**PASSOVER IS COMPLICATED**

Hag Ha-Umah חג האומה Festival of Nationhood

Hag Ha-Heirutחג החירות Festival of Freedom / Zeman Heiruteinu the Passover saga is certainly one of the most powerful and resonant stories of freedom ever told, a story which continues to inspire us to strengthen our commitment to political, religious and spiritual freedom.

Hag Ha-Aviv חג האביב Festival of the Spring ), a time of renewal and rebirth when we clean out our homes and focus on cleaning out whatever causes our souls to puff up with pride and egotism in an effort to make a fresh stat.

Hag Ha-Pesach חג הפסח Festival of Passing Over / Skipping / Protection / Lambs (Ex. 12:23) (Ex. 12:1–28, 43–49; Deut. 16:1–8) *Hag ha Pesah*, named for the paschal offering

Hag Ha-Matzot חג המצות Festival of Matzot / “unleavened bread” ( Ex. 23:15; Lev. 23:6; Deut. 16:16) Matzah is a symbol of great power and ambiguity. It is the lechem oni, the poor bread, the bread of slavery that our ancestors ate in Egypt. It is also the bread of freedom, the bread that was baked but did not have time to rise as the Israelites made a hasty exit from Egypt.

Hag ha-Gez or Re´shit ha-Gez חג הגז Festival of Fleece / Shearing was the biblical festival or celebration of the shearing of the sheep

# NEW STATEMENTS FOR THE SEDER

**A Statement on Your Seder Plate**

[Gal Beckerman](http://forward.com/author/gal-beckerman/)

Passover always feels both repetitious and fresh.

Every year we are asked to tell the story of enslavement and redemption anew, asked to go through the same motions, dip our fingers in the wine again the same number of times. But there is another imperative — not just to remember our own historic moment of slavery, but to consider freedom more universally, including in our own time and place. The Seder demands that we look around us, at our society and world, and not just into the past.

Nothing exemplifies this duality more than the evolving Seder plate. It contains the same traditional elements that it has for centuries, items whose meaning we know by heart. Parsley to dip in salt water and remind us of bitterness and tears. Charoset, reminiscent of the brick-building mortar. A shankbone to bring us back to the Temple and its sacrifices. An egg (I can’t resist — I have an uncle who every year tells the same profane joke, swearing the egg is to remind us of how high the water of the Red Sea reached as the Israelite men tried to escape).

These are the staples, providing continuity and tradition. But over the past couple decades, some new symbols have joined the plate. They are testament to a desire among Jews to see in the ritual of the Seder an opportunity to make a statement about present-day commitments and beliefs. These foods add to the plate as much as they affirm the spirit of the holiday.

I won’t explain some of these new Seder plate items, since we have some wonderful writers who have taken up the task in our pages. You can click to read Susannah Heschel on the [orange](http://forward.com/articles/172959/an-orange-for-women-and-marginalized-jews/) (a tradition she invented); Rebecca Alpert on [bread](http://forward.com/articles/172960/a-piece-of-bread-for-all-the-excluded/) ; Joshua Lesser on the [tomato](http://forward.com/articles/172962/a-tomato-for-those-still-enslaved/) ; and Rebecca Vilkomerson on the [olive](http://forward.com/articles/172963/an-olive-for-the-palestinians/) .

Together these piece add another dimension to Passover’s importance, and highlight maybe it’s least appreciated aspect: a chance for creativity.

**SYMBOLISM of Seder Plate and Items**

**MATZAH**

Ashkenazi *matzah* is a hard thin wafer, while Sephardim make softer, thicker *matzot* by using a much more watered batter. This soft *matzah* does not have a long shelf life, which necessitates baking and freezing it shortly before Passover, and indeed, before the advent of freezers, Sephardim baked *matzah* daily during the holiday.

*Matzah* is referred to as *leḥem oni*, "the bread of affliction" (Deut. 16:3)

On this basis the [\*Karaites](http://go.galegroup.com.spertus.idm.oclc.org/ps/retrieve.do?inPS=true&prodId=GVRL&userGroupName=spertusgvrl&tabID=T003&searchId=R1&searchType=AdvancedSearchForm&contentSet=GALE&docId=GALE%7CCX2587510743) , who interpreted the Bible literally, make *matzah* only from barley, which was used to make the poor man's bread

When it comes to the three *matzot*at the Seder, there are many different takes on the significance of having three specifically. These opinions come from thousands of years of tradition and from sources within the *Midrash.*

The top matzah is called the *Keter,* or Crown. The middle matzah is called the *Hokhmah*, or Wisdom. The bottom matzah is called the *Binah*, or Intelligence.

1. There are many different interpretations for the symbolic meaning of these matzot. The traditional interpretation is that the top, Keter, and the bottom, Binah, represent the **double portion of manna** that fell the day before the Sabbath for the Israelites in the wilderness. The middle matzah, Hokhmah, which eventually yields the Afikomen, represents the Exodus and is the "bread of poverty." Poor people usually break their bread and share it, or they break off one piece of their bread and put away the other piece for a later meal.[[1]](#footnote-1)[
2. According to one opinion, the three *matzot*are known as the Kohen (priest), Levi, and Yisrael (Israelite), which are the **three types of Jews** that make up the Jewish people.

* **Top *matzah*:** Kohen, taking priority in all matters.
* **Middle *matzah*:** Levi, broken in two at the beginning of the Seder, the smaller of the two pieces is left on the plate and is eaten later in the *Seder* along with the Kohen to fulfill the commandment to eat *matzah*. The larger of the two pieces is placed in a special "afikomen" bag and is searched for later in the Seder.
* **Bottom *matzah*:** Yisrael is used for the [*korech*](http://www.aish.com/h/pes/h/Bitter-Herbs-and-Korech-Sandwich.html), which is the sandwich made with bitter herbs often called the "Hillel sandwich" during the *Seder*. This allows everyone at the meal to take part in the performance of the commandment to eat *matzah*.

