

[Jews Around the Globe](#)

Sephardic, Ashkenazic, Mizrahi and Ethiopian Jews

The Jewish world is more ethnically and racially diverse than many people realize.

By [Rabbi Rachel M. Solomin](#)

For most Americans, traditional Jewish culture summons up images of Passover seders with steaming bowls of matzah ball soup, black-hatted, pale-skinned Hasidic men, and Yiddish-speaking bubbes (grandmothers) and zeydes (grandfathers). In reality, these snapshots represent only one Jewish ethnic group — Ashkenazi — of many.

Shared Jewish history, rituals, laws, and values unify an international Jewish community. However, the divergent histories of Jewish communities and their contacts with other cultural influences distinguish Jewish ethnic groups from one another, giving each a unique way of being Jewish. In addition, thanks to intermarriage, conversion and interracial adoption growing numbers of American Jews are of color and have Latino, Asian or African-American ancestry.

Worldwide, Jews from distinct geographic regions vary greatly in their diet, language, dress, and folk customs. Most pre-modern Diaspora communities are categorized into three major ethnic groups (in Hebrew, sometimes called *eidot*, “communities”):

- **Ashkenazim**, the Jews of Germany and Northern France (in Hebrew, Ashkenaz)
- **Sephardim**, the Jews of Iberia (in Hebrew, Sepharad) and the Spanish diasporam,
- **Mizrachi (m)** or Oriental Jews
- **Ethiopian** Jews
- **Jews who have immigrated long ago or recently** to Southeast Asia, Central and South America, for example

Ashkenazi Jews

The Jewish ethnic identity most readily recognized by North Americans — the culture of [matzah balls](#), black-hatted Hasidim, and Yiddish — originated in medieval Germany. Although strictly speaking, “Ashkenazim” refers to Jews of Germany, the term has come to refer more broadly to Jews from Central and Eastern Europe. Jews [first reached the interior of Europe](#) by following trade routes along waterways during the eighth and ninth centuries.

Eventually, the vast majority of Ashkenazim [relocated to the Polish Commonwealth](#) (today’s Poland, Lithuania, Latvia, Ukraine, and Belarus), where princes welcomed their skilled and educated workforce. The small preexistent Polish Jewish community’s customs were displaced by the Ashkenazic prayer order, customs, and Yiddish language.

Jewish life and learning thrived in northeastern Europe. The yeshiva culture of Poland, Russia, and Lithuania produced a constant stream of new talmudic scholarship. In 18th-century Germany, the [Haskalah](#) movement advocated for modernization, introducing the modern denominations and institutions of secular Jewish culture.

Although the [first American Jews](#) were Sephardic, today Ashkenazim are the most populous ethnic group in North America. The modern religious denominations developed in Ashkenazic countries, and therefore most North American synagogues use the Ashkenazic liturgy.

Sephardic Jews

Many historical documents recount a large population of Jews in Spain during the early years of the Common Era. Their cultural distinctiveness is characterized in Roman writings as a “corrupting” influence. Later, with the arrival of Christianity, Jewish legal authorities became worried about assimilation and maintaining Jewish identity. Despite these concerns, by the seventh century Sephardim had flourished, beginning a time known as the “[Golden Age of Spain](#).”

During this period, Sephardic Jews reached the highest echelons of secular government and the military. Many Jews gained renown in non-Jewish circles as poets, scholars, and physicians. New forms of Hebrew poetry arose, and talmudic and [halakhic](#) (Jewish law) study took on great sophistication.

[Ladino](#), the Judeo-Spanish language, unified Jews throughout the peninsula in daily life, ritual, and song. Ladino, a blend of medieval Spanish with significant loan words from Hebrew, Arabic, and Portuguese, had both a formal, literary dialect, and numerous daily, spoken dialects which evolved during the immigrations of Sephardic Jews to new lands.

The Sephardic Golden Age ended when Christian princes consolidated their kingdoms and reestablished Christian rule throughout Spain and Portugal. In 1492, King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella [expelled all Jews from Spain](#); soon after, a similar law exiled Jews from Portugal. Sephardic Jews immigrated to Amsterdam, North Africa, and the Middle East.

Others established new communities in the Americas or converted publicly to Christianity, sometimes secretly maintaining a Jewish life. These converts (known in Ladino as *conversos* and in Hebrew as *anusim*, forced converts) often maintained their Judaism in secret. In the 21st century, there are still people in both Europe and the Americas who are discovering and reclaiming their Jewish ancestry.

Wherever Sephardic Jews traveled, they brought with them their unique ritual customs, language, arts, and architecture. Sephardic synagogues often retain the influence of Islam in their architecture by favoring geometric, calligraphic, and floral decorative motifs. Although they may align with the Ashkenazic religious denominations (usually Orthodoxy), the denominational identity of Sephardic synagogues is, in most cases, less strong than their ethnic identity.

At home, Ladino songs convey family traditions at the Shabbat table, although [Ladino is rapidly disappearing](#) from daily use. Sephardic Jews often maintain unique holiday customs, such as a [seder for Rosh Hashanah](#) that includes a series of special foods eaten as omens for a good new year and the [eating of rice and legumes](#) (kitniyot) on Passover.

Mizrahi Jews

Although often confused with Sephardic Jews (because they share many religious customs), Mizrahi Jews have a separate heritage. Mizrahi (in Hebrew, “Eastern” or “Oriental”) Jews come from [Middle Eastern ancestry](#). Their earliest communities date from Late Antiquity, and the oldest and largest of these communities were in modern Iraq (Babylonia), Iran (Persia), and Yemen.

Today, most Mizrahi Jews live either in Israel or the United States. In their new homes, Mizrahi Jews are more likely than other Jews to maintain particularly strong ties with others from their family’s nation of origin. Thus, it is not uncommon to find a specifically Persian or Bukharan synagogue. Likewise, Mizrahi Jews are not united by a single Jewish language; each subgroup spoke its own tongue.

The unique Mizrahi culture has [penetrated Israeli mainstream](#) society in recent years. Yemenite music entered the pop scene with [Ofra Haza](#), who blended traditional instruments, rhythms, and lyrics with modern flair. Yemenite silversmiths create sacred objects used by Jews of all backgrounds. “Mizrahi” restaurants — where large platters of skewered meat and breads and bowl upon bowl of salads and condiments are shared by a group — have become fashionable gathering places in Israel.

