

# Susannah Heschel on the Orange

Contributed by [Mark Cohn](#)

Source:

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“In the early 1980s, the Hillel Foundation invited me to speak on a panel at Oberlin College. While on campus, I came across a Haggadah that had been written by some Oberlin students to express feminist concerns [several of whom later became part of the Havurat Shalom community in Boston]. One ritual they devised was placing a crust of bread on the Seder plate, as a sign of solidarity with Jewish lesbians (there’s as much room for a lesbian in Judaism as there is for a crust of break on the Seder plate).

[The ritual in the original Oberlin Haggadah took the form of an old folktale, though set in modern Manhattan. The lesbian matriarch who was the narrative voice had a orthodox rabbi saying to her, “there’s as much room for a lesbian in Judaism as there is for a crust of break on the Seder plate,” and then being so proud of himself for coming up with the line that he called the newspaper to tell them the same thing. The collective in the story, upon hearing the news, enters into a period of mourning, until one member comes up with the idea of doing exactly what the rabbi suggested.]

At the next Passover, I placed an orange on our family’s Seder plate.

During the first part of the Seder, I asked everyone to take a segment of the orange, make the blessing over fruit, and eat it as a gesture of solidarity with Jewish lesbians and gay men, and others who are marginalized within the Jewish community (I mentioned widows in particular).

Bread on the Seder plate brings an end to Pesach - it renders everything chometz. And it suggests that being lesbian is being transgressive, violating Judaism. I felt that an orange was suggestive of something else: the fruitfulness for all Jews when lesbians and gay men are contributing and active members of Jewish life. In addition, each orange segment had a few seeds that had to be spit out - a gesture of spitting out, repudiating the homophobia of Judaism.

When lecturing, I often mentioned my custom as one of many new feminist rituals that have been developed in the last twenty years. Somehow, though, the typical patriarchal maneuver occurred: My idea of an orange and my intention of affirming lesbians and gay men were transformed. Now the story circulates that a MAN said to me that a woman belongs on the bimah [that is, as a woman rabbi] as an orange on the Seder plate. A woman’s words are attributed to a man, and the affirmation of lesbians and gay men is simply erased.

Isn’t that precisely what’s happened over the centuries to women’s ideas?

Susannah Heschel