

Why is there an orange on the seder plate?

Well, it depends on who you ask. Some will answer that they put an orange on their seder plate because a male rabbi famously said that “a woman belongs on the bimah like an orange belongs on the seder plate.” For them, the ritual is a rebuttal: it asserts that women have a place in Judaism. This is a compelling story, but it never happened.

The real story starts in the early 1980s, when Jewish Studies professor Susannah Heschel learned about a ritual of placing a bread crust on the seder plate as a symbol of lesbian inclusion. She liked the idea—but not the bread—so she substituted an orange. While bread during Passover is a violation of Jewish law, Heschel “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.”

Tonight, we will complete the ritual as Heschel intended, by distributing orange segments, saying the blessing over fruit, and eating the orange, as Heschel writes, “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.” (To this list we might add: Jews across the LGBTQ+ spectrum, Jews in interfaith relationships, Jews of color, disabled Jews, Jewish women, and other groups.) We will follow Heschel’s instructions to spit out any seeds, rejecting homophobia and bigotry.

One whole orange remains on the seder plate, while orange segments are passed out to the group. As the segments are passed:

As you prepare to eat the orange, you might think about how and why some narratives dominate others, considering in this case the sexism that attributes Heschel’s idea to an imaginary man and the homophobia that erases her ritual’s original meaning. You might also think about any parts of your own identity that you hold apart from Judaism and welcome them in.

Together, we say the blessing over fruit:

Baruch Atah Adonai, Eloheynu Ruach Ha’Olam, bo’ray p’ree ha’etz.
Blessed are You, Lord our God, Spirit of the Universe, who creates the fruit of the tree.

We eat the orange segments and spit out any seeds.

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