Despite these trends, Jewish ethnic barriers remain strong. In Israel, Ashkenazic Jews still dominate leadership roles in public institutions. For much of Israel’s history, Sephardic and Mizrahi Jews were disproportionately underrepresented in the government. Yet now, they [make up more than half](#) of the population.

Ethiopian Jews

A Jewish community in Ethiopia — the *Beta Israel* (House of Israel) — has existed for at least 15 centuries.

Because of low literacy levels, a tendency to rely on oral traditions and nomadic lifestyles among most Ethiopians prior to the 20th century, historic material about this community is scant and unreliable.

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, tens of thousands of Ethiopian Jews emigrated to Israel, leaving behind a very small community. [Learn more about Ethiopian Israelis here.](#)

Jewish Diversity Still Matters to all of us today, everywhere

Many Jews today live a multi-layered Jewish existence. Some Ethiopian Jews attend Hasidic yeshivas, and some Sephardic Jews enjoy matzah ball soup at their Passover seders. Jews from all backgrounds often borrow each other’s cultural traditions. Many populous Jewish communities have a diverse range of ethnicities, and that diversity presents itself even within individual families.

Though some of these cultural divides have healed — partially due to the increase in marriages among members of different ethnic groups — ethnicity is still highly relevant in Israeli society. For example, the public school curriculum over-represents Ashkenazic cultural achievements and history. At least one study recently reported that Mizrahi Jews are still half as likely to attend universities as Ashkenazi Jews.

Massive economic disparities exist among different communities, since Mizrahi immigrants frequently were brought to Israel by emergency airlifts, arriving with minimal property or wealth. Partially as a way to combat these discrepancies, Israeli political parties are often formed along ethnic lines, such as Shas (Sephardic), Agudas Israel (Ashkenazic), and Atid Ehad (Ethiopian Jews).

Some Jews protect their ethnic identity in other ways. Religious Jews will follow the customs of their ancestors in both their homes and synagogues. Others consciously study their traditional Jewish language, whether Yiddish, Ladino, or Farsi (Persian) and join social clubs based on their ethnic heritage. In North America, where secular schools often celebrate multiculturalism, Jewish supplemental and day schools have begun to include Jewish ethnic diversity in their curricula. Indeed, Jewish ethnicity becomes a way to trace the course of Jewish history.

Instances of Sephardic usage

Code	Description
L	Sephardic usage derived from Lurianic Kabbalah (some of these are accepted by Greek and Turkish Sephardim and Mizrahi Jews but not by Western communities such as the Spanish and Portuguese Jews)
P	Sephardic usage inherited from Palestine while the Ashkenazic usage is Babylonian
B	Sephardic usage conforming to the Babylonian while the Ashkenazic usage is Palestinian
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sephardim do not put on tefillin during Ḥol ha-Mo`ed (the middle days of festivals). L • They say only one blessing to cover the tefillin of the arm and the head, rather than one for each. • They wind the tefillin strap anti-clockwise (for a right-handed person). The form of the knot and of the wrappings round the hand is also different from that of the Ashkenazim. • Mezuzot are placed vertically rather than slanting, except among Spanish and Portuguese Jews in western countries. • In the tzitzit, each winding loops through the preceding one, and the pattern of windings between the knots is either 10-5-6-5 (in some communities, L) or 7-8-11-13 (in others, per Shulḥan `Arukh).^[14] • The script used in Torah scrolls, tefillin and mezuzot is different from the Ashkenazic and nearer to the printed square characters.^[15] • In many of the prayers, they preserve Mishnaic patterns of vocalization and have mostly not altered them to conform with the rules of Biblical Hebrew: examples are "Naqdishakh" (not "Naqdishkha") and "ha-Gefen" (not "ha-Gafen").^[16] • The second blessing before the Shema begins "Ahavat `Olam" (and not "Ahavah Rabbah") in all services. • In the summer months they use the words <i>Morid ha-Ṭal</i> in the second blessing of the `Amidah. P • The <i>Qedushah</i> of the morning service begins "Naqdishakh ve-Na`ariṣakh", and the <i>Qedushah</i> of musaf (the additional service for Shabbat and festivals) begins "Keter Yitenu L'kha". • There are separate summer and winter forms for the "Birkat ha-Shanim". • There is no Birkat ha-Kohanim in minḥah (the afternoon service) on any day except Yom Kippur (Ashkenazim also say it on the afternoons of fast days). P • The last blessing of the `Amidah is "Sim Shalom" (and not "Shalom Rav") in all services. • They are permitted to sit for Qaddish. • Adon Olam has an extra stanza (and is longer still in Oriental communities^[17]). • In many communities (mostly Mizrahi rather than Sephardi proper) the Torah scroll is kept in a <i>tiq</i> (wooden or metal case) instead of a velvet mantle. • They lift the Torah scroll and display it to the congregation before the Torah reading rather than after.^[18] B • Most Sephardim regard it as permissible to eat Kitniyot (grains and seeds such as rice or beans) on Passover. • Sephardim only say blessings over the first and third cups of Passover wine, instead of over all four. • The items on the Seder plate are arranged in a fixed hexagonal order (except among Spanish and Portuguese Jews: this usage is increasingly popular among Ashkenazim). L

- [Selihot](#) are said throughout the month of Elul.
- Sephardic [Rishonim](#) (medieval scholars) reject the customs of [Tashlikh](#) and [Kapparot](#), though they were re-introduced by the [Lurianic](#) school (Spanish and Portuguese Jews still do not observe them).
- Only one set of [Hanukkah](#) lights is lit in each household.
- The *shammash* is lit together with the other [Hanukkah](#) lights, instead of being used to light them (which would be impractical, given that the lights are traditionally oil lamps rather than candles).
- The laws of [shehitah](#) are in some respects stricter and in other respects less strict than those of Ashkenazim (modern [kashrut](#) authorities try to ensure that all meat complies with both standards).
- Many Sephardim avoid eating fish with milk, as in Eastern Mediterranean countries this is widely considered to be unhealthy (by non-Jews as well as Jews). Ashkenazim argue that this practice originated from a mistake in the Bet Yosef, and that the prohibition really concerned the eating of fish with meat.^[19]

Bitter, sweet and unusual symbols on the seder plate

By [J. Correspondent](#) | April 14, 2000

In an increasingly prepackaged and expensive age, there is at least one aspect of the seder that requires us to be homemade and down-to-earth. That is the seder plate.