1. Some commentators say that the **three *matzot* refer to the three patriarchs**: Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Others see them as alluding to the three portions of flour that Abraham asked his wife Sarah to bake when the angels visited him in Genesis 18:6. Abraham tells Sarah to be quick, which connects very closely to the haste in which the Israelites had to bake their bread, or *matzah*, when fleeing Exodus. The biblical commentator Alshich says that Abraham wanted Sarah to knead the dough herself (and not delegate the job to a servant) so that she could make sure that it did not become Chametz.
2. There are some who connect the three *matzot*to the thanksgiving offering to God of three cakes. This thanksgiving offering was required whenever someone returned from a journey at sea, journeyed through the desert, recovered from an illness, or was released from prison. According to the Exodus story, the Israelites managed all four of these feats in one fell swoop. As a result, Jews honor this thanksgiving offering by placing three *matzot* on the *Seder*table.
3. On Passover we need two whole Matzot for the blessing, as for Shabbat. So we start out with three because at the beginning of the Seder we break the middle Matzah and we’re left with two whole ones for the blessing. Every Shabbat and holiday you need two whole loaves of Challah. [This commemorates the double portion of manna we received in the desert on the day before Shabbat or a holiday.]
4. The middle matzah, Hokhmah, which eventually yields the Afikomen, represents the Exodus and is the "bread of poverty." Poor people usually break their bread and share it, or they break off one piece of their bread and put away the other piece for a later meal
5. Given that the shewbread was unleavened bread like matzah, this interpretation draws an even more direct connection between the matzah and the Paschal sacrifice. Not only does the middle matzah of the three specifically represent the Paschal sacrifice, but also the outer two matzot indirectly represent the same. Some rabbis even feel that the matzah that is eaten just preceding the eating of bitter herbs should be salted as a reminder that all sacrifices brought to the temple were salted before being burned on the altar. In this way, the matzah further represents the sacrificial lamb
6. A fourth interpretation of the three matzot is that they represent the three temples of Jerusalem – the Temple of Solomon, the Second Temple (i.e. - the Temple of Zerubabbel/Herod's Temple), and the future temple that is yet to be built.
7. The top matzah, Keter, represents the Cohenim, or priests of the temple. The middle matzah, Hokhmah, represents the Levi’im, or singers and servitors of the temple. The bottom matzah, Binah, represents the Yisraelim, or the congregation of Israel. This interpretation contains clear references to the ancient Temple and its concentric courtyards of limited access. Thus, in the absence of the Paschal sacrifice, these three matzot remind Jews of the Temple and the ancient sacrifices performed there. In this symbolism, we find one of the ways in which matzah has replaced the Paschal sacrifice.

**TRADITIONAL SEDER SYMBOLS**

**Matzah:** *Matzah* s one of the most iconic elements of Passover. During the Exodus from Egypt, the Jews fled so quickly that there was no time to waste waiting for bread to ris. Instead, they ate unleavened matzah in their desperate escape from slavery. What was once an act of necessity is now celebrated in triumphant, everlasting joy. Jews choose to eat matzah in honor of their ancestors, and to celebrate their freedom. This special bread is included on the Seder plate, or next to it. I

**Bitter Herbs: *Maror* and *Chazeret*** are bitter herbs, such as romaine lettuce, endives, or horseradish, which are eaten to remind the participants of the bitter and frightening journey of Exodus.

***Charoset :*** *Charoset* is a sweet-tasting mixture of apples, cinnamon, wine, and nuts. Charoset is symbolic of the mortar that the Jewish slaves used when being forced to build Egyptian storehouses. The bitter maror is dipped into the charoset before being consumed. When tasted together, the participants remember the struggle of the Jewish slaves, and pay homage to their hardships. The bitterness of the maror tells the tale of a life of strife, while the sweet-tasting charoset invokes the very building blocks of a slave’s daily existence.

***Karpas:*** *Karpas* is a vegetable, often celery or potatoes, which is dipped into salted water or vinegar. The plain, bitter taste of this food also reinforces the brutal life of the Jewish slaves, which was fraught with scarcity and pain. The participants at the Passover Seder meal taste the pain of their ancestors. The vegetable serves a secondary purpose - the promise that spring is on its way. Like many of the elements of the Passover dinner, the dual nature of the dish both reminds us of the past struggles of our ancestors, and celebrates their successful journey to freedom.

***Zeroah:*** *Zeroah* is the second-to-last dish on the Passover Seder Plate. Zeroah is the only meat included on the dish. Usually, zeroah is a shank bone of meat or poultry. In ancient Jeruselum, the Jews celebrated the first night of Passover by sacrificing a lamb in the Temple, roasting it, and consuming it on the eve of the Exodus. The lamb was known as the “Pesach” offering. After the temple was destroyed, the zeroah became part of the Seder Plate to invoke the offering of Pesach. For vegetarians, the Pesach sacrifice can be represented by a beet.

*korban chagigah* was (usually) offered on the fourteenth of Nissan, along with the *korban Pesach*. In commemoration of these two offerings, the sages instituted that there be two cooked dishes at the Seder

usually a shank bone, corresponding to the *korban Pesach*

egg, corresponding to *korban chagigah* (festival sacrifice)

Others explain that these two dishes are meant to correspond to the two messengers, Moses and Aaron, that G‑d sent to take the Jews out of Egypt.

These two cooked foods are traditionally the shank or neck of a chicken, and an egg. Why the egg? Some say because it is very easy to cook.

*zero'a* (usually a shank bone), corresponding to the *korban Pesach,* because the word *zero’a* literally means “arm,” alluding to the verse which states, “And I will redeem you with an outstretched arm . . .” The egg corresponds to the *korban chagigah*.

In Aramaic, it is called *beya*, which also means "pray" or "please." Thus, the foods silently plead, "May it **please** the Merciful G‑d to redeem us with an outstretched **arm**."

***Beitzah:*** *Beitzah* is an egg which has been roasted to symbolize another ancient Jerusalem sacrifice - the Korban Chagigah. The Chagigah was a meat sacrifice, yet on the Seder Plate it is represented by an egg.

***Salt Water:*** represents the tears and/or the crossing of the Red Sea

***Kos Eliyahu:*** *Cup of Elijah*

# Learning how to appreciate the Pesach egg

by RABBI DANIEL S. BRENNER, Special to the Bulletin

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What exactly is the egg doing on the Seder plate?  
  
The roasted orb has been a guest of honor for generations and hardly a word has been spoken in its direction. The matzah, the shank bone, the bitter herbs -- they generate the buzz year after year. But what would you say about the egg?  
  
"The egg is a symbol of life."

