So You’re Celebrating With Sephardim...

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So You Are Celebrating Pesach With Sephardim:

A Primer for Those Unfamiliar With Our Practices...

Before reading about Sephardi Passover customs and traditions, one must understand the origin and meaning of the Hebrew words "Sephardic", "Sephardi", and "Sephardim" (alternate spellings: "Sefardic", "Sefardi", and "Sefardim"). All the aforementioned Hebrew words are derived from the Hebrew word "Sepharad" which was originally mentioned as a place name in the Tanakh or Hebrew Bible, in Obadiah 1:20. The place named "Sepharad" was identified by Jewish biblical commentators (Rashi, Ibn Ezra) the Iberian Peninsula, and "Sephardim" came to denote the Jewish inhabitants of both Spain and Portugal. Similarly, a "Sephardi" was either a Spanish-Jewish person or a Portuguese-Jewish person, and the word "Sephardic" described Jews who adopted the rich cultural and religious traditions of the Spanish-Jews and Portuguese-Jews. Since Jews in Spain and Portugal from the Early Middle Ages until the latter part of the 15th century C.E. lived more or less in relative peace with their fellow citizens, a rich and strong cultural and religious tradition developed within both the Spanish and Portuguese Jewish communities, particularly in the Spanish-Jewish communities, including prayer rites ("nusach", "nusah" or "nusakh" in Hebrew), legal concepts, mores, religious traditions, etc. Following the 1492 and 1497 expulsions, the Jews from "Sepharad" migrated to other countries in Europe, North Africa, the Middle East, and Asia. When they settled amongst the already established Jewish communities of North Africa, the Middle East, and Asia their cultural and religious practices melted together and ultimately evolved into what it known as Sephardic Judaism today, a rich Mediterranean/Middle Eastern cultural heritage.

Sephardic Passover customs and traditions can vary from region to region, country to country, city to city, community to community, and family to family. Many Sephardic customs and traditions involved assimilating Pesach rituals with the culinary, musical, and linguistic traditions of the surrounding peoples in the areas where Sephardim lived. The following is a selected list of Sephardic Passover customs and traditions... If an item is in BOLD - you will notice it's inclusion in our Seder tonight, if an item in in Italics, this is a part of our family's tradition, however for tonight's Seder it has been omitted to include the traditions of our Ashkenazi guests as well, and if an item is in plain text then it's just interesting and cool and I thought you'd appreciate it :) 

- Sephardic Passover Food - Sephardic Passover Dietary Law Rulings Permit the Use of Kitniyot
  Kitniyot are small fleshless seeds of annual plants that an individual might ground into flour, and their derivatives in other products. Examples are: ascorbic acid, calcium ascorbate, caraway seeds, castor sugar, chick peas, citric acid, corn, custard powder, dextrose, dried beans, dried peas, glucose, green beans, icing sugar, lecithin, lentils, mustard, rice, sesame seeds, soya beans, soya products, starch, sunflower seeds, tofu, and their derivatives in food and beverage products in cooking during the Passover festival. In practice, most - but not all - Sephardic communities eat products containing these grains and legumes and their derivatives during Passover. However, like Ashkenazim, Sephardim forbid the use of chametz grains, which include: barley, oats, rye, spelt, and wheat, during the Passover festival, except when making matzah, in which case any of the 5 chametz grains MUST be used so that it simulates the situation that the Hebrews experienced when they tried to bake their bread as they prepared to flee Egypt. Furthermore, Sephardim, like Ashkenazim, are forbidden to come in contact with or even have in their possession in their household any chametz. Chametz includes leavened foods, drinks and ingredients that are made from or contain wheat, rye, barley, oats or spelt.
Therefore, all grain products such as breads, cereals and other breakfast foods, grain alcohol, grain vinegar and malts, are forbidden during Passover. Some Sephardic communities will eat rice and kitniyot during Passover but must check them three times prior to the Passover festival to make absolutely certain there are no kernels of chametz in the rice or kitniyot, in accordance with the Passover dietary laws for chametz. In addition, out of the concern for an accidental mixture of kitniyot flour with chametz flour, Sephardim will only use fresh legumes and not dried legumes, unless the dried legumes were dried for the specific purpose of being used for the Passover festival. Despite these restrictions, Sephardim and Ashkenazim agree that having possession of kitniyot (Sephardic pronunciation) / kitniyos (Ashkenazic pronunciation) is permitted during the Passover festival.