Most of our seder rituals were established in the Mishnah, a collection of rabbinic writings on Jewish law that was edited in 200 C.E. But the origins of the seder plate seem to be later, perhaps from the fifth century. The first mention is found in a commentary from around 1000 C.E.

The commentary describes a basket that was placed on the table containing all the symbolic foods of the seder. Many Sephardim still use a basket today, rather than a plate.

Here are the history and customs of these symbols of Pesach.

Three Matzot

Three matzot are stacked together and separated from each other by a cloth or a compartment. The matzot are either placed under the seder plate or beside it.

They represent the two "breads" that are used for Shabbat and festivals, as well as a third "bread." This third piece is the lechem oni, the bread of affliction. This is also the matzah that is broken in half. One part represents our suffering and our past; the other part, which is hidden as the afikomen, is a symbol of redemption.

Maror

The most commonly used bitter herbs are horseradish — whole slices or grated — and romaine lettuce. The bitter herbs remind us of our bitter times in Egypt. They are also cleansing foods that open the sinuses and tear ducts and purify the blood as a springtime tonic.

Charoset

Charoset is perhaps the favorite food of the seder evening. It is a sweet mixture of fruits and nuts that the maror is dipped into. There is no blessing for the charoset because it is part of the maror ritual.

Charoset reminds us of the mortar that was used to hold the bricks together when we were slaves in Egypt. When sweet charoset is mixed with the bitter maror, it reminds us of the bitter-sweet nature of life.

The ingredients in the charoset are influenced by the cultures in which Jews lived. Ashkenazi charoset consists of apples, nuts, cinnamon and wine. Sephardi charoset varies, but can include dates, almonds, sesame seeds, raisins and apricots.

Z'roah

The z'roah is a roasted bone with some meat on it. It reminds us of the *z'roah netuyah*, the outstretched arm with which God took us out of slavery. The z'roah represents the Pesach lamb sacrifice that each family offered on Passover eve in the Holy Temple in Jerusalem.

After the lamb was slaughtered, the meat was roasted and eaten by the family.

Ashkenazi Jews no longer eat roasted lamb on Passover because of the loss of the Temple, but many Sephardim do eat lamb.

Some people use a roasted lamb shoulder for the z'roah on the seder plate, while others use a roasted chicken neck, so as not to confuse it with the Passover sacrifice. In vegetarian families, there is a custom to substitute a roasted beet or a "paschal yam" in place of the meat.

Baytza

The baytza is a hard-boiled, roasted egg that is used instead of another piece of meat, to remind us of the second sacrifice, the hagiga, which was offered at the Temple on each festival.

There are many thoughts as to why the egg was used. It is the food served after a funeral and is therefore a symbol of mourning for the Temple. It is round and reminds us of the wheel of fate that turns and brings us from our mourning into hope.

The egg is also a symbol of fertility, of birth and rebirth. Although we don't eat the z'roah or the baytza as sacrifices on Pesach, there are many people who serve hard-boiled eggs dipped in saltwater as a first course.

In some Sephardic homes, the roasted egg is eaten by a firstborn at the end of the meal, while standing behind a door. This gesture symbolizes gratitude that the firstborn of the Jews were saved.

Sometimes the baytza is given to an unmarried girl to eat to increase her good fortune in finding a husband. It is important to note that after hard-boiling the baytza, the ends of the egg are punctured before broiling it, so that it does not explode in the oven.

There is an old Sephardi tradition that states: The z'roah represents Moses and the quality of judgment. The baytza represents Aaron and the quality of kindness. And *dag*, a fish, is added to the seder plate to represent Miriam and the quality of modesty.

Karpas

The karpas is a vegetable that is not bitter, usually celery, parsley or boiled potato. It is customary to use the fresh greens of spring, which can include many kinds of herbs like cilantro and chives.

The boiled potato is an Eastern European custom, due to the cold climate, where the only fresh vegetables available were the sprouting potatoes in the root cellar. Karpas is the first food eaten after the kiddush — the blessing of the wine — and it is a symbol of the simplicity of life.

The greens are dipped in saltwater or cider vinegar that is placed in a bowl near the seder plate. Dipping the greens into the saltwater is a reminder of the tears we have shed in our suffering. It is also a reminder of the salty ocean, mother of all life on earth.

After the blessing over the karpas vegetable has been said, it is possible to nosh on vegetables throughout the rest of the seder and allow discussions to take place without unbearable hunger. Since it is an evening of dipping, some families place fresh vegetables around the table with tasty dips like guacamole and Russian dressing.

Seder Plate

The design of the seder plate is an opportunity for artistic imagination and beauty. Although one usually thinks of only one seder plate for the table, some people have the custom of making one for each family or for each person.

The seder plate is more than a ritual decoration. We eat from many of the foods on the plate and therefore it is functional as well as ceremonial. Many years ago, when I saw a photograph of a Yemenite seder in "A Feast of History," I had a deep realization.

The table was very simple and was covered with romaine lettuce and the symbolic foods of the seder plate. It suddenly occurred to me that the table was the plate. Since that time, I have covered our plastic tablecloth with romaine lettuce, fresh veggies and dips. Rather than worrying about fancy dishes, silver and crystal, I place a simple glass bowl and kiddush cup at each place setting.

When we enter the dining room, it feels like walking into a garden. The seder table is pregnant with greens. It becomes an edible reminder of our simple origins and the freedom of our imagination.

Orange

One of the gifts of our tradition is that we are able to interpret and expand the customs that have been handed down to us. One newer custom that has become very popular is the addition of an orange on the seder plate. This was a creative beginning to today's custom of adding to the Seder Plate with another lesson for the participants.

