

midrash on the orange and crust of bread

assembled by rozele; text by rozele (in italics), ari davidow, abbe don, rebecca alpert, susannah heschel, s.k., and several unnamed intermediaries; all text except rozele's taken from <https://www.ivritype.com/toolkits/>

*In 5761, Ari Davidow made a summary of the history of the orange / bread on the seder plate.
This is his account of how he came to learn more.*

Did Pat and I feel that we had the definitive version back then? How silly. My friend, Abbe Don, who is also one of the world's best storytellers (among many talents) [www.bubbe.com], posted this summary, this year (1999) on the WELL, whose Jewish discussion area I co-founded, and is the oldest, moderated Jewish community on the internet (but not nearly so old as, say, soc.culture.jewish, which is not moderated). I have added reference info for the books she cites, so you can follow up further:

jewish.642.47: mystical matzo ball moment (abbe) Thu 25 Mar 99 07:02

The book **Like Bread on the Seder Plate** by Rabbi Rebecca Alpert (PB, 224 pp, 1998, Columbia Univ Press; ISBN: 0231096615) documents the "urban legend" of bread and oranges on the seder plate very thoroughly. It's quite interesting to read how this evolved. (Note: the full title of the book is: "Like Bread on the Seder Plate: Jewish Lesbians and the Transformation of Tradition.")

Here's a synopsis of the evolution of this story, according to Alpert, from pages 1-3: In 1979, a Jewish Women's Group at UC Berkeley Hillel invited Hilda Langer, the rebbitzin from the campus Habad House, to speak on the subject of "Women and Halakha." When asked her opinion about the place of lesbians in Judaism, she treated the issue as a minor matter, suggesting it was a small transgression, like eating bread during Passover.

Later that spring, as some members of the Berkeley group were planning a seder, Langer's comment surfaced. They felt it didn't match their reality and that lesbianism was much more problematic and "transgressive" in a Jewish context than Langers' comment suggested. So, they chose that year not simply to eat bread during Passover but to place a crust of bread on the seder plate in solidarity with lesbians who were trying to find a place in Jewish life.

Early 1980s: The idea of "crust of bread on the seder plate" is a midrash that becomes incorporated into Jewish lesbian haggadot around the US. The drash becomes, the "Febrente Rebbe" declared "there is as much place for lesbians in Judaism as for leavened bread on the seder table."

Some Jewish feminists didn't feel comfortable with the symbolism of bread on the seder plate, so they substituted an orange to symbolize lesbians and later gay men in Judaism.

But over the years, the legend changed. The story began to be told about a Jewish feminist who was speaking in Florida. She was "upbraided" by a man who said that women rabbis had as much of a role in Judaism as an orange on the seder plate. The tale is also told that the man said,

"women had as much place on the bimah as oranges on the seder plate." Somewhere along the line, the "Jewish feminist" was named as Susannah Heschel but she denies either changing the symbolism from bread to orange nor of having been the feminist who had this experience in Florida.

But, interesting enough, some version of the orange on the seder plate story does appear in "On Being a Jewish Feminist" edited by Susannah Heschel (PB, 288pp, Schocken Books, 1983, repr. 1995, ISBN: 0805210369).

and in that version, heschel does actively claim to have invented the orange as a substitute for the crust of bread, and gives her explanation for why. it basically boils down to the fact that a crust of bread on the seder plate makes a structural critique (a jewishness that excludes dykes can never be kosher) which she is unwilling to embrace, so substitutes an aesthetic critique (a jewishness that includes feminism is tastier; a jewishness that doesn't is still legitimate). a rejection of a community-created ritual practice that demands rethinking institutional and social power as a response to deeply rooted exclusions, in favor of a purely supplemental call for diversity/tolerance/inclusion within unchanged structures.

Alpert concludes: "Putting an orange on the seder plate to represent women's roles in Judaism seemed to appeal to many people, and the practice has been incorporated into seders....

