

## FEMINISM

# The Passover Symbols, The Orange & Miriam's Cup

Contributed by [Jewish Women's Archive](#)

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## The Passover Symbols

We have now told the story of Passover... but wait! We're not quite done. There are still some symbols on our seder plate we haven't talked about yet. Rabban Gamliel would say that whoever didn't explain the shank bone, matzah, and *marror* (or bitter herbs) hasn't done Passover justice.

The shank bone represents the *Pesach*, the special lamb sacrifice made in the days of the Temple for the Passover holiday. It is called the *pesach*, from the Hebrew word meaning "to pass over," because God passed over the houses of our ancestors in Egypt when visiting plagues upon our oppressors.

The matzah reminds us that when our ancestors were finally free to leave Egypt, there was no time to pack or prepare. Our ancestors grabbed whatever dough was made and set out on their journey, letting their dough bake into matzah as they fled.

The bitter herbs provide a visceral reminder of the bitterness of slavery, the life of hard labor our ancestors experienced in Egypt.

## The Orange

Even after one has encountered the collection of seemingly unconnected foods on the seder plate year after year, it's fun to ask what it's all about. Since each item is supposed to spur discussion, it makes sense that adding something new has been one way to introduce contemporary issues to a seder.

So how was it that the orange found its place on the seder plate as a Passover symbol of feminism and women's rights?

The most familiar version of the story features Susannah Heschel, daughter of Abraham Joshua Heschel and scholar in her own right, giving a speech about the ordination of women clergy. From the audience, a man declared, "A woman belongs on the *bima* like an orange belongs on the seder plate!" However, Heschel herself tells a different story.

During a visit to Oberlin College in the early 1980s, she read a feminist Haggadah that called for placing a piece of bread on the seder plate as a symbol of the need to include gays and lesbians in Jewish life. Heschel liked the idea of putting something new on the seder plate to represent suppressed voices, but she was uncomfortable with using *chametz*, which she felt would invalidate the very ritual it was meant to enhance. She chose instead to add an orange and to interpret it as a symbol of all marginalized populations.

## Miriam's Cup

A decade later, the ritual of Miriam's Cup emerged as another way to honor women during the seder. Miriam's Cup builds upon the message of the orange, transforming the seder into an empowering and inclusive experience.

Although Miriam, a prophet and the sister of Moses, is never mentioned in the traditional Haggadah text, she is one of the central figures in the Exodus story.

According to Jewish feminist writer Tamara Cohen, the practice of filling a goblet with water to symbolize Miriam's inclusion in the seder originated at a Rosh Chodesh group in Boston in 1989. The idea resonated

with many people and quickly spread.

Miriam has long been associated with water. The rabbis attribute to Miriam the well that traveled with the Israelites throughout their wandering in the desert. In the Book of Numbers, the well dries up immediately following Miriam's death. Of course, water played a role in Miriam's life from the first time we meet her, watching over the infant Moses on the Nile, through her triumphant crossing of the Red Sea.

There is no agreed-upon ritual for incorporating Miriam's Cup into the seder, but there are three moments in the seder that work particularly well with Miriam's story.

1) As Moses's sister, Miriam protected him as an infant and made sure he was safely received by Pharaoh's daughter. Some seders highlight this moment by invoking her name at the start of the *Maggid* section when we begin telling the Passover story.

2) Other seders, such as this one, incorporate Miriam's cup when we sing songs of praise during the *Maggid* and later during the *Hallel* as a reminder that Miriam led the Israelites in song and dance during the Exodus.

3) Still others place Miriam's Cup alongside the cup we put out for Elijah.

Just as there is no set time in the seder to use Miriam's Cup, there is no set ritual or liturgy either. Some fill the cup with water at the start of the seder; others fill the cup during the seder. Some sing Debbie Friedman's "Miriam's Song"; others sing "Miriam Ha-Neviah." As with all seder symbols, Miriam's Cup is most effective when it inspires discussion.

What does Miriam mean to you? How do all of her roles, as sister, protector, prophet, leader, singer, and dancer, contribute to our understanding of the Exodus story? Who are the Miriams of today?