This was the result of an encounter that scholar Susannah Heschel had while delivering a talk. A man in the audience said that women had as much place on the bimah –the raised platform in the front of sanctuary — as an orange on the seder plate. Needless to say, Heschel's family instituted the custom of the orange that Pesach. The custom quickly gained popularity among feminists.

Passoverkill?

By Andrew Silow-Carroll

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 charoses (haroset). At some point we began adding chazeres, 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:

Orange: to honor the contributions of Jewish women. Others: inclusion of those who otherwise are marginalized and inappropriately part of our community and Seder.

Tomato: to show support exploited farmworkers

Olives: a symbol of peace between Israelis and Palestinians

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.

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.

Potato: Placed on the plate piping hot, it reminds you not to bring up certain topics with your in-laws, especially but not limited to the high cost of prescription drugs and the traffic since they built the new development.

Scallions: Persian and Kurdish Jews have a Passover custom of striking one another with scallions to symbolize the burdens of the Israelites. I like to put scallions on the seder plate to mock what sounds like a ridiculous and even dangerous custom.

Rhubarb: Uh-oh, you brought up the cost of drugs when I told you not to, and now Uncle Harry is going on and on about Obamacare. Nice job.

Prune: Doesn't symbolize anything, but believe me, you'll want one in the next few days.

Pineapple: Just as a pineapple starts out sweet and ends up causing cold sores, something something something about your cousin's boyfriend.

Banana: Reminds us that a man, too, can wash the damn dishes after the seder.

Which Seder Plate Item Are You?

The items on a seder plate each tell part of a larger story about freedom and renewal. Which piece of Passover is the best match to your personality? Take the quiz and find out where you fit into the “order” of things.

When a disagreement breaks out, your first instinct is to:

- A Bring the two sides toward common ground.
- B Suggest a new way of looking at the problem.
- C Shake your head and say, “Here we go again.”
- D Defend the side you agree with, even if it means getting dragged into the debate.
- E Be front-and-center! You thrive on the energy of a dispute.

Which type of historical figure would you most like to be?

- A A warrior, like a samurai or gladiator
- B A Renaissance painter
- C An American founding father
- D A brooding medieval philosopher
- E An explorer of nature, like John Muir

If you could be a room in your house, which would you be?

- A The front door, where I could make sure the house is safe
- B The back patio, surrounded by my garden plants
- C An office or art space where I could let my creative side loose
- D The kitchen, where everyone gathers together
- E The basement or somewhere else I could be alone

What kind of foods do you prefer?

- A Verdant, fresh plant-based dishes
- B Anything that boosts my immune system
- C The bitterer, the better
- D A mélange of different flavors
- E Anything that’s presented in a new, creative

Who’s your favorite character in the Passover story?

- A Pharaoh’s daughter, whose quick and creative thinking saved Moses’ life
- B Pharaoh—what can I say, I love a villain
- C Moses, who helped a group of slaves transform into a united people
- D Miriam, whose energy inspired a new song for the Jewish people to sing
- E God, who could not allow the Chosen People to be enslaved any longer

What's your favorite part of the Passover seder?

- A Contemplating the cruelty of a life of slavery
- B Reciting the 10 plagues with gratitude that the Israelites were protected
- C Talking about the renewal of springtime
- D When my family inserts our own unique traditions
- E Constructing and eating a Hillel sandwich

What kind of Passover guest are you?

- A Excited and filled with springtime joy
- B One who keeps the conversation flowing and everyone comfortable
- C Generous, ready to give up the last helping of your favorite dishes
- D Eager to create new memories with loved ones
- E A bit impatient to wrap up the seder and eat dinner

Which word best describes your personality?

- A Self-sacrificing
- B Creative
- C Vibrant
- D Stable
- E Pessimistic

Which of these jobs would you prefer?

- A Construction Worker
- B Farmer
- C Police Officer
- D Novelist
- E Like anyone would hire me?

Which of these songs speaks to you the most?

- A "Paint It, Black" by The Rolling Stones
- B "Come Together" by The Beatles
- C "(Everything I Do) I Do It For You" by Bryan Adams
- D "Sunshine on My Shoulders" by John Denver
- E "Unwritten" by Natasha Bedingfield

Karpas (Spring Greens)

Whether it's parsley, lettuce, or another leafy vegetable, the greens on the seder plate are as vibrant and alive as your personality. You see the world through fresh, vital eyes, and others admire you for your ability to find renewal in unexpected places. You love nothing more than basking in the sunshine, surrounded by living nature.

[Our Ever-Growing List of Seder Plate Additions](#)

Posted by Haggadot.com



Most of us know about the orange, Miriam's Cup, and even a beet in place of a shankbone for vegetarian-friendly seders. But have you heard about the pine cone, the coconut or the banana? Here's our growing list of every seder plate addition that we've seen on the site.

[A SECOND SEDER PLATE](#)

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](#)

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](#)

Temple Israel of Boston invites us to remember the mass incarceration crisis in America.

[AN ARTICHOKE](#)

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](#)

Kosher? No! But it is a great conversation starter about our reliance on oil and the effects of drilling.

[AN OLIVE](#)

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](#)

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](#)

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](#). 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](#).

[RUTH'S CUP](#)

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](#)

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](#)

Those who stand in solidarity with workers' rights issues ask us to add the tomato to consider the struggles of farm workers.

NEW SEDER SYMBOLS another, longer list

Passover celebrates the end of slavery for Jews in Egypt, so naturally much of the discussion centers around freedom and oppression. As part of this discussion, some Jews choose to add or substitute additional items that represent their political beliefs and spark conversation.

BAG OF RICE – inclusion of the Sefardim and Mizrahi 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 – 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

CRUST of BREAD – what the poor world-wide subsist on, and for them not a symbol

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

FAIR-TRADE CHOCOLATE – 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 BOX – not to forget the needs of the poor even in the midst of our celebration

SCALLIONS – used by Mizrahi 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](#) to draw your own symbols on the plate. And for something completely different, try [The 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

Passover customs and quirks vary tremendously between Ashkenazi, Sephardi

By [J. Correspondent](#) | April 14, 2000

“It doesn’t make sense,” a friend said recently. “I’m not a religious woman, yet on Pesach all I can eat is matzah and jam, while my Iraqi neighbor — a pious rabbi — eats corn, rice and bean salad and finishes it off with cake made from ground peanuts. Isn’t it time the Jews had one halachah, one legal code for everybody?”