"The egg is symbolic of the Temple sacrifice" (historic)

"The egg reminds us that God has no beginning and no end" (theological)

"The egg is the food of mourning" (psychological)

"The egg is a symbol of springtime and rebirth" (seasonal).  
 "Eggs are like the Jews -- the more time they spend in oppressive heat the tougher they get."

, "An egg, due to its shape, cannot stand without help. From this we learn that our ancestors needed help to stand up against Pharaoh."

In Aramaic -- the language of the Talmud -- the word for egg, "beya," is the same word as the word for "please." In the Jerusalem Talmud, there is a suggestion that on Passover the egg be presented together with the shoulder bone: "Please, God, lift us up from slavery!"  
"Peeling an egg is done to free the egg from its shell --but this peeling is a difficult task, just like the peeling away of the slavery mentality of our ancestors."  
“Perhaps, one could pair the egg with matzah or with the parsley and speak about how these foods are connected.”

“We use an egg, which has no opening, for on this day “the mouths of our enemies became sealed shut” like the smooth, closed egg.”  
  
Where do these references come from? It came as a shock to me that none of these explanations of the egg appear in either the Bible or the Talmud. In fact, the only mention we have from ancient sources is from some rather creative wordplay.

As Jews in Calcutta, Crakow, Chadera, Caracas and Cleveland have placed eggs on their Seder plates, they've creatively interpreted the meaning of these oval delicacies. Creating new meanings for the foods eaten on Passover night has become an important tradition.   
  
With that historical context in mind, the National Jewish Center for Learning and Leadership has created a new ritual for the Seder table -- one that helps Seder participants reflect on eggs and the other foods that aren't part of the Haggadah's telling. Rabbi Daniel S. Brenner is a Senior Teaching Fellow at the National Jewish Center for Learning and Leadership.

Additional meanings for “egg”

Egg as symbol of mourning - Others explain that an egg—a traditional food of mourning, since its rounded shape symbolizes the cycle of life—expresses our mourning for the destruction of the Holy Temple and the lack of these sacrifices

with mourning comes with consolation. Thus, some say that the egg evokes the suffering and subsequent consolation from G‑d that the Israelites experienced. This is in line with what we say in the Haggadah, “Therefore, it is our duty to thank and praise . . . He who did all these miracles for our fathers and for us. He took us out from slavery to freedom . . . **and from mourning to festivity**

Rabbi Moshe Isserlis explains that the custom of eating the egg at the Seder is an outgrowth of having an egg on the Seder plate and is eaten as a way of mourning the destruction of the Temple and the lack of the *korban Pesach*

Many of the ancient Egyptians held religious beliefs that prevented them from consuming meat, fish or eggs. On the night that we celebrate being taken out of Egyptian bondage, we make sure to have both meat and eggs on the Seder plate, showing that we are not bound by their pagan beliefs

According to others, there is a tradition that Abraham passed away on the night of Passover, and the egg is eaten to mourn his passing

Rabbi Isserlis points out that the night of the Seder has a unique connection to the destruction of the Temple, as the first day of Passover always falls out on the same day of the week as the Ninth of Av, the day of the destruction of the Temple

the egg also symbolizes our hope and prayer for the future. When a chicken lays an egg, the egg appears to be a completed object. Yet, in truth, it isn’t complete, and the egg is just a preparation for the live creature that will emerge from it later. So, too, the Exodus from Egypt directs us to the future with hope.

Here's how it's done:  
  
1. Ask the people at your Seder table to think for a moment about eggs. As you point to the egg, or pass it around, ask your guests to connect their thoughts on eggs to the Passover story.

2. After that, ask people to suggest connections to any of the other foods your family shares: the rosemary chicken, macaroons, figs or sesame candies. Are there memories of specific family or friends to whom these foods connect you? Can you creatively relate these foods to the themes of the Passover Seder?  
  
Asking these questions can certainly be a way to add a dose of spontaneity to your Seder. And who knows, maybe in years to come Passover Seders will include some of your family's insights.  
  
Over the years, the Passover Seder has grown from a **simple meal** of meat and herbs on matzah to an elaborate feast. This has happened, in part, because in each generation and in each region, Jews have creatively added on to the set of foods used to tell the story. These new practices were not seen as a challenge to the tradition -- they were seen as enhancing it.  
  
That said, I would not be surprised if someday my great-grandchildren's Seder plate has a few extra circles -- and maybe even some macaroons. The Haggadah of the future might read: "These coconut treats remind us that what is hard to crack on the outside is often sweet on the inside. Once our ancestors broke free from oppression, they could taste the sweetness of freedom."

**Passoverkill?**

By Andrew Silow-Carroll

***[This list was introduced and begun some years ago – and now it has grown. Here is my latest compilation. How many of these do you use or consider relevant to today BDL]***

Suggestions to make next year's seders even more culturally sensitive

When I was growing up, there were five foods on our seder plate: egg (beitza), shank bone (zeroa), bitter herbs (maror), vegetable (karpas), and charoset (haroset). At some point we began adding chazeret, another form of the bitter herbs, on the theory that a Jewish family gathering could always use  a  little more bitterness. In recent years, the symbols on the seder plate have tended to proliferate. All of these are worthy reminders, but how many symbols do we need during a ritual event already bursting with symbolism? Lots, that's how many. If you really want to cover your bases next year, check out my suggestions for the 21st-century seder plate:

[**A SECOND SEDER PLATE**](https://www.haggadot.com/clip/secondsederplate-todays-refugees)Why have just one? This year, Jewish World Watch asks

us to consider the plight of over 65 million displaced persons around the world with their #SecondSederPlate activity guide.

[**A CHILI PEPPER**](https://www.haggadot.com/clip/porque-tenemos-un-chile-en-el-platio-del-seder)This fantastic Jewish Mexican Haggadah encourages us to add the pepper to "honor the abuelas, the bisabuelas, the chignonas, the curandras, and the other femme Moshes, Miriams, Tziporahs and Aarons in our lives who taught us who we are..."

[**A PINE CONE**](https://www.haggadot.com/clip/passover-pine-cone-putting-prisons-seder-plate)Temple Israel of Boston invites us to remember the mass incarceration crisis in America.

[**AN ARTICHOKE**](https://www.haggadot.com/clip/artichoke-seder-plate)Interfaith Family notes, "Jewish people have been thorny about this question of interfaith marriage" and has chosen an artichoke to spark conversation towards inclusiveness at our seder tables.

