוּ בְּלִבְדָּ גָּאֵל הַקְּדוֹשׁ בְּרוּךְ הוּא, אֲלֵא אִף אוֹתְנוּ גָּאֵל עִמָּהֶם.

Discussion:

- Why do you think we are obligated to see ourselves as part of the Exodus story? How does this change our experience of Passover?
- Do you experience Passover as being a story about you? Why or why not?
- How does the seder experience work as a pedagogical/spiritual tool for seeing ourselves as liberated from Egypt?

Source 2: "Learn About the Passover Seder Plate,"

(Reformjudaism.org)

Beitzah: The roasted egg is symbolic of the festival sacrifice made in biblical times. It is also a symbol of spring - the season in which Passover is always celebrated.

Chazeret: Lettuce is often used in addition to the maror as a bitter herb. The authorities are divided on the requirement of chazeret, so not all communities use it. Since the commandment (in Numbers 9:11) to eat the paschal lamb "with unleavened bread and bitter herbs" uses the plural ("bitter herbs") most seder plates have a place for chazeret.

Zeroa: The shank bone is symbolic of the Paschal lamb offered as the Passover sacrifice in biblical times. Some communities use a chicken neck as a substitute. Vegetarian households may use beets.

Charoset: This mixture (often apple, nuts, and spices ground together and mixed with wine) are symbolic of the mortar used by Hebrew slaves to build Egyptian structures. There are several variations in the recipe for charoset; the Mishnah describes a mixture of fruits, nuts, and vinegar.

Karpas: Parsley is dipped into salt water during the seder. The salt water serves as a reminder of the tears shed during Egyptian slavery. The dipping of a vegetable as an appetizer is said to reflect the influence of Greek culture.

Maror: Bitter Herbs (usually horseradish) symbolize the bitterness of Egyptian slavery. The maror is often dipped in charoset to reduce its sharpness. Maror is used in the seder because of the commandment (in Numbers 9:11) to eat the paschal lamb "with unleavened bread and bitter herbs".

Discussion:

- What is the purpose of having a physical seder plate? Why not just talk about the ideas?
- Is there a particular symbol that you resonate the most with? The least?
- Do you have any particular resonances with any of the items?
- Does your family have any custom to add anything to the seder plate -- why? What do you think about this?

Source 3: Tamara Cohen, "Orange on the Seder Plate" (*Ritualwell*)

In the early 1980s, while speaking at Oberlin College Hillel, Susannah Heschel was introduced to an early feminist haggadah that suggested adding a crust of bread on the seder as a sign of solidarity with Jewish lesbians ("there's as much room for a lesbian in Judaism as there is for a crust of bread on the seder plate"). Heschel felt that to put bread on the seder plate would be to accept that Jewish lesbians and gay men violate Judaism like chametz violates Passover.

So, at her next seder, she chose an orange as a symbol of inclusion of gays and lesbians and others who are marginalized within the Jewish community. She offered the orange as a symbol of the fruitfulness for all Jews when lesbians and gay men are contributing and active members of Jewish life. In addition, each orange segment had a few seeds that had to be spit out—a gesture of spitting out, repudiating the homophobia of Judaism.

Discussion:

- What do you think about this story? Why do you think it was important to add a symbol to the seder plate for Heschel?

- How do you understand the idea of bread on a seder plate? Is this something that you would ever do for your seder?

Source 4: Rabbi Sari Laufer, "Here's Why I'm Sticking To the Basics On My Passover Seder Plate" (JTA, april 2022)

One of the great tensions of Jewish life in the 21st century is between universalism – the central themes and ideas of Jewish wisdom that speak to all of the human experience – and particularism, the doctrines and injunctions meant to distinguish Jewish practice and ritual from that of the rest of the world. And of all of our stories, it is perhaps Passover that best embodies this tension....

The seder night is a night for telling stories, our own and the ones we think need to be told. But to my mind, we do not need more on our seder plate to make that happen. In fact, I worry that, in this case, more is less – in trying to include each particular story, we lose the universal truths....

Why do we need additional items, when these symbols allow us to tell the stories we want to tell? I worry that the more specific stories we attempt to include, the more we are excluding. What happens to people who do not see their specific story represented on a seder plate that is groaning with symbols of so many other stories?....

Discussion:

- How do you understand the ideas of universalism vs. particularism as they come up in observing Passover?
- Do you feel that the ritual objects on the seder plate are sufficient? What do we lose in adding items -- and what do we gain?
- How do you feel that observing Passover this year might be different for you?

Source 5: Modern Day Seder Plate Items (compiled from various sources)

1. **Fair trade chocolate, cocoa beans, or coffee** -- launched by Fair Trade Judaica in 2011 to raise awareness regarding child labor in chocolate & coffee industries
2. **Banana** -- Rabbi Dan Moskowitz called for this in 2015 after a photo of the body of Aylan Kurdi, a young boy who was a Syrian refugee, washed up on the shore. The father of Aylan and his brother, Galip, gave them bananas every day.
3. **Potato** -- In 1991, Israel launched Operation Solomon, a covert plan to bring Ethiopian Jews to Israel. When they arrived in Israel, many were so ill that they were unable to digest substantial food. Israeli doctors fed these new immigrants simple boiled potatoes and rice until their systems could handle

more substantial food.

4. **Acorn** -- Led by Kehilla Community Synagogue in Piedmont, CA, some communities include acorns to acknowledge the indigenous and Native stewards of the land, and will accompany this with a land acknowledgement.
5. **Artichoke** -- Rabbi Geela Rayzel Raphael suggests introducing a thorny artichoke to the seder plate to represent the some Jews' qualma with interfaith relationships: "Let this artichoke on the seder plate tonight stand for the wisdom of God's creation in making the Jewish people a population able to absorb many elements and cultures throughout the centuries — yet still remain Jewish."
6. **Lock and key** -- Included by "The Jewish Working Group to End The New Jim Crow" to raise awareness in the American Jewish community about mass incarceration and the prison industrial complex.
7. **Garlic** -- Dori Midnight writes that "garlic is a symbol for reconnecting with and revealing ancestral healing and protection practices and divesting from harmful practices and institutions that offer an illusion of safety at the expense of others...A fifth question for Passover might be why? What happens when we lose these ancestral traditions and ancient blessings of protection? What do we turn to for protection when we're stripped of or abandon traditions of community care and interdependence? What happens when centuries of trauma/assimilation/modernization/xenophobia separate us from the pungent blessing of garlic and seed us with shame about smelling like garlic?"
8. **Spoon** -- Rabbi Elliot Kukla called in 2020 for people to add a spoon to their seder plate. They wrote, "A spoon placed tenderly on the seder plate holds multiple meanings: It represents sick and disabled people, as well as elders, but it also represents the need for everyone to tend to their energy in this time of shelter." We can add one today to represent the continued impact of the COVID pandemic, and for disability representation.
9. **Tomato** -- A symbol of contemporary slavery (underpaid and overworked farm workers) is represented by the tomato. This ritual, developed by T'ruah and the Coalition of Immokalee Workers in Florida, places a tomato on the seder plate in recognition of the farmworker who picked the tomato and their struggles for justice.
10. **Olive** -- The olive tree is one of the first plants to be mentioned in the Torah, and is among the oldest species in Israel/Palestine. It has become a universal symbol of peace and hope, associated with the dove in the story of Noah's ark and the flood. It is a symbol for peace in Israel and Palestine.

Discussion:

- How does adding new items to our seder plate have the potential to increase our experience of liberation on this holiday?
- What symbols do you resonate best with? What will your seder plate have?