- **Sephardic Passover Food**: Sephardim usually do not cook with matzah meal. Instead, they use matzah with eggs and in meat or vegetable dishes. Olive oil is usually used in Passover cooking.

- **Sephardic Passover Customs and Traditions: The Four Questions Pt. 1**: Sephardim recite The Four Questions in the following order: 1. "On all other nights, we do not dip even once, but on this night, we dip twice. Why?"; 2. "On all other nights we eat bread or matzah, but on this night we eat only matzah. Why?"; 3. "On all other nights, we eat all kinds of herbs, but on this night we eat only maror. Why?"; and 4. "On all other nights, we eat either sitting or reclining, but on this night, we eat reclining. Why?".

- **Sephardic Passover Customs and Traditions: The Four Questions Pt. 2**: Sephardic custom is to have all participants at the Passover Seder table chanting "The Four Questions" in unison.

- **Sephardic Passover Customs and Traditions: Passover Symbolic Foods - Karpas / Maror / Chazeret**: Most Sephardim use celery leaves, romaine lettuce, or parsley for the karpas. The celery leaves or romaine are dipped in either salt water, vinegar, lemon juice, or lime juice, depending on the custom of one’s community. The karpas vegetable should not be the same type of vegetable as the maror or the chazeret. All Sephardim use a second bitter vegetable, called chazeret, as part of the symbolic foods of Passover. Instead of the Ashkenazic preference for horseradish that would represent one of the bitter herbs, Sephardim use either escarole or endive.

- **Sephardic Passover Customs and Traditions: Passover Symbolic Foods - Charoset**: The basic charoset recipe of honey, wine, nuts, fruit, and spices is common to all Sephardim. However, Sephardic families will use a variety of ingredients that reflect the cuisines of their country or community, or what is available in their community to make charoset. Either one or a combination of crushed, chopped or boiled dates, figs, chestnut paste, raisins, pomegranates, apricots, or oranges might be used as the fruit ingredient, chopped pistachio nuts or chopped walnuts might be used as the nut ingredient, and a variety of spices might be used in place of using cinnamon as the traditional spice to make charoset. Other charoset combinations include the use of date honey, known as Haleq, or mixing figs, apples, nuts, cinnamon, and wine. Charoset is the Passover food that has the greatest variety of recipes of any Passover food.

- **Sephardic Passover Customs and Traditions: Passover Haggadah**: For Sephardim, the Passover Haggadah is recited using both the local language and Hebrew, or in the Sephardic dialect known as Ladino, which is primarily a mixture of Hebrew and/or Judeo-Arabic and 14th and 15th century Spanish, or by using a combination of Ladino and the local language and/or Hebrew, depending on the community.

- **Sephardic Passover Customs and Traditions: Re-enacting the Exodus from Egypt**: Following either the Passover Seder step of Yachatz (breaking of the middle matzah) or during the Maggid, most Sephardim (except for Spanish-Portuguese Sephardim) re-enact the exodus from Egypt. The afikoman is tied in a large napkin, given to one of the children at the Passover Seder table, and then the child slings the napkin over his or her shoulders. The leader of the Passover Seder then asks a series of three questions to the child: 1. "From where have you come?" The child answers: "I have come from
Egypt”. 2. The Passover Seder leader then asks: "Where are you going?” The child answers: "I am going to Jerusalem". Finally, the Passover Seder leader asks: "What are you taking with you?” The child then points to the sack or napkin full of matzah. A variation of this is performed among Sephardic Egyptian Jews, where not just a child is given the chance to re-enact the Passover story and be asked the questions, but each person at the Passover Seder table will takes turns re-enacting the exodus from Egypt. Also, the person at a Sephardic Egyptian Passover Seder will first sling the napkin of matzah over their right shoulder and then be asked by the leader of the Passover Seder: "Where are you from?” The person answers: "Egypt”. The leader then asks: "Where are you going?” The person then slings the napkin of matzah over their left shoulder and says: "Jerusalem!".