[**AN OYSTER**](http://​https:/www.haggadot.com/clip/why-there-oyster-seder-plate)Kosher? No! But it is a great conversation starter about our reliance on oil and the effects of drilling.

[**AN OLIVE**](https://www.haggadot.com/clip/olives-seder-plate)Olive branches are traditionally known as a symbol of peace, so this author reminds us "we are not free until there is peace in our homes, our community and in our world"

[**COCONUT & FRUIT SALAD**](https://www.haggadot.com/clip/glbt-seder-plate-2)JQ International has a full LGBTQ Haggadah with a seder plate that includes a coconut for those "still in the closet and their struggle in coming out" and fruit salad for "our collective potential and recognition"

[**PINEAPPLE**](https://www.haggadot.com/clip/pineapple-seder-plate)This author asks us to be mindful of depression and anxiety that reside within us, adding "May the source of all deliver all who suffer from their own personal Mitzrayim (narrow places)"

**BITTER CHOCOLATE** Some host Chocolate seders to entertain the kids, while others eat [fair-trade chocolate to honor workers' struggles](https://www.haggadot.com/clip/adding-fair-trade-chocolate-seder-plate). In their "Revenge of Dinah" haggadah, a group of activist teens have created a [Bitter Chocolate Ritual for us to consider the pervasiveness of rape culture in our Jewish communities](https://www.haggadot.com/clip/bitter-chocolate-ritual).

[**RUTH'S CUP**](https://www.haggadot.com/clip/ruths-cup-1)Many consider Ruth to be the original convert and model for the diversity in Jewish life. To honor her and represent an inclusive vision of Judaism, some have added a new cup to the table rituals.

[**A BANANA**](https://www.haggadot.com/clip/banana-seder-plate-ritual-reflect-refugee-crisis)Religious Action Center also asks us to consider the refugee crisis, this time with a banana, considered a luxury in war-torn Syria.

[**A TOMATO**](https://www.haggadot.com/clip/tomato-seder-plate)Those who stand in solidarity with workers' rights issues ask us to add the tomato to consider the struggles of farm workers.

**BAG OF RICE** – inclusion of the Sefardim and Mizrachi Jewish communities

**ORANGE** – a long debated as to why it was first added to the Seder (plate) and what it has come to mean. to honor the contributions of Jewish women. Others: inclusion of those who otherwise are marginalized and inappropriately part of our community and Seder

**GREEN PEPPER**: Symbolizes our need to heal the planet, which you promise to do right after using up all the Styrofoam cups and plastic utensils that you bought for Passover

**STRAWBERRY**: Expresses solidarity with professional athletes struggling with addiction problems.

**CARROT**: Calls attention to the plight of “gingees” (Hebrew slang for redheads), and how people with red hair must really be careful in the sun.

**BEET** – for vegetarians to replace the shank bone / meat bone on the plate

**FLOWER or SEED PACKET** – symbol of Spring

**BRICK** – represents the building materials that the ancient Israelites made in the brickyards

**A CHECK** FOR A DONATION TO A FOOD-RELIEF ORGANIZATION LIKE [MAZON](http://mazon.org/)

**CRUST of BREAD** – what the poor world-wide subsist on, and for them not a symbol place on the table security covered in plastic film and then bagged!

**POTATO PEELINGS** – what sustained our people in concentration camps of the Shoah and how so many in Europe survived ghettoes and oppression

[**FAIR-TRADE CHOCOLATE**](http://shop.equalexchange.coop/pesach) – check for a Bitter Chocolate ritual in an activist Haggadah, but also a real symbol of protecting the farmers and laborers on cocoa plantations

**WHITE WINE** – as opposed to Red wine, recalling the blood libels from the Medieval period through modern times, still being encouraged by anti-Semites

**MIRIAM’S CUP** – now added to restore a meaningful role for the family of Moses and for women in the story of the Exodus

**TAMBOURINE** – a symbol of the Song at the Red Sea and the women who danced

[**TZEDAKAH**](http://www.ritualwell.org/glossary/4/lettert#term375) **BOX** – not to forget the needs of the poor even in the midst of our celebration

**SCALLIONS** – used by Mizrachi Jews, especially from North Africa / Morocco during the Seder to symbolize the whips used by taskmasters

**A LOCK AND KEY** – the needs of the incarcerated who needs for mental health, rehabilitation, education while in prison and a modern structure to return them to society as positive members of a community

**BROCCOLI:** The surprising fact that broccoli is a member of the cabbage species helps us understand how some of our family members can actually be related to us.  
  
**APPLE:** Celebrates how technology has changed Jewish life, like on-line Torah learning and the ability to play Candy Crush while sitting in the carpool lane at Sunday school.  
  
**GRAPES:** A reminder that if you really drink all four cups of wine, you can put up with your cousin's boyfriend for one night.  
  
**ASPARAGUS:** A reminder that two hours after the seder you'll be reminded what you ate at the seder.  
  
**PRICKLY PEAR**: The national symbol of the Israeli Jew: tough on the outside, soft and sweet on the inside.  
  
**KIWI:** The national symbol of the American Jew: once exotic, now familiar, especially among college grads, who tend to marry them in greater and greater numbers. Jews, not kiwis. Marrying a kiwi would be weird.  
  
**CELERY:** Sounds like "salary," and expresses the hope that your children will get jobs after graduation.

Ready to get creative at your seder? Try our [Alternative Seder Plate Activity](https://www.haggadot.com/clip/alternative-seder-plate) to draw your own symbols on the plate. And for something completely different, try [**The Science Seder Plate**](https://www.haggadot.com/clip/science-seder-plate). It's a great coloring activity with science facts about the traditional seder symbols. We LOVE it!

Do you have a new symbol on the seder plate that you'd like to share? Let us know! Post it to the site, or email us at [info@haggadot.com](mailto:info@haggadot.com)

**CUP OF SERACH bat ASHER**

Unfortunately we will not live forever. But, like Serach, we are all important as links in the chain of Tradition. We all have Serachs' power to pass something meaningful onto the next generation, as gently as Serach did with Jacob, or as forcefully as she did with Rabbi Yochanan. Pesach asks us to hand on something of importance, meaning and joy to the next generation. Perhaps Serach will appear to help us, but in case she doesn’t, all of us will have to learn and explore for ourselves, to ensure that the next generation have something they also feel able to hand on. May something powerful and freeing be transmitted to you, so that you might pass it on.

