

From Portugal to Persia: Passover Customs from Around the World

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At my Passover seder, which follows the traditions of the Jews of Indian-Iraqi-Syrian ancestry, we chant each paragraph of the haggadah in both Hebrew and Judeo-Arabic, a combination of Hebrew and Arabic. We use romaine lettuce instead of horseradish; a thick date syrup called *halek* for *haroset*; celery leaves instead of parsley for *karpas*; lemon juice instead of salt water, bread instead of matzah... No, no, just kidding. But only about the bread.

Although Jews all over the world conduct a seder for Passover with the hagaddah as their "instruction manual," customs vary from country to country. The words may be familiar, and certain rituals universal, but different melodies, novel customs and special foods impart a distinctive flair to Passover traditions from Portugal to Persia. One rule of thumb: American Jews generally follow the customs of Ashkenazic Jews (from Eastern Europe); what sounds unusual in America is actually quite common among the many Sephardic and Mizrahi Jews (who hail originally from Spain or the East). Sephardic communities often share similar customs, although they vary in nuance by country. Foods, especially, were influenced by what was available locally and by regional culinary traditions.

Here is a sampler of different customs and foods that might whet your appetite to add creativity to your own seder, compiled from my own traditions, kosher ethnic cookbooks and Rabbi Herbert Dobrinsky's *A Treasury of Sephardic Laws and Customs* (Yeshiva University/Ktav). All seder plates must include the shankbone (*zero'a*), egg (*betzah*), bitter herbs (*maror*), *haroset* (symbolizing mortar), green vegetable (*karpas*), and a second green vegetable (*hazeret*). Three matzot (plural of matzah, which means unleavened bread) and a liquid for dipping—either salt water, lemon juice or vinegar—stand outside the plate. As is my custom, many Sephardic families use romaine lettuce for *maror* and celery leaves for *karpas*. Before boxed matzah was readily available, some communities baked a thick pita-like matzah for the seder and a wafer-thin variety for

the rest of the week.

The one element that changes most from community to community is the recipe for *haroset*, which symbolizes the mortar the Israelites used to make bricks. *Haroset* is usually sweet, often made in large quantities and eaten for breakfast, even lunch and dinner, throughout the week of Passover. But the recipe most of us are familiar with—chopped apples, walnuts, sweet wine and cinnamon—is hardly set in stone. In my family, *haroset* is made from boiling dates until they are reduced to a thick liquid, straining them, then adding chopped walnuts. Persian communities mix spices with over a dozen kinds of fruits and nuts, including dates, pomegranates, bananas, oranges and pistachios. Venetian Jews blend chestnut paste and apricots. Despite the bitterness it is supposed to symbolize, only a few communities temper the pleasant flavor of *haroset*: among them, the Greek Jews of Zakynthos mash raisins in vinegar, and add pinches of pepper and finely ground brick! Yemenite Jews use chopped dates and figs, chili pepper and spicy coriander.

The haggadah (book containing the seder service), recited in Hebrew as well as the local vernacular, whether Ladino (Spanish and Hebrew), French or Arabic, highlights the concept that each person should feel as if he or she were leaving Egypt. A custom I'm particularly fond of—common among Sephardic and Mizrahi Jews—helps reenact the exodus. We tie the *afikomen* (special matzah that had been placed in the middle of the other matzoh) in a large napkin and give it to one of the children, who slings it from his or her shoulders. The leader asks a series of three questions:

"From where have you come?"

"From Egypt," the child answers.

"Where are you going?"

"To Jerusalem."

"What are you taking with you?"

The child points to the sack of matzah. Then, everyone bursts into the singing of Mah Nishtanah, the Four Questions, which is not reserved for the youngest child alone.

The questions also follow a different order. First, we ask, "Why do we dip twice?" which is the third question according to Ashkenazic custom, then "Why do we eat matzah (unleavened bread)?" "Why *maror* (bitter herbs)?" "Why do we recline?"

Moroccan Jews hold the seder tray aloft and pass it over the heads of everyone at the table, proclaiming that they have left Egypt and are now free. Persian Jews beat each other lightly on the back and shoulders with bunches of scallions or leeks when they chant Dayenu, to symbolize the sting of the taskmaster's whip.

In Ashkenazic homes, when the ten plagues are recited, each person dips a pinky in the wine and diminishes it by ten drops. Sephardic families are much more superstitious! Often, it is only the leader who recites the plagues so that others will not be "contaminated." In my house, the leader empties a special cup of wine into a bowl, then washes his or her hands. Among Levantine and Balkan Jews (from Turkey, for instance), nobody even looks at the wine that is spilled out. While Sephardic Jews do not usually have a Cup of Elijah or hide the *afikomen* (special middle matzah) symbols from the seder plate are transformed into good omens for year-round protection against the "Evil Eye." No rabbits' feet here. The Bene Israel Jews in the villages around Bombay still dip a hand in sheep's blood, impress it on a sheet of paper, then hang it above the doorway as a *hamsa*, the symbolic, protective hand of God. Moroccan Jews follow a similar tradition—but with *haroset* instead of blood. They also strip the shankbone of meat after the seders and leave it in the cupboard all year as a good luck omen. My family stashes away a piece of *afikomen*—an unusually crunchy amulet! We've even been known to take that *afikomen* on plane rides to make sure we leave and arrive in safety.

Ashkenazic Jews do not eat legumes (*kitniyot*), such as rice, corn, beans and peas on Passover, because these products were sometimes ground into flour and baked into bread. To avoid confusion with the grains which are truly *hametz* (forbidden), legumes were added to the category of forbidden foods. The practice of

Sephardic Jews varies, but many communities do eat rice and other legumes. Lamb--the original Passover sacrifice--is also forbidden among Ashkenazim (Eastern European Jews) since the destruction of the Temple, but some Sephardim (Jews from Spain or the Middle East) feature lamb as the centerpiece of the seder meal. Other special foods include *haminados*--eggs boiled with red onion skins, vinegar and saffron; leek croquettes; *mina*-a vegetable or meat matzah pie; fava bean soup; almond torte and nut cake.

For Sephardic and Mizrahi Jews, Passover celebrations did not end with the seders. In Turkish homes, the father or grandfather throws grass, coins and candy for the children to collect, a symbol of the wealth the Israelites brought out of Egypt (the grass represents the reeds of the Red Sea), and a wish that the year ahead should be "green" and productive. Probably the best known end-of-Passover celebration is the Moroccan "Maimuna," held the day after Passover. During Maimuna, the Arabic word for wealth, or good fortune, tables groan with an array of sweets and symbols of good luck. Traditionally a time for matchmaking, Maimuna has become a day for picnicking in Israel today.

As we say in the Iraqi tradition at the end of Passover, *sant-il-khadra*, a year of good fortune!