

# Why an orange on the seder plate?

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Have you heard about putting an orange on the Seder Plate? Even if you have, I'm sure it's not the true story of how it came to be, so to do my part to put rumors to rest, I present you here with the real story of why people put an orange on the Seder plate. It started with Dr. Susannah Heschel. The story you may have heard goes something like this:

After a lecture given in Miami Beach, a man (usually Orthodox) stood up and angrily denounced feminism, saying that a woman belongs on a bima (pulpit) the way an orange belongs on a Seder plate. To support women's rightful place in Jewish life, people put an orange on their Passover tables.

It's a powerful story. And it's absolutely false. It never happened.

Heschel herself tells the story of the genesis of this new ritual in the 2003 book, *The Women's Passover Companion* (JPL). It all started with a story from Oberlin College in the early 1980's. Heschel was speaking at the Hillel, and while there, she came across a haggadah written by some Oberlin students to bring a feminist voice into the holiday. In it, a story is told about a young girl who asks a Rebbe what room there is in Judaism for a lesbian. The Rebbe rises in anger and shouts, "There's as much room for a lesbian in Judaism as there is for a crust of bread on the seder plate."

Though Heschel was inspired by the idea behind the story, she couldn't follow it literally. Besides the fact that it would make everything—the dish, the table, the meal, the house—unkosher for Passover, it carried a message that lesbians were a violation of Judaism itself, that these women were infecting the community with something impure.

So, the next year, Heschel put an orange on the family seder plate, "I chose an orange because it suggests the fruitfulness for all Jews when lesbians and gay men are contributing and active members of Jewish life." The symbolism grew to include people who feel marginalized from the Jewish community: the widow, the orphan, women's issues in general, but solidarity with the gay and lesbian Jewish community was at the core.

It wasn't a navel orange; it had to have seeds to symbolize rebirth, renewal. And spitting out the seeds reminds us to spit out the hatred and ostracization of homosexuals in our community, and others who feel prejudice's sting. The orange is segmented, not fragmented. Our community has discrete segments, but they form a whole. The symbolism of the orange may have expanded, but its origins are clearly from a desire to liberate an entire segment of our community from their painful mitzrayim-narrow place.

- Extract from "The real story behind the orange on the seder plate" by Anita Silvert