**ADDING THE VOICE OF SERACH BAT ASHER TO YOUR SEDER**

Shared by [Rabbi Debbie Young-Somers](http://www.ritualwell.org/user/1002)

Through rabbinic tradition, Serach Bat Asher (Gen. 46:17 and Num. 26:46) symbolizes the importance of mesorah—oral tradition, by telling it as it was, and being the conduit for information. This is a tradition we honor tonight at our [Seder](http://www.ritualwell.org/glossary/4/letters#term326). Serach is reported to have been among the 10 or 11 people in the [Torah](http://www.ritualwell.org/glossary/4/lettert#term371) who never died, like [Elijah](http://www.ritualwell.org/glossary/4/lettere#term193). You might add a cup for Serach next to Elijah’s cup, to acknowledge this connection. Elijah represents our hope for the future, while Serach represents the importance of remembering and learning from the past. She is even able to correct the ancient sages in their re-telling of the Exodus story:

"Rabbi Yochanan was sitting and expounding, how the waters were made into a wall for [Israel](http://www.ritualwell.org/glossary/4/letteri#term234). Rabbi Yochanan explained they were like opaque walls. Serach, the daughter of Asher, grew angry and said ‘I was there, and they were like nets!’" (Pesikta D’Rav Kahana 11:13)

As you hold your Serach's Cup aloft (why not make your own before Pesakh?), or if you don’t have one, the Seder plate, which encourages us to tell and to ask, read together:

We remember the lessons taught to us by those who wrote our stories, and those who passed them on by word of mouth. Those who have celebrated Seder before us, and who in each generation made the Exodus, slavery, and freedom come to life. May we be empowered to add life and new meaning to our Seder, remembering those who continue in slavery today, and being inspired to not just talk the talk, but to walk the walk of freedom, and to fight for others to enjoy freedom too.

**PASSING ON TRADITIONS... SERACH BAT ASHER**

Alternative Seder symbols are not as unusual today as they were twenty years ago. From Oranges on the Seder plate (from Susannah Heschel, to symbolize the fruitfulness of the community when all are included) to Miriams' cup (which according to the learned Annette Boeckler at Leo Baeck College has much older roots than we often give credit to, to olives to hope for peace and freedom in Israel. As a rabbinic student my Midrash teacher suggested I explore the figure of Serach Bat Asher for an essay, and she has been providing me with inspiration ever since. She is someone I would love to see brought into the Seder because I think she represents something very compelling about Pesach.  
  
The first mention of her is in Genesis in a big long list of names of those who travelled down to Egypt with Jacob to be reunited with Joseph. We are told the names of all the sons that go down to Egypt, and their sons who went with them. It must have been an impressive caravan. But in the midst of this long list, we hear about the sons of Asher:

*And the sons of Asher; Jimnah, and Ishvah, and Isui, and Beriah, and Serach their sister; and the sons of Beriah; Heber, and Malchiel (Gen 46:17).*  
  
It did not escape the beady eye of the Rabbis’ that this mention of a sister was strange. Generational lines in the Bible do occasionally mention women, but not often, and in these lists she is the only female other than the matriarchs and Dinah (Jacobs' only daughter), so there must have been some significance to Serach. We do hear about her once more in Torah (and the previous mention is cited again in Chronicles), though we are not told much more. In Numbers 26 a census is taken of the Israelites in the desert, to see who would be able to fight and aid in conquering Canaan. The census is taken, and important names in the tribes are recorded. In verse 46 we hear “And the name of the daughter of Asher was Serach”. So, we know who Serachs' father and brothers were. But this mention of Serach in Numbers suggested to the Rabbis and writers of Midrash, that not only did she go down to Egypt with Jacob, but she also left Egypt with the Exodus, some 400 years later.   
  
For the Rabbis, these 2 mentions were the starting point for a wonderful narrative around Serach. She joins a small group of men and women who are considered to have never died, and she becomes a tool of the Rabbis, who used her in Midrashim to fill in gaps in stories, for example an anonymous woman in 2 Samuel 20 is named as Serach. In this way, a rich life tapestry is woven for Serach, with no need for modern novels to bring her to life (though I do think she would be a great candidate for such a work!) The first question the Rabbis needed to answer is what on earth she did to merit such a long life. So the Rabbis ascribe Serach the task of informing Jacob that Joseph is still alive. The original account doesn't mention much of anything, let alone Serach, but in Midrash it is explained that the brothers feared the news might shock Jacob to death, and so Serach delicately delivers the news of Josephs' presence in Egypt in song, and enables him to take it on board gently. Jacob blesses her saying ‘if this is true, the bearer of the news shall live forever’ (Midrash HaGadol 46:25).  
  
Serach also helps to solve a riddle left to us in Exodus, when we learn that Josephs' bones were taken out of Egypt with the Israelites. How did they know where to find them? Serach showed Moses of course! As she was there when Joseph would have been buried, and when his coffin left Egypt with the Exodus (Sotah 13a), she begins to provide a generational link between those who came down to Egypt, and those who left. In a similar vein she is said to have provided the prophetic proof that Moses was the leader that the slaves had been awaiting. In all of these tales she is the key bearer of information, and a link from one generation to another. The Rabbis suggest that Serach must have been a woman of incredible integrity and merit to warrant such an honor, but what is fascinating is that a woman so closely linked to the exodus story, and who is such a key transmitter of information from generation to generation, gets no mention in the Haggadah, the text that tries to do exactly what Serach does, according to tradition.

Serachs' presence through Jewish time does not end in the Tanakh, and she even pops up in the Rabbinic period itself, where we read in a collection of Rabbinic sermons from sometime around the 6th century (Pesikta de Rav-Kahana 11:13):  
*Rabbi Yochanan was sitting and expounding, how the waters were made into a wall for Israel. Rabbi Yochanan explained they were like opaque walls. Serach the daughter of Asher grew angry and said, “I was there and they were like nets”.*

So not only is Serach a key transmitter of inter-generational information, she is permitted to contradict a Rabbi in her transmission of how it really was when they crossed the Red Sea! Few women are given such privilege in Rabbinic Literature, and those that do, such as Beruriah, have been known to meet rather nasty ends!  
  