This question comes up over and over again. Of all the differences in customs among different groups of Jews, and especially between Ashkenazim and Sephardim, those involving Pesach customs are the most striking.

The most basic difference between Sephardim and Ashkenazim pertains to kitniyot, which are eaten by Sephardim but not by Ashkenazi Jews. The literal translation of the word is “legumes,” but the term is a catch-all for several varieties of grain or meal that are not actually chametz.

These include rice, corn, millet, string beans, green peas and various kinds of dried beans, such as lentils, split peas, soybeans and chickpeas.

According to the predominant interpretation, the rule also extends to the oils derived from these legumes, as well as such borderline cases as peanuts.

Where does this custom come from? The origin of the ban on kitniyot is lost in the mists of halachic history.

It is first referred to in writing by the 13th-century codifier, R. Isaac of Corbeil, author of the *Sefer Mitzvot Katan* (S’mak). Yet he describes it as a deeply rooted, venerable practice, observed since earliest times by the kadmonim — a term referring to the founders of the Ashkenazi halachic tradition, somewhere around the 10th century.

The S’mak points out that the rationale for this observance is not that any authorities consider rice or lentils to be chametz, but that it is an edict intended to prevent any possible mix-up between food made of these items and real chametz.

(Indeed, even the Sephardim, who do eat rice, are careful to sift through the sacks of rice several times to make sure no wheat berries or other forms of chametz have been mixed in by mistake. An Egyptian-born Jew, for instance, still has childhood memories of his mother and sisters sitting on the floor for hours, starting immediately after Purim, to check each bag of rice seven times.)

The kitniyot problem was further complicated by the fact that various kinds of grain were ground into flour or meal, making it even more difficult to distinguish them from one another.

In earlier generations, the kitniyot custom still elicited surprise from many quarters. There were those, even in the Ashkenazi world, such as the Tosafist Rabbi Yehiel of Paris, who argued against the custom, claiming that there was no cogent reason for it.

Some of the Sephardi rabbis were more outspoken and contemptuous of the custom, denouncing it as baseless and calling it “a foolish thing.”

But gradually it took root among all the Ashkenazi communities. By the 17th century, even such an authority as Rabbi Zvi Hirsch Ashkenzi of Moravia, who found the custom objectionable and pointless, declared that he was powerless to abolish it in practice “unless all the great rabbis of the generation unite with me in abolishing it.”

Only in certain situations of dire need — famine or wartime — did the rabbis waive it, and then only temporarily, as needed.

Even among Ashkenazim themselves, there are many variations regarding what one does, or does not, eat on Pesach.

Anyone familiar with Orthodox society has heard stories of the proverbial neighbor’s son or daughter who came home from a year of yeshiva study, or suddenly became a devotee of a Chassidic group, and demanded that his or her parents revise their Pesach observance: no more matzah balls in the seder soup, no more cakes baked with matzah meal, no more matzah brei.

Or some readers may have noticed hotel advertisements offering Pesach vacation packages that say: “no gebrochts.” Gebrochts, Yiddish for “broken,” refers to cooking or baking with matzah or matzah meal mixed with liquid.

This avoidance of gebrochts, ubiquitous among Chassidic communities, is based upon the suspicion that matzah, even though it has been properly baked, may contain unkneaded bits of raw flour that, upon moistening, may become chametz.

None of the official halachic codes mention this problem, and even state explicitly that matzah cannot possibly become chametz once baked. But this custom, based upon the remote possibility that some bits of unbaked flour might nevertheless exist, is deeply rooted in many communities.

Pesach is not only food bans and kitchen anxieties. Entire books have been written about the many colorful and interesting customs of different Jewish communities.

The seder itself is marked by many different customs. Iraqi and Kurdistan Jews begin the seder with a dramatic dialogue. One of the children goes outside, knocks on the door and then answers the questions of the seder leader: “Where have you come from?” “Egypt.” “Where are you going?” “To Jerusalem.” “What are your supplies?”

The child answers by reciting the Four Questions, thereby opening the seder.

A similar custom is observed by Yemenite Jews, who perform a symbolic reenactment of the Exodus. The seder leader gets up from the table, throws the afikoman in its bag over his back like a knapsack, walks around the room leaning on a cane and relates to those assembled how he has just now come out of Egypt and experienced miracles.

Several years ago, I was invited to a seder of Afghan Jews. Midway through the reading of the Haggadah, our hostess gave each of the guests a spring onion — a thick, footlong scallion. As they came to the singing of “Dayenu,” each person banged his onion over the head and arms of his neighbors. Nobody seemed to know the origin or rationale, if any, of this bizarre custom.

In terms of halachah, the major difference between an Ashkenazi and Sephardi seder is that Sephardim do not recite the blessing over the second and fourth cups of wine, maintaining that the blessings over the first cup for the kiddush and third cup following the Grace After Meals cover these cups as well.

The text of Ashkenazi and Sephardi Haggadot is basically the same, although there are some minor differences. Toward the end of the seder, there is greater freedom and variety among the Sephardim. Among some people, the concluding songs may be sung in a variety of languages.

Jews of North African or Asian origin — and some Chassidim whose roots go back to 19th-century Eretz Yisrael — sing “Chad Gadya” in Judaeo-Arabic. Eastern European Jews have been known to sing a Yiddish version of “Echad Mi Yodea” (Who Knows One). The German Jews sing “Adir Hu,” the hymn ending in a prayer for the rebuilding of the Temple, in medieval German.

On the last day of Pesach, there are various ways of celebrating and reenacting the parting of the Red Sea.

In many communities, both Ashkenazi and Sephardi, it is customary to gather toward midnight in the synagogue or in the town square to recite the Song of the Sea (Exodus 15), with much singing, dancing, and rejoicing.

Among Moroccan Jews, the end of Pesach is the portal to the Mimouna — the great Moroccan festival in honor of Rabbi Maimon, father of Moses Maimonides, a beloved leader of Moroccan Jewry more than 800 years ago.

