

Making Halaik

Contributed by [Haggadot](#)

Source: Love and Justice In Times of War Haggadah

by Julie Iny

Some Jews prepare for Pesach by getting rid of all their hametz. Last year, I inadvertently created a ritual for a near reenactment of the 40 days and 40 nights our people spent wandering in the desert when I decided to learn how to make *halaik*, the date syrup that is the critical and divine ingredient of Iraqi charoset.

In years past, my Aunt Rachel, keeper of many Iraqi and Indian-Iraqi culinary and cultural traditions, would, because she loves me, send me a bottle of homemade halaik carefully wrapped for its journey from Montreal to Oakland via Los Angeles. My friends who have tasted Iraqi charoset, made of halaik and chopped nuts, have dubbed this intensely flavorful and hard-to-come-by syrup “liquid gold.” They are typically so enthralled by its sweet taste, that they fail to notice how its appearance serves to remind us of the bricks and mortar of slavery in Egypt.

In these times when many traditional cultures are being lost, I hope there will be people who work to preserve the rich diversity of languages, traditions and practices of non-European Jews. So, with this in mind, I called my Aunt Rachel who happily faxed me “Aunt Rachel and Granny’s Halaik” recipe, which included strategies for avoiding date-syrup scheming squirrels and ants.

I bought 5 pounds of dates from Costco. Then I poured boiling water onto the dates and mashed them in the pot, leaving them uncovered overnight. The next step felt like about 36 of the 40 days and nights. I had to use porous fabric and squeeze date pulp to extract juice – one scoop at a time. I ultimately safety-pinned a contraption together to keep the dates from squeezing out on all sides. Day after day, my roommates would wake up and go to bed with me at the kitchen table squeezing dates.

Finally, I was able to boil the date water, which I then had to pass through a cloth bag yet again. I brought the now pulp-free date juice to a near boil and let it simmer for over an hour as I kept it company. Once cool, I covered it and put it in the sun to thicken - indoors so as to avoid the date- syrup scheming squirrels and ants my aunt warned me about.

As I undertook this journey in pursuit of liquid gold, I had several revelations. Our people probably didn’t work 45-hour weeks and then prepare for holidays. Halaik is good on matza brei. Our people probably organized the process so that a few folks made Halaik for the whole neighborhood. Halaik is good over labne on matzah. Our people would probably be grateful to know that in Oakland, California, this Iraqi Jewish woman didn’t go buy a jar of factory-made date syrup. Oh, and did I mention, Halaik is *good*.

Julie Iny is an Indian-Iraqi/Russian American Jewish activist in Oakland, California.