But what was Serachs' end? There is a synagogue cemetery in [Istfahan,](http://www.iajgsjewishcemeteryproject.org/iran/linjan-see-pir-bakran-and-isfahan.html) Iran, that is named in her honor and claims to have her grave located in their midst . In the Rabbinic tradition, however, no burial place was necessary for her, because she is one of only 10 or 11 people who is said to have not died, but to have entered paradise (or the Garden of Eden) alive (Midrash Avot, Otzar ha-Midrashim). This was the result of Jacob’s blessing, and allows her to be present throughout Jewish time. This meritorious woman, who has appeared at crucial moments in Jewish History to perform righteous and important deeds, and who has been the holder and giver of oral tradition, does not die, but continues indefinitely, and could, potentially be called upon to tell us how things really were again. Perhaps next to Elijah’s' cup (who also never died) we should have a Cos Serach, a cup of Serach.  
  
Unfortunately we will not live forever. But, like Serach, we are all important as links in the chain of Tradition. We all have Serachs' power to pass something meaningful onto the next generation, as gently as Serach did with Jacob, or as forcefully as she did with Rabbi Yochanan. Pesach asks us to hand on something of importance, meaning and joy to the next generation. Perhaps Serach will appear to help us, but in case she doesn’t, all of us will have to learn and explore for ourselves, to ensure that the next generation have something they also feel able to hand on. May something powerful and freeing be transmitted to you, so that you might pass it on.  
  
**2012 addendum: Having just been asked how to bring Serach into the Seder, I would suggest, introducing a *kos* (cup of) Serach, next to the *kos* Eliyahu - as  their lack of death is shared there is an obvious parallel, and emphasize her story as a reminder of why it's important for us to have an oral tradition, by perhaps jumping from her story to recollections from older participants of the Sedarim of their childhood.**

**MIRIAM’S CUP: A Ritual for Adoptive Mothers of Chinese Daughters**

Shared by Rabbi Susan Schnur

Only you—adoptive moms and adopted daughters—know what ritual feels right for your circumstances, but here’s one possibility for mothers. After the parsley (symbol of rebirth) is dipped in salty water (symbol of tears), raise Miriam’s Cup and recite the following:

Miriam’s Cup, brimming with water, reminds us that [Moses](http://www.ritualwell.org/glossary/4/letterm#term288) has two mothers: Yocheved, his birth mother, and Bithia, his adoptive one, daughter of Pharaoh. Moses’ sister Miriam understood that sometimes it takes tandem mothers to create and rear a child, that neither Yocheved nor Bithia could do it on her own; each needed the other.

And so when Moses was three months old, and Yocheved had woven a little ark and lined it with bitumen and nestled her child inside and pushed it off into the Nile — that self-same river in which Pharaoh decreed “every Hebrew boy be drowned” — well, then, Miriam hid herself among thickets of papyrus, at a distance, the way Chinese birth mothers do when they place their babies inside lotus roots or celery leaves, or in a crowded market or on a doorstep, weeping until a stranger finds the package and exclaims, “Whose beautiful child?”

Indeed, Pharaoh’s daughter exclaimed exactly this, and it was she who named the baby Moses, explaining, “I drew him out of water.” And Bithia adopted Moses, as Miriam — the prophetess — knew she would, and Bithia gave him life, and a feeling for his other mother, and she gave him privilege and a bicultural mission.

My daughter’s other mother, I thank you. I do not know your name. I do not know you. You do not know me. We will never know each other. But we needed each other to create and love and nurture this child. I pray that you have found comfort and blessing.

You abound in blessings, God, creator and nurturer of the universe, who sustains us with living water. May we, like the children of [Israel](http://www.ritualwell.org/glossary/4/letteri#term234) leaving Egypt, be guarded and nursed and kept alive in the wilderness, and may You give us wisdom to understand that the journey itself holds the promise of redemption. AMEN.

**A LETTER TO ALL THE LOST DAUGHTERS OF CHINA**  
by Anchee Min

I feel connected to you, orphans adopted from China. The Yangtze River runs in our blood…. We are all females, Chinese females, the kind an old saying describes as “grass born to be stepped on.”

Why is it the girls who are lost? Don’t take it personally. Please understand that Chinese women

are cultivated to suffer. Giving away a daughter to someone, a childless sibling or a great aunt who is in need of caring, was considered a virtue. Girls were presents, companions, kitchen-hands, bed-mates, baby-making machines…. China is an agricultural country where hard labor is a means of survival—a man can carry 300 pounds of soil while a woman 150. See my point?

When I was five, my mother was pitied every time we went out. It was because she had three daughters. “Look, a string of crabs!”

…In 1995 I helped launch a movement called “Mothers, Save Your Daughters.” It started with a report…about a couple who murdered five of their infant daughters in the hope of gaining a son. The news shattered me. I believe that if only that couple had had education, the killing wouldn’t have happened. They were peasants and illiterate; they were not in touch with their consciences.

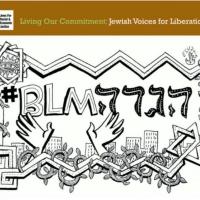
There are struggles of course. How can a mother not [struggle] after she carried you months in her body? You might be the result of her hesitation. She couldn’t do it; her heart opposed her and her hands shook. So she thought of an alternative. If a child is strong enough to endure, she might escape her fate.

Each of your birth mothers was not sure, but she wanted to do her best for you for the last time. She might have traveled as far as her money allowed her, to a richer area and a busier market where she would lay you down and hide you…. For her you will forever be a “broken arm hidden in her sleeve.”

Oh, how I wish your Chinese birth mothers could read this. They would be comforted, relieved, and released from nightmares that haunt them.

**#BLACKLIVESMATTER HAGGADAH SUPPLEMENT**

Shared by Jews for Racial and Economic Justice



We gather on Passover to recall a moment of resistance and liberation in the history of our people. The story of Exodus reminds us of the transformative power that our people wield when we confront oppression.

This summer we witnessed the deaths of Michael Brown and Eric Garner at the hands of the police; in the months that followed the #BlackLivesMatter movement blossomed from that stained soil and swept the country. From Ferguson to Staten Island, Black people resisted the discriminatory and abusive policing targeting them. #BlackLivesMatter, a term coined by activists Alicia Garza, Patrice Cullors & Opal Tometi, demands that we recognize the full humanity and precious value

of every individual Black life — that we cherish and fight for all people of African heritage.

