

## Oranges on the Seder Plate

Contributed by [Miranda Cooper](#)

Source: Vanessa Ochs, *Inventing Jewish Ritual*

The practice of placing an orange on one's seder plate affirms women's place in the history and observance of Passover; it also affirms women's inclusion as full-fledged liturgical participants, not just in the seder ritual, but in all areas of Judaism. Here is an early telling of the narrative: According to feminist scholar Rabbi Rebecca Alpert, when a Jewish women's group at UC Berkeley once invited the Chabad House *rebbetzin* (rabbi's wife) to speak, they asked her about the place of lesbians in Judaism. The *rebbetzin* responded that lesbianism, compared to male homosexuality, represented but a small transgression, one that was like "eating bread on Passover," that is, something you would try not to do, but if you did so by accident, you would not be considered an outcast. That spring, the group was still troubled by the *rebbetzin*'s curious response. They were convinced lesbianism was seen as being "much more problematic and transgressive in a Jewish context." In a ritual response, they placed bread on their seder plate that year as a gesture of solidarity with lesbians. This gesture struck a nerve and spread. By the 1980s, it was included in several lesbian *haggadot*. Groups not comfortable handling bread, forbidden on Passover, just told the story about the *rebbetzin* and the group that initially used bread as a ritual object. An orange soon replaced the ritually problematic bread, and it came to represent the inclusion of gay women as well as gay men in Judaism. (Some have noted that the orange, which originally pointed to lesbians in Judaism, was communally co-opted when its meaning was broadened to lesbians and gays in Judaism, and then to all feminist change in Judaism.) The story soon changed. In later tellings, it became "a Jewish feminist who, speaking in Florida, was upbraided by a man who said to her that women rabbis had as much of a role in Judaism as oranges did on a seder plate, or that women had as much place on the bimah as oranges on a seder plate. With this new telling in place, a telling that obscured the earlier ones, the orange on the seder plate has come to represent the full participation of women in Judaism. The symbol affirms that women and their wisdom do indeed belong at the seder table, no matter how unsettling their involved presence may be to others.