

April 2018 Message from Rabbi Dubin

Dear Friends,

This past Sunday, I had the great pleasure of sitting with the [Mike Weiner School of Jewish Learning](#) families for our annual Passover seder. Thanks to the parents we had all the traditional foods and a beautifully set table. It was an absolute pleasure.

Midway through the seder, I pointed to a less traditional food on the table and asked, “Who knows why the orange is here?” A few of our parents knew the familiar story of Susannah Heschel, Professor of Jewish studies at Dartmouth College (and daughter of the late great Abraham Joshua Heschel). As the story goes, when she was presenting on Jewish Feminism to an audience in Miami Beach, a man yelled out, “A woman has as much of a place in the rabbinate as an orange has on the seder plate!” Because of this, Professor Heschel decided to place an orange on her seder plate at the next Passover. Through word of mouth, the practice spread, and has now become a common seder practice in liberal Jewish homes.

It’s a great and inspiring story. The only problem is that it also never actually happened, which is why I then proceeded to correct them and tell the actual story. Rather than Heschel presenting on Jewish Feminism in Miami Beach, it was actually a notoriously antihomosexual rabbi who was talking to a Hillel audience when representatives of a campus lesbian advocacy group demanded to know from him what place lesbians should have in Jewish life. His answer was that “Lesbians have as much place in Jewish life as an orange has on the seder plate.” And so, from that anti-lesbian comment was born the modern tradition of placing an orange on the seder plate, to be in solidarity with our lesbian sisters.

No one at our Sunday School seder had heard this story before, so I was happy for the opportunity to set the record straight. And they were happy to learn the **real** story.

And then something completely unexpected happened...

A day or two after the seder, as I was doing some personal research on an unrelated Passover topic, I came across an [The Forward by Susannah Heschel](#) from 2013. After reading it, I sat there jaw-dropped and embarrassed. I’d like to share with you what she wrote, and in the process acknowledge publically that I didn’t get the story right either.

Passover was high drama in my childhood. Preparations began weeks in advance, with meticulous scrubbing, shopping and organizing. Strong emotions came out in the days before the holiday, when every crumb of hametz had to be removed, and we had to tread very carefully. One mistake could bring calamity. When we finally sat down for the Seder, my mother would always claim that only women understood the Exodus, having slaved away in the kitchen for weeks and then been finally liberated when the holiday began, but too exhausted to enjoy it.

I love the Haggadah, the Hebrew text as well as all the special actions we take at the Seder; eating, drinking, reclining, discussing and debating. In my home, we immerse ourselves in the Haggadah in Hebrew and also in the centuries of commentary on each passage. While we carefully follow all the traditions, we also recognize that over the centuries, Jews have often added new customs to Passover. At the height of the Jewish feminist movement of the 1980s, inspired by the abundant new customs expressing women's viewpoints and experiences, I started placing an orange on the Seder plate. At an early point in the Seder, when stomachs were starting to growl, I asked each person to take a segment of the orange, make the blessing over fruit and eat the segment in recognition of gay and lesbian Jews and of widows, orphans, Jews who are adopted and all others who sometimes feel marginalized in the Jewish community.

When we eat that orange segment, we spit out the seeds to repudiate homophobia and we recognize that in a whole orange, each segment sticks together. Oranges are sweet and juicy and remind us of the fruitfulness of gay and lesbian Jews and of the homosociality that has been such an important part of Jewish experience, whether of men in yeshivas or of women in the Ezrat Nashim.

Strangely, I discovered some years ago that an urban legend was circulating: Strangers told me they placed an orange on their Seder plate because of an incident in Miami Beach in which a man angrily denounced me when I gave a lecture, saying that a woman belongs on the bimah of a synagogue no more than an orange belongs on the Seder plate.

That incident never happened! Instead, my custom had fallen victim to a folktale process in which my original intention was subverted. My idea of the orange was attributed to a man, and my goal of affirming lesbians and gay men was erased.

Moreover, the power of the custom was subverted: By now, women are on the bimah, so there is no great political courage in eating an orange, because women ought to be on the bimah.

For years, I have known about women whose scientific discoveries were attributed to men, or who had to publish their work under a male pseudonym. That it happened to me makes me realize all the more how important it is to recognize how deep and strong patriarchy remains, and how important it is for us to celebrate the contributions of gay and lesbian Jews, and all those who need to be liberated from marginality to centrality. And Passover is the right moment to ensure freedom for all Jews.

I share Professor Heschel's correction of my misrepresentation of history not only because hers is an interesting and inspiring story from which we can all learn, but because during this season of Passover, especially, it is my prayer that each of us will strive to do all we can to liberate those who are marginalized from the periphery of life. As we celebrate our own exodus from slavery and subjugation this week, we do so with an appreciation that had we not taken such great pains to support and look

after one another during our escape 3300 years ago (according to the biblical story), some of us on the more “invisible” side of society inevitably would have gone unnoticed and been left behind. This Passover, and every Passover, let us commit ourselves to freeing every last one of us from the lonely and awkward periphery of life. Let no one’s story ever again be forgotten, stolen, or misattributed.

Together, we can do it. But only if we do it together.

Chag Pesach Sameach,
Rabbi Dubin

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