

Why is there an Oyster on the Seder Plate?

Contributed by [Paul Kipnes](#)

Source: Unknown

ALL: Tonight we might have put an oyster on our Seder plate.

While I didn't particularly want to put something traif atop that most kosher of dishes, this Passover falls on the first anniversary of the Deepwater Horizon blowout in the Gulf of Mexico. And since BP, the leaseholder of the failed well, seems intent with its new television ads on making us forget about the spill, I felt that something drastic was in order to help us remember. Combining the memorial powers of the Seder plate with the canary-in-the-coal-mine nature of the oyster seemed a good way to keep the disaster — and BP's promises to clean up its mess — in mind.

In March, I spent a week in Louisiana's bays and bayous. All over the region I encountered oyster dredges full of dead, empty shells and broken oystermen with equally empty pockets. Many of the oystermen I interviewed reported that 80 percent of their beds had been killed.

ALL: Ecologically speaking, this is huge: a single oyster can filter 40 gallons of water a day, and the millions of oysters in Louisiana's waters are one of the things that make the gulf work as an ecosystem.

True, many oysters died not from the oil directly, but rather from the consequences of a desperate attempt to counter the spill's effects. As oil rushed shoreward last spring, Louisiana's coastal coordinator opened gates along the Mississippi River and released millions of gallons of freshwater, hoping the surge would push the oil away. It's hard to say whether this worked; what it definitely did do was make some coastal waters too fresh for oysters to survive. Many beds were decimated. It will take years for them to recover.

Freshwater wasn't the only thing dumped into gulf waters to mitigate the spill: more than 1.8 million gallons of Corexit, a chemical used to break up oil slicks, transformed the floating, possibly recoverable oil into an invisible angel of death that sank and claimed not just the first born but perhaps the first million born of many gulf creatures — a considerable blow to what is arguably America's most important fish nursery.

ALL: Indeed, oysters are just the beginning.

The delayed effects of oil and Corexit will likely be seen for years. In 2012 the number of blue crabs — which many people associate with the Chesapeake Bay but in fact often come from the gulf — may significantly drop thanks to the spill. In 2013, the redfish that Paul Prudhomme famously blackened may not be there for fishermen and diners to enjoy. In 2017 we could see a considerable drop in the population of bluefin tuna, the missing adult fish having been killed as fragile larvae in 2010.

And even if by some miracle there is no significant decline in the gulf's sea life, its harvest might still suffer from a sullied reputation. In a recent poll of 18 national restaurant chains released by Greater New Orleans Inc., an economic development

organization, found that only 19 percent of those restaurants' customers held a favorable view of gulf seafood in 2010, compared with 75 percent in 2004.

ALL: Oystermen weren't the only ones affected by the spill, of course.

But while BP has compensated waiters and hairdressers for work lost during last summer's ruined tourist season, most oystermen told me that aside from an emergency payment last fall, they have yet to see compensation that approaches the value of their lost oysters.

Fortunately for BP, it can take decades for the aftereffects of an event of this scale to appear. And it will be a long time before the Natural Resources Damage Assessment, put in place to determine BP's true liability, will be made fully public with any sort of conclusion about the company's liability.

Although I put an oyster on the Seder plate, you might want to find a less controversial, less treif way to mark the disaster.

We might put a small dish of oil next to your glass of wine. After we've dipped our finger in our wine to count out the 10 plagues that brought down Egypt's tyrannical pharaoh, we could dip our finger in the oil and dab out an 11th plague.

ALL: In so doing [we] remember that in A.D. 2010, the Jewish year 5770, humanity damaged a valuable, nourishing ecosystem to maintain the tyranny of oil. Until we throw off that tyranny, we will mark many more plagues in the years to come.

Adapted by Rabbi Paul Kipnes

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