During the evening of the Mimouna, people traditionally visit one another in their homes, and ply each other with freshly prepared chametz foods, such as thin fragrant pancakes known as mufleita, stuffed dates, sweets and other delicacies.

But the question remains: Why should Jews continue to observe customs such as kitniyot today, when Jews from so many places have been ingathered in one state?

Is there no way that the rabbis can unify Jewish practice on such a basic point?

From a halachic perspective, any custom accepted by a community over a significant period of time carries great weight. Time and again, rabbis defend a seemingly inexplicable practice with the reasoning that “this is a venerable custom, observed by communities since earliest times, and one is not to change it.”

It is inevitable, however, that over the course of time, the sharp distinction between Ashkenazi and Sephardi customs will inevitably begin to disappear. They will be replaced, through a process of organic change, by a more uniform custom, at least among Israeli Jews.

Perhaps my friend, if she’s still around then, may be able to legitimately enjoy her neighbor’s rice and bean salads. If not, then perhaps her grandchildren and great-grandchildren will be able to do so.

The Seder Plate in Morocco



The Seder plate is brought to the Seder table with great ceremony. It would be covered with a beautiful scarf and the family would sing as the plate arrived at the table. Before it was set down, the Seder plate would be placed on a child's head and then rotated for everyone to see.

The Seder Plate in Tunisia, Sicily & Sardinia



As the plate arrives at the table, the Seder leader sets it on the head of the Seder leader. The plate is then passed from person to person around the table – held for a moment on each head by a family member. The Seder begins in this manner to demonstrate that we were once slaves in Egypt and carried heavy burdens on our heads.

The Matzah



At the point in the Haggadah where the matzah is described as “the bread of affliction,” Egyptian and Moroccan Jews would have ready three pieces of matzah tied up in a napkin, like a little sack. The sack would be passed around the table, shoulder to shoulder like this: First the sack would be held on the person’s right shoulder and the leader would ask her/him, “Where are you from?” The person with the shoulder sack would reply, “I am from Egypt.” The leader then asks the same person, “Where are you going?” Then the person with the sack would shift it to the left shoulder and say, “I am going to Yerushalayim. Will you come with me?” The sack is then passed to the next person at that table who says, “Yes.” And the process repeats around the table.

Pan de Semita – or “semitic bread”



Passover bread made and eaten first by the Jews in pre-Inquisition Spain and later on by Mexicans and Mexican Americans along the Texas border. (Note: There are some historians who believe that the entire Caucasian population of Mexican is of Jewish origin, having escaped the Inquisition and fled to what is now Mexico. In the remote villages of Mexico many peasants observe Jewish traditions and customs without knowing the underlying Jewish basis of their practice!). *Pan de semita* is always eaten around Passover season, even when families don’t understand their Jewish connection. It is always unleavened and is made by combining two cups of flour, one half cup of water, a few tablespoons of olive oil and baked unleavened. Mexicans says that pork lard is prohibited, hence the name, “semetic.” Only olive oil may be used.

The Ten Plagues



Yemenite Jews follow a custom that has become “*minhag*” for many of us. As each plague is said aloud, the Seder leader would pour a little bit of wine from his cup into a tin can. When all the plagues have been repeated, the matriarch of the family would take the tin can out into the

farthest part of the yard, pour the wine into the ground and say in a loud whisper, “May this go to all of our enemies and haters. May they create no suffering for us or for themselves. Amen!” Those at the table remain very quiet, so that the loud whisper can be heard. In Greece this same ceremony is done with vinegar poured into a can as each plague is said.

Singing “Dayenu”



In Italy the Seder table is set with a green onion (with long stems), one for each person. When it is time to sing Dayenu, each person takes an onion and wields it like a whip. At the chorus, each person takes the onion and whips the wrist of the person next to her/him. The sound of the onion stems represents the sounds of the whips of our slave masters. In Iran, Afghanistan and Iraq the onions are gathered in a bunch and one person “whips” the person next to her/him, then passes the onion bunch along. Incidentally, this ritual is performed while singing Dayenu because Dayenu is the song of miracles, so the whipping reminds us that it was a miracle that we were freed from the lash of oppression.

The Charoset



The Charoset is one of the most popular and well-remembered Seder foods. It is part of the ritual food on the Seder plate, chosen to remind us of our lives as slaves where we had to mix mortar to make the bricks for Pharaoh’s buildings. Sephardi charoset is often made with dates as the staple (in Ashkenazi homes the staple is apple) because the color of the dates is similar to the color of mortar. Other Charoset ingredients include a variety of nuts, apricots, cinnamon and wine.

Charoset for Anousim or Oppressed Jews



In Cuba where Jews have had difficulty practicing their religion, traditional fruits are often not available. Apples and nuts and dried fruit were impossible to find. So Cuban Jews created a recipe called “Charoset of the Oppressed.” The mixture is basic and includes only matzah, honey, cinnamon and wine. Using this charoset at your Seder table will remind your family, especially the children, of the plight of Cuban Jews and all oppressed people around the world.

The Four Cups



The Four Cups – In the Sephardi Seder blessings are said over the first and third cup of wine only. According to Sephardic *halacha*, rabbis believe that the blessings over the first cup for the Kiddush and the third cup after the Grace After Meals covers these cups as well.

Seder Dress



It is traditional for everyone to wear white to the Seder. In Italian and Spanish homes, the leader will always dress in a white caftan or robe, even if the guests do not. It is also a custom to have a crown present and to select someone as “Pharaoh.” The Pharaoh wears the crown and during the singing of Dayenu and the “whipping” with the onions, the Pharaoh moves from table to table, supervising the whipping!

Mimouna



Mimouna – (“mee-moh-oo-na) is the celebration that marks the [end of Pesach](#) – There are several ways to celebrate the crossing of the Sea of Reeds and our path to freedom. In Sephardi synagogues in Mediterranean countries, the synagogue is opened at one minute after midnight (the end of the eighth night). The Torah is taken from the ark and the Song of Songs is read while congregants dance in the aisles. Following the Torah reading, the Mimouna festival begins. (Mimouna can also be done on the evening of the ninth day with visiting of neighbors and friends.) The Mimouna celebration honors Rabbi Maimon, the father of Moses Maimonides who was the beloved leader of the Moroccan Jews. Traditional Mimouna foods include pita bread, cut into pieces and eaten by dipping a piece into honey. The meaning behind this tradition is that the pita and honey will glue the family together and slavery and oppression will never again separate us.