And so a contemporary legend was born. Like any evocative story, it was not often told the same way twice. The complex variations of this story resonate with the complicated ways in which Jewish lesbians have been dealt with by the Jewish community. This process of transmission also made it clear that Jewish lesbians saw our treatment in the Jewish community quite differently from the way others, from the Habad rebbetzin to the Jewish feminist, saw it."

One other point that Alpert makes is that the change from "bread on the seder plate to represent lesbians" to "orange of the seder plate to represent women" minimizes and standardizes difference. As she writes, "group members do their best to protect the status quo, to incorporate change in the way that will least radically alter the nature of the group as it exists."

and here, again with ari davidow's framing, are a few iterations of susannah heschel's ever-changing accounts of her role in the spread of the orange and displacement of the bread, and her fascinating place in the still evolving legend and web of midrash about these entwined rituals.

Having gotten this far, Susannah Heschel e-mailed me in 2000, with her own explanation:

I started placing an orange on our family Seder plate in the early 1980s (and still do). Sections of the orange were passed around the table, each person took a piece, recited the blessing over fruit, and ate it. I presented this as an act in solidarity with Jewish lesbians and gay men, and others marginalized in the Jewish community (I always mentioned windows and orphans). I started including mention of this ritual during lectures on Jewish feminism, and after a while it caught on.

I read the Oberlin student Haggadah about the crust of bread on the Seder plate, and usually included mention of that, plus the story that was told about the feminister rebbe (a great story!). Still, I felt that bread on the Seder plate was transgressive, and being a lesbian or gay man is not

transgressive, but perfectly normal.

What amazes me is that the story emerged that a MAN said to me, after one of my lectures, that a woman belongs on the bimah like an orange on the Seder plate. It is disturbing that a ritual I developed would be credited to a man, and that my intention, to confront homophobia, was entirely erased.

We continue to celebrate the seder with an orange on our sederplate. For me, it is a counter to the extra matzo which we placed on seder plates starting in the late Sixties, to remind us of those who wished to participate, but were prevented by antisemitic governments, such as that of the former USSR. Today, we also look around us and consider those who are not allowed to participate--starting, of course, with gays and lesbians, but continuing, as Professor Heschel notes, much further. In this way, as we retell the story of our exodus from Egypt, we also consider the narrow waters--the *mei tzarim* of our own time.

* * *

A friend wrote in February (1998): "... I don't recall when exactly we spoke, but around that time S.K. and I had a conversation I thought you'd find especially interesting. Sometime in the Fall, she met Susannah Heschel and asked her about the story concerning the orange on the seder plate.... At any rate, this is an account from S.K. of her conversation with Susannah:

At some point in the past, Susannah was speaking at Oberlin College (in Ohio) and a person from Oberlin Hillel gave Susannah a haggadah. (S. didn't remember the name but said the artwork was by Claire Cotts.)

The haggadah had revised the Four Questions; turning them into apocryphal stories about women. The story concerning the orange was included. As part of Susannah's Oberlin talk, she repeated the story.

"Here's my account of S's account of Susannah's account" (This is my friend imagining what happened, from the perspective of what we knew in 1998):

Three generations of women were preparing for Pesach, a grandmother, her daughter, and her granddaughter. As they were nearing the seder and almost finished with their tasks, the granddaughter realized she had an important question to ask the rabbi. Her mother and grandmother encouraged her to go talk to him.

When the granddaughter arrived at the rabbi's, he was also thrilled, thinking she had a question about kashrut. Instead, the granddaughter asked, 'What is the place of a lesbian in Judaism?'

(Susannah didn't, apparently, describe the rabbi's reaction, but ...) He responded: 'A lesbian in Judaism is like an orange on the seder plate.'

"There you have it."

... and those who know the original Rebecca Alpert story can see the direct parallels and return of the original (*rebetzin* to Alpert) punch line.