- Sephardic Passover Customs and Traditions #11: Participants at a Sephardic Persian (or Iranian) Passover Seder will simultaneously chant the Passover song "Dayenu" and hold bunches of either celery, chives, leeks or scallions in their hands and lightly beat each other on the back and shoulders to symbolize the sting generated by the whip of the Egyptian taskmasters. A variation of this custom with Sephardic Persian Jewish families will have participants at the Passover Seder table take turns being an Egyptian taskmaster, lightly beating another person with the celery, chives, scallions, or leeks. Once one person is done, they then pass the chives, scallions, or leeks on to the next person at the table who will then repeat the custom, and so on until all at the table have had their turns. While Sephardim are performing this ritual, all at the Passover Seder wish each other "Sentak Khadra", which is a blessing for a green, fruitful year for everyone. Iraqi Jews will say to each other "Sant-il-Khadra", meaning "a year of good fortune".

- Sephardic Passover Customs and Traditions: Passover Seder Plate - Many Sephardic Jews will hold the Passover Seder plate aloft and pass it over the heads of all those at the Passover Seder table while announcing to each participant that they have left Egypt and are now free.

- Sephardic Passover Customs and Traditions: The 10 Plagues of Passover: When reciting the 10 plagues, the leader at a Sephardic Passover Seder will spill a bit of wine from a special cup of wine into a bowl at the mention of each plague, for a total of 10 spills of wine. The leader usually will then wash his or her hands to symbolically cleanse themself of the 10 plagues. Some Sephardic families in countries such as Turkey and other Balkan countries will not even look at the wine that is spilled out of the cup when reciting each of the 10 plagues, while other Sephardic families in other countries will only permit the leader of the Passover Seder to recite the 10 plagues lest they be "poisoned" or "contaminated" from the recitation. Many Sephardic Greek Jewish families will pour vinegar into a basin beside them as the 10 plagues are recited, followed by the singing of "Dayenu".

- Sephardic Passover Customs and Traditions: Sephardim, unlike Ashkenazim, usually do not hide the afikoman matzah or have a Cup of Elijah. However, Sephardim want to protect themselves from the "Evil Eye", and in so doing they take the symbols of Passover food and use them as good omens for the entire year. For instance, Sephardim in different communities might save a piece of afikoman matzah to be used as an ornament or even carried on one’s person for protection against the "Evil Eye", or dip their hand in charoset to make an imprint of a hamsa hand on a sheet of paper to be hung on their door which serves as protection against the "Evil Eye".

- Sephardic Passover Foods: Foods served at a Sephardic Passover meal might include lamb served as the main course, vegetable or meat matzah pies, called "Mina", huevos haminados (eggs boiled with red onion skins, saffron, tea, vinegar), fava bean or lentil soup, saffron rice, leek croquettes, and for dessert, a kosher for pesach torte or baklava.

- Sephardic Passover Symbolic Foods - In lieu of huevos haminados, some Sephardim use a single hard-boiled egg, cut it up, and then distribute a piece of it to each participant at the Passover Seder table to be eaten.
Sephardic Passover Customs and Traditions: Candle-lighting - In addition to the two Shabbat/Yom Tov candles lit as part of the Seder, Sephardic Jews also light seven candles on the eve of each Passover Seder, and this is traditionally done by the lady of the household. The reason for seven candles is rooted in Kabbalistic traditions. According to the Kabbalah, the Passover Seder night radiates an extremely powerful light - in a spiritual sense.