A Full Seder Plate

by Elyse Glickman
February 28th, 2015

When Jews gather to pay tribute to Moses, the Exodus and the arrival of spring, the foods and traditions they share will include surprising variety



If there's anything that unifies Jews around the world, it's food. As a people we appreciate the ways a Passover Seder brings family and friends together, as well as the fun and challenges of preparing and eating symbolic dishes. There are of course common elements, but there is also significant variety among Ashkenazi, Sephardic and other Jewish cultural groups.

Rabbi Menachem Weiss of Nessah Synagogue (a Persian Congregation) in Beverly Hills and director of the Israel Center at Milken High School is an Ashkenazi Jew with professional experience in Ashkenazi, Sephardic and Persian-Jewish customs. He explains that, "Various customs evolved because there were geographically separate Jewish groups living around the world through history, and the way they were acclimating to the society they lived in affected how they practiced Judaism."

Ashkenazim are descended from the Jews of Germany and Northern France, as well as much of Northern and Eastern Europe. Sephardim are primarily the Jews of Spain, Portugal and Mediterranean. Although Mizrahim are often confused with Sephardim (because they share many religious customs), Mizrahim have a separate heritage with roots in Iran and Iraq. Traditions evolved in these various locales in times when transportation was not as easy as it is today, and as Rabbi Weiss reminds us, "The various communities did not connect with each other."

Yet he believes the various ways of observing major Jewish holidays are links to our heritages on a large and small scale, and serve as a means of preserving Judaism and transmitting it from generation to generation.

"If I were to trace my roots back through my family's line from Spain to Hungary and on to New York City, the various things we do are somehow shaped by where my ancestors lived," he

continues. “By the same token, my spouse brought Jewish customs shaped by where her family came from through the generations.”

Grains of Truth

Of all the variations in customs among different groups of Jews, and especially between Ashkenazim and Sephardim, the widest divergence involves food served during Pesach.



The principal difference pertains to *kitniyot*, a catch-all category for several varieties of grain or meal that are not actually considered *chametz* (any food product made from leavened wheat, barley, rye, oats or spelt) according to Ashkenazi tradition. So while rice, corn, millet, string beans, green peas and dried beans (such as lentils, split peas, soybeans and chickpeas) will appear in various forms on the Sephardi or Mizrahi Passover table, Ashkenazi Jews are off all grains during Passover week, except for the customary kosher-for-Passover unleavened matzah and foods prepared with specially marked and blessed matzah meal. This is their way of commemorating the Jews’ hasty exodus from Egypt when, according to the Old Testament, the bread dough they prepared didn’t have time to rise.

This is also referenced by the 13th-century codifier, R. Isaac of Corbeil, author of the *Sefer Mitzvot Katan (S’mak)*. Yet he describes it as a deeply rooted, venerable practice, observed since earliest times by the *kadmonim*, who were believed to be the founders of the Ashkenazi *halachic* tradition, around the 10th century.

In Italy, Morocco and other Mediterranean countries there’s a tradition related to matzah that involves tying three pieces of matzah into a napkin to resemble a symbolic “sack.” As the sack goes around the table, each person is asked, “Where are you from?” and each replies, “I am from Egypt.” When the Seder leader asks, “Where are you going?” the person holding the sack responds, “I am going to Jerusalem,” and then passes the sack to the person to his right.

In Mexico and other Latin American countries, *Pan de Semita* (semitic bread) is eaten at Passover by both Jews and non-Jews descended from *conversos* (those whose ancestors converted to Catholicism during the Inquisition and other times of persecution). It is made with two cups of flour, one half cup of water and a few tablespoons of olive oil, and baked

unleavened. The same recipe is used in Calabria, in southern Italy, where it is called *pane azimo* (unleavened bread).

Quite the Dish

Seder plate traditions also can vary from country to country. In some households in southern Italy and Morocco the plate is covered with a beautiful scarf and the family sings as it is carried to the table. Before it is set down, the plate is placed on a child's head and then rotated for everyone to see. In Tunisia, Sicily and Sardinia, the plate is carried from person to person around the table, and held for a moment on each head. This symbolically alludes to the fact that Jews were once slaves in Egypt and carried heavy burdens on their heads.

Charoset, a staple of every Seder plate that is used during the ritual reading of the *Haggadah* (sacred Passover text), serves as a reminder of our ancestor's bondage under the Pharaoh's rule, when Jewish slaves were forced to mix mortar to make bricks for Pharaoh's buildings. Sephardi charoset often uses dates as the foundation, while the "mortar" in Ashkenazi homes is made from apples. Other charoset ingredients may include nuts, apricots, cinnamon and wine.

The Cuban recipe for charoset reflects the difficulty of practicing Judaism, as well as the lack of availability of traditional fruit. Their "charoset of the oppressed" includes only matzah, honey, cinnamon and wine.

Questions Answered

While Ashkenazi and Sephardi *haggadah* are basically the same in content, and the children in both traditions generally ask the "Four Questions" as to why Passover is observed, there are differences in the way the Seder is carried out. The Ashkenazi variation is generally reserved and straightforward. However in Mizrahi and Sephardic culture, things start getting lively when "Dayenu," the song of liberation, is sung. Onions or leeks are included on the Passover table near the Seder Plate, and at the chorus of the song, each person takes an onion and wields it like a whip against his neighbor, in remembrance of the miracle of being freed from the lash of oppression.

Although every family holds dear its own traditions and those of their ancestors, Rabbi Weiss notes that the mingling of customs can take the practices in exciting new directions.

"In today's times we're all living together, our children are going to school together, going to *shul* and falling in love with one another," concludes Rabbi Weiss. "We have a reintegration going on, mending those segments of the community that were previously divided into Ashkenazi, Sephardic, Persian and others. My hope for the future is a complete reintegration of the Jewish people under one title: 'Israel.'"

With that in mind, "Next year in Jerusalem!"