In this spirit, Jews For Racial & Economic Justice collaborated with inspiring activists and leaders from around the country to produce this [haggadah](http://www.ritualwell.org/glossary/4/letterh#term216) supplement. In it you will find additions to the [Seder](http://www.ritualwell.org/glossary/4/letters#term326) rituals & haggadah text intended to highlight the role we believe Jews must play in confronting racism and abusive policing. Each piece of the supplement may provoke discussion, reflection or even contention. We hope that this wrestling, thinking and feeling — in the great tradition of our people—will be a powerful part of your Seder and will lead to meaningful action for justice.

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**An Orange on Plate for Women — And Spit Out Seeds of Hate**

[Susannah Heschel](http://forward.com/author/susannah-heschel/)

Passover was high drama in my childhood. Preparations began weeks in advance, with meticulous scrubbing, shopping and organizing. Strong emotions came out in the days before the holiday, when every crumb of hametz had to be removed, and we had to tread very carefully. One mistake could bring calamity. When we finally sat down for the Seder, my mother would always claim that only women understood the Exodus, having slaved away in the kitchen for weeks and then been finally liberated when the holiday began, but too exhausted to enjoy it.

I love the Haggadah, the Hebrew text as well as all the special actions we take at the Seder; eating, drinking, reclining, discussing and debating. In my home, we immerse ourselves in the Haggadah in Hebrew and also in the centuries of commentary on each passage. While we carefully follow all the traditions, we also recognize that over the centuries, Jews have often added new customs to Passover.

At the height of the Jewish feminist movement of the 1980s, inspired by the abundant new customs expressing women’s viewpoints and experiences, I started placing an orange on the Seder plate.

At an early point in the Seder, when stomachs were starting to growl, I asked each person to take a segment of the orange, make the blessing over fruit and eat the segment in recognition of gay and lesbian Jews and of widows, orphans, Jews who are adopted and all others who sometimes feel marginalized in the Jewish community.

When we eat that orange segment, we spit out the seeds to repudiate homophobia and we recognize that in a whole orange, each segment sticks together. Oranges are sweet and juicy and remind us of the fruitfulness of gay and lesbian Jews and of the homosociality that has been such an important part of Jewish experience, whether of men in yeshivas or of women in the Ezrat Nashim.

Strangely, I discovered some years ago that an urban legend was circulating: Strangers told me they placed an orange on their Seder plate because of an incident in Miami Beach in which a man angrily denounced me when I gave a lecture, saying that a woman belongs on the bimah of a synagogue no more than an orange belongs on the Seder plate.

That incident never happened! Instead, my custom had fallen victim to a folktale process in which my original intention was subverted. My idea of the orange was attributed to a man, and my goal of affirming lesbians and gay men was erased.

Moreover, the power of the custom was subverted: By now, women are on the bimah, so there is no great political courage in eating an orange, because women ought to be on the bimah.

For years, I have known about women whose scientific discoveries were attributed to men, or who had to publish their work under a male pseudonym. That it happened to me makes me realize all the more how important it is to recognize how deep and strong patriarchy remains, and how important it is for us to celebrate the contributions of gay and lesbian Jews, and all those who need to be liberated from marginality to centrality. And Passover is the right moment to ensure freedom for all Jews.

Susannah Heschel is a professor of Jewish studies at Dartmouth College.

**FOR THOSE STILL ENSLAVED, TOMATO SYMBOLIZES SOLIDARITY**

[Joshua Lesser](http://forward.com/author/joshua-lesser/)Mar 11, 2013(Updated Mar 14, 2013)

Last year I put a tomato on my Seder plate. I invite you this year to consider doing the same.

The retelling of our liberation story at Passover is powerful, but we deepen the sense of the story through tasting it symbolically. We ingest the bitterness of slavery through the maror . The saltiness of the tears of oppression stings our throats. The haste of leaving Egypt is baked into the crisp matzo. The earthiness of the parsley guides us to savor the promise of spring. Our Seder plate helps us literally digest our story.

The symbolic struggle told by the Passover story is so relevant to so many contemporary stories of injustice. It makes sense that we find ways to demonstrate this connection symbolically on our Seder plate. The modern-day slavery that we find in our country, in our own backyards, and of which we reap the benefits at our neighborhood grocery store, is the connection that feels most present to me.

After a trip with to the tomato fields of Immokalee, Fla., to meet with the farm workers who are a part of the Coalition of Immokalee Workers and their partner, Interfaith Action, I added a tomato onto my Seder plate to remind me of this modern-day slavery.

We gathered to bear witness, to learn from the workers and to strategize about what our communities could do to help change a broken system that exploits the most vulnerable. We opened our eyes and heard the stories that brought to life the facts.

[Can you recall any other items on our tables which remind us of the hardship for those who plant , reap and provide our foodstuffs?]

# SLICE OF BREAD FOR LGBT JEWS AND ALL THE EXCLUDED

[Rebecca Alpert](http://forward.com/author/rebecca-alpert/) March 17, 2013

Jews who want to challenge the community use foods as a way symbolizing those challenges on the most heartfelt of Jewish rituals: the Passover Seder. Each day, we will examine a different food and what it means.

In 1997 I wrote a book with the title [“Like Bread on the Seder Plate: Jewish Lesbians and the Transformation of Tradition.”](http://www.amazon.com/Like-Bread-Seder-Plate-Transformation/dp/0231096615) The book was about how we Jewish lesbians had begun to claim our place in the Jewish community by reinterpreting traditions, as the half of the title after the colon suggests. But the provocative words before the colon had a different purpose. Saying that lesbians identified with what it would feel like to be “bread on the Seder plate” was meant to draw attention to how unwelcome they felt in the Jewish world at that time.

For the record, neither at my own Seder nor at any Seder conducted by any lesbian I know was bread ever placed on the Seder plate. The idea was so alien that my editor could not even find a Jewish person on staff to donate a Seder plate for the simulated image on the book’s cover. (I shipped them my own Seder plate after being assured that bread never touched it.) I will admit that the year the book came out, we did put it on the Seder plate, but that’s as far as it went.