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PASSOVER FOOD | THE GREAT DEBATE: RICE IS NICE, BUT IS IT KITNIYOT

By [J. Correspondent](#) | April 4, 2014

Israel has spent more than six decades weaving the two formerly disparate basic branches of the Jewish family, Sephardi and Ashkenazi, into one people. These days, nary an eyebrow is raised as they hang out, date and marry, and most of their cultural differences have nearly evaporated.

But during Passover, the lines are drawn all over again, over something as seemingly innocuous as a bowl of rice — making for a lively seder debate.

Most Ashkenazim were raised with the belief that, along with yeasty breads, crackers, cereals and other baked goods, kitniyot — corn and rice and all foods made with them, as well as legumes of all kinds (yes, that includes tofu) — are also off the Passover menu. For traditional Ashkenazim, these foods are as hametz (leavened) as a fluffy loaf of challah.

The Torah itself (Exodus 13:3) forbids Jews from dining on hametz during Passover, as defined as leaven from the “five grains”: wheat, spelt, barley, *shibbolet shu'al* (two-rowed barley, says Maimonides; oats, says Rashi), and rye. The rabbis in ancient times added to the list anything made from these grains other than matzah and matzah products.

Over the centuries, many Ashkenazim have expanded the list of Passover-prohibited foods to also include peanuts, green beans, snow peas, sugar-snap peas, chickpeas, soybeans, and sunflower and poppy seeds.

But in Israel, with two very different markets to please, packaging can be challenging.

“‘Kosher for Pesach for those who eat kitniyot’ is really the phrase you look for [on packaging] so you know not to buy it,” says Arlene Barnhart, an Ashkenazi living in Beit Shemesh. “Sometimes ‘Kosher for Pesach’ is in large letters and the rest is really small. So, even when you have great Hebrew ... it can still take hours in the store struggling to decipher what you can and can’t buy.”

There is a subtle shift among many Ashkenazim to say yes to kitniyot: Some mainstream rabbis have ruled that kitniyot foods are acceptable, assuming that the ingredient in question isn’t the main one and is clearly recognizable.

There’s even a Facebook group called Kitniyot Liberation Front that boasts hundreds of followers.

The traditional U.S. Jewish community, meanwhile, is not seeing much of a kitniyot pushback, says Kashrut.com editor Arlene Scharf. And even in Israel, most traditional Ashkenazim will pass on it at the seder table.

“It’s just something we’ve always stayed away from,” says Rabbi David Aaron, founder and dean of the Jerusalem-based Isralight Academy of Adult Jewish Studies, adding, “For a week I can live without rice.”

For Sephardim, no need to pass over sushi at Pesach

By [J. Correspondent](#) | April 11, 2003

JERUSALEM — "Maybe this Pesach will be the year," I hint to my wife, Jody.

"Year for what?" she asks innocently, knowing exactly what the cat is about to drag in. We have this conversation every year at just about this time.

"That we practice what we preach," I reply, taking the high ground. "Social integration. Breaking down class and racial differences."

Who couldn't resist such a pitch? Except that what I'm really talking about is serving sushi. On Pesach.

Now such a discussion would never even have come up in North America. On Passover, you simply don't eat wheat and various other grains — including the rice that's at the center of the sushi experience.

That's because most Jews in North America are of Ashkenazi extraction. That is, they are of Eastern European descent and, in addition to not eating wheat products, hold by the post-biblical prohibition against eating kitniyot on Passover.

Kitniyot, often translated as "legumes," are those grains that are similar in appearance to wheat, or that were stored in the same bags as wheat in years past. "Just in case" some prohibited wheat should accidentally still be in an oat or barley bag, the kitniyot products are banned, too.

Now, for the seven days of Pesach (eight outside of Israel), that was never a major deal. The kosher-for-Pesach section of the North American supermarket or local kosher deli would be conspicuously free of kitniyot.

But in Israel, the majority culture is not Ashkenazi, but that of the Sephardi Jews, who hail primarily from Arab lands. And their custom is the more kitniyot, the merrier.

And so, officially certified kosher-for-Pesach products in Israel are full of the Ashkenazically offensive kitniyot. We're not talking about outright grains, but derivatives like corn oil. All the snack foods — the chips and the candy bars — are made with the stuff. Which takes them off the list for the Ashkenazi observant.

One of the most liberating things about moving to Israel for those who keep kosher is not having to read labels and look for small letters in circles and triangles on the backs and sides of packages. But come Pesach, it's back to the diaspora.

This distinction between different types of Jews, though, is in my opinion artificial and unnecessary. Do we really need to have different customs depending on where you came from? We're all here now. And Israel is clearly in the Sephardi part of the world. To mix a metaphor, when in Rome, let them eat rice cakes!

And then there's these "just in case" prohibitions. Last time I checked, we don't really re-use burlap grain bags thrown over the backs of donkeys anymore. Everything is very neatly separated and kept quite clean, thank you. The chances of a tiny grain of wheat getting into my cream of corn soup is pretty marginal.

"But our family tradition is Ashkenazi," Jody protests.

"Our family tradition was nothing," I remind her.

That's true: Neither of us is from an observant background, so why shouldn't we pick and choose what works the best?

Besides which, I already have a tradition of eating kitniyot. In 1987, I spent Passover in Tokyo, joining a large group seder at the Tokyo JCC under the leadership of then-Tokyo Rabbi Michael Shudrich.

During the intermediate days of Pesach, members of the Tokyo Jewish community went on a group hike up a nearby mountaintop.

It was a beautiful spring day; the cherry blossoms were in full bloom as we sat down to eat our lunches. The assorted families on the trip tore the tin foil off of their carefully packed kosher meals from home. But I was a traveler, on the road, staying in a cheap hotel. So, I had picked something up along the way. And what else do you eat in Japan?

That's right. Sushi.

"You can't eat that," the rabbi's wife said to me, aghast.

"Yes, I can," I replied as I picked up the chopsticks and enjoyed my kitniyot under a warm Japanese sun.

"It's only a matter of time," I say to Jody, trying to stare down her resolve.

"I'll think about it," she replies.

This is also part of our annual dance. But Jody's been known to think about things a long time.

It looks like we'll have to pass over the sushi again this year.