So if the purpose was not to make a ritual of bread on the Seder plate, what’s this all about? Like many things Jewish, it started with a story.

In 1979 a rebbetzin from the local chapter of Chabad in Berkeley gave a talk at the local Hillel about women in Halacha. When someone asked about lesbians, she (correctly) described sex between women as a minor transgression in Jewish law and likened it to eating bread during the week of Passover. The Jewish lesbians who heard her took the analogy to heart, and discussed putting a crust of bread on their Seder plate that year to symbolize their anger at feeling like outsiders in the Jewish community.

This story traveled far and wide and became part of several lesbian Haggadot. Like all good Jewish stories, it was transformed into a midrash about a “ Febrente Rebbe ” who declared, “There is as much place for lesbians in Judaism as for leavened bread at the Seder table,” and about the group of women who, in response, defiantly added a crust of bread to the Seder plate to make their presence felt in a world where they were being told they did not belong.

The world has changed radically since that time, and lesbians have been welcomed into the liberal Jewish world with open arms. And while there are still “ Febrente Rebbes ,” there are also Orthodox lesbians. While this transgressive tale contributed to raising awareness and making these changes happen, one might argue that the problem is solved and the bread no longer serves a purpose.

But today there are other groups of Jews (transmen and women, Jews of color, patrilineals and anti-Zionists, for example) who seek a place at the Passover table and don’t always feel welcome. I commend this ritual to them.

Rebecca Alpert is a Reconstructionist rabbi and associate professor of religion at Temple University.

# A LOCK AND KEY ON THE SEDER PLATE

By Rabbi Melissa Klein, Rabbi Joanna Katz, Rabbi Julie Greenberg, Rabbi Jo Hirschmann, Susan Kaplow, Rabbi Sue Levi Elwell

This year, we add a padlock and a key to our [seder](http://www.ritualwell.org/glossary/4/letters#term326) plate.

Those of us who are blessed to live in our own homes tend to associate locks and keys with protection and access. Many of us have homes that keep us safe and that allow us to go in and out as we please. In contrast, for more than two million individuals who are incarcerated in the United States — the majority of whom are people of color — the lock represents the reality of being locked up and then locked out. Upon leaving prison with a felony conviction, these Americans “enter a hidden underworld of legalized discrimination and permanent social exclusion” (Michelle Alexander, The New Jim Crow, p. 13). They are locked out of jobs, housing opportunities, and in many places, voting rights. In Michelle Alexander’s words, “Today a criminal freed from prison has scarcely more rights, and arguably less respect, than a freed slave or a black person living ‘free’ in Mississippi at the height of Jim Crow” (The New Jim Crow, p. 141).

 We place the lock and key on our seder plate tonight to ally ourselves with those who are behind bars, with those who are labelled as felons in the community, and with the parents, children, and other family members of those who are locked up and locked out. The key represents our commitment, as Jews who know a history of oppression, to join the movement to end mass incarceration in the United States. The key reminds us of our potential to partner with the Source of Liberation to unlock a more promising, dignified future for us all.

The task may seem overwhelming, yet each of us can do our part to help transform the criminal justice system here in the United States. The first step to transformation is awareness, and thus we ask questions and learn from one another this seder night.

This supplement is a work-in-progress. Suggestions and feedback on using it at your seder should be sent to: Rabbi Melissa Klein, [malkahbinah@gmail.com](mailto:malkahbinah@gmail.com).

# EGG-SODUS & THE CIRCLE OF LIFE

Shared by [Chaplain Daniel Coleman](http://www.ritualwell.org/user/1840)



There is an ancient tradition to start "shulchan orech," the much anticipated [seder](http://www.ritualwell.org/glossary/4/letters#term326) meal, with an egg\* (a symbol of life/fertility) dipped in salt water (a symbol of stagnation/death). This reminds us of the circle of life, and that endings often mark beginnings. The seder egg thematically connects to the egg served at the seudat havra’ah—meal of recuperation (i.e., the meal served to mourners following burial) and also the [seudah](http://www.ritualwell.org/glossary/4/letters#term331) hamafseket—the meal prior to the start of [Tisha B’Av](http://www.ritualwell.org/glossary/4/lettert#term370) that features an egg dipped in ashes.

Moments of personal and communal celebration are often tinged with intense sorrow due to the desire to share the moment with a loved one who died or is unable to be present. Our tradition creates opportunities and symbols to aid us in acknowledging our loss. On seder night the egg is our symbol, giving us permission to grieve on a night of celebration.

Some might find one (or both) of the following readings a helpful starting point for their own prayer or meditation prior to the start of their seder meal. You may wish to invite others present to answer "amen" after your recitation or to add their own prayer, metaphor, hope, pun, or reflection.

While holding, viewing, or dipping the egg:

**Reading 1**:  
Having experienced the personal/communal loss of \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ (pause to allow others to consider a loss) I/we/they have been swimming in a sea of grief, sometimes feeling as if I/we/they were drowning. We are about to dip an egg into ocean-like saltwater, and ask You to fulfill the words of the prophets “May Adonai Elohim wipe away tears from every face.” As we grieve, give us courage to emerge from our protective shells to embrace the love and support from others, while reminding us of Your protection and Your loving presence during moments when we feel distant and vulnerable.

**Reading 2**:  
Holy One, tonight we gather to celebrate a new season of hope and renewal, just as You gave a new lease of hope to our ancestors who had suffered bitterly in Egypt—a place of narrowness and constraint, a place where our individuality and creative expression were stifled. Help us as individuals and a community to incubate creativity and nurture new ideas. Help us to give birth to new life and energy that flourishes physically, emotionally and spiritually. At times in our history You openly stretched out Your hand, and at others You held back. Grant us the wisdom to know when, how and if, to intervene in the lives of our children, parents and friends—and when to seek support for ourselves. Provide us with a glimpse of our Promised Land and the comfort of seeing tears of celebration on the horizon, fulfilling the assurance (Psalm 126:5) that “Those who sow with tears, shall reap with joy.”

\*Eggs play an implicit component in healing rituals, e.g., certain communities organize gatherings of 40 people for challah baking, others encourage spouses to pledge to increase the frequency of marital relations, and still others ask God to join and move heaven and earth to revive a sick person.

***WHAT WOULD YOU ADD TO THE SEDER THIS YEAR? (Why?)***

1. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)