

Shabbat HaGadol: To Kitniyot or Not?

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Today is known as “Shabbat HaGadol” because it is the Sabbath before Passover. Because Passover is such an important holiday, with so many regulations and restrictions, and it is so widely celebrated by Jews the world over, the Sabbath preceding it gets special recognition. Unlike the other special shabbatot of the last several months, however, when we had special maftir and haftarah readings, there is no special reading today.

Beginning next Friday night and extending for 8 days, until the conclusion of Shabbat the following Saturday night, we must forgo anything that is leavened, what is known as hametz.

This includes any food made with the five grains: wheat, rye, barley, oats and spelt. These grains can be consumed in the form of matzah – but that is because the process is closely supervised to ensure that no yeast is added, that it is not exposed to water for more than 18 minutes, so that no rising or leavening occurs.

There are a number of reasons we alter our diet during Passover.

For one, we do it because we are commanded to do so. The Torah states that we are not to have any leaven products in our midst during the holiday. For many, God issuing a directive is reason enough. The Torah goes on to explain that we are to do this so we recall our hurried departure from Egypt, *behipazon*, under the dark of night. Since there was no time to waste, we could not wait for our bread to rise. We had to escape and get out of “Dodge City” quickly, before Pharaoh changed his mind again. The quick-baked bread, called matzah, which is made from start-to-finish in less than 18 minutes, is a key element of many kosher-for-Passover foods.

One of the fundamental purposes of Jewish ritual and customs is to put us in the story, so that the history of our ancestors becomes our story. It is incumbent upon us to do more than just tell the story. We actually relive and become a part of it. As I have always said, Judaism is much more than an academic exercise. It is not just giving expression to various concepts, but it is a tradition that calls upon us to act and to incorporate its teachings into our lives by observing and practicing mitzvot, along with rituals and customs. These distinct and unique practices are part of what distinguish us as Jews and as a people.

Among the foods we are permitted to eat during the holiday: All fruits and vegetables (I will discuss corn and legumes in a moment)

Beef, turkey, chicken, fish with scales, that is kosher

Eggs, Processed foods and dairy products marked with a kosher-for-Passover *hechsher* (a symbol that represents an item is kosher for Passover)

Prohibited foods include: bread, biscuits, cakes that are not kosher for Passover, pasta, crackers, cereal and so on.

In addition to *hametz*, many Ashkenazi Jews for the past several hundred years have also avoided consuming *kitniyot*. The concern was that foods that swell in the cooking process could resemble the way that fermented grains rise. The rabbis worried that mistakes could be made, or that incorrect assumptions would be drawn were one to be seen eating these products. Some *kitniyot* foods include:

Corn, Millet, Rice, Legumes (lentils, all dried beans, peanuts, soy beans)

Mustard, Cumin, Fennel seeds, Sesame seeds, and Poppy seeds

The prohibition originated in France in the 13th century for a number of reasons. Apparently the rabbis were concerned that rice and legumes were sometimes mixed with wheat, or they may have been concerned that because of their proximity to each other in the market place they would become mixed. Despite much controversy and widespread resistance and refutation of the custom among many great rabbis, to avoid accidents, kitniyot were banned altogether in Ashkenazic communities.

The story of how coffee came to be deemed acceptable is interesting.

In 1923 Joseph Jacobs, a New York advertising genius, who was an advertising manager at the widely read Yiddish paper, the *Forverts*, pursued a program to have big companies market more aggressively in the Jewish community. He approached Maxwell House Coffee Company about advertising in the Jewish press. His overture coincided with a time when the coffee company wanted to expand its sales in cities such as New York, which had large Jewish populations. Many recent Jewish immigrants from Eastern Europe assumed that coffee beans, like other beans, were not kosher for Passover. Jacobs consulted a number of rabbinic authorities, who informed him that coffee beans were actually classified as berries and therefore kosher for Passover. Armed with this information, Jacobs got the company to place an ad assuring readers that Maxwell House was kosher for Passover. In 1932 he took the campaign a step further and convinced the company to publish a hagadah and give it away with cans of coffee, creating one of the most successful marketing and branding campaigns in history. There are now over 50 million copies of the iconic hagadah which have been printed.

It parallels in many respects the story of another iconic American product, Coca Cola being deemed kosher for Passover.

A Lithuanian born rabbi, Tuvia Geffen, living in Atlanta who was rabbi of Congregation Shearith Israel from 1910 until his death in 1970 at the age of 99, is responsible for kashering Coke. He noticed and was concerned that members of his congregation were reluctant to give up Coca Cola for the Passover holiday. So in 1935 he contacted the company and asked to learn the ingredients. As we all know, the Coke formula is one of the best guarded secrets in the world. It is right up there, along with the nuclear codes. Initially reluctant to reveal its ingredients, eventually Rabbi Geffen gained their trust and they shared with him the contents, but not the quantities or amounts. As a result of his negotiations and

discussions with the management, the giant beverage company agreed to use cane sugar for the holiday, and so he pronounced Coke to be kosher for Passover.

Rabbi Geffen wrote in his ruling, “Because it has become an insurmountable problem to induce the great majority of Jews to refrain from partaking of this drink. I have tried earnestly to find a method of permitting its usage. With the help of God, I have been able to uncover a pragmatic solution.” A letter to the editor of Time Magazine by someone from Atlanta helped to spread the word, and people to this day look for the Coke bottles with the yellow caps, knowing it will be sweeter than the regular Coke. Maybe instead of saying “things go better with Coke”, their slogan should be “Matzah goes better with Coke.”

All of which brings us to the question of what to do about kitniyot today.

Building on a ruling from the Israeli conservative movement in a teshuva written by Rabbi David Golinkin, originally in Hebrew for Israeli Jews in the 1980’s, this past December the Conservative movement’s Committee on Jewish Law and Standards ruled that kitniyot are permissible. For many of us the decision is no less than earth-shattering, for it breaks with centuries of tradition. While in Israel, where there are large numbers of Sephardic Jews, and many Sephardic Jews married to Ashkenazic Jews, there has been growing acceptance of this practice, many Ashkenazim cannot bring themselves to change their practice and to deviate from the way their grandparents and great grandparents kept the holiday.

This year’s Guide is not an instruction to do so, but rather recognizes that those who wish to eat legumes, rice, corn and beans may do so. Caution must still be exercised in regard to packaged and processed foods which might use regular hametz in its preparation.

I accept the ruling, but with the caveat that I do not want people to view it as a leniency or granting of permission to lessen our restrictions and be any less vigilant about not consuming hametz during the holiday. It does not mean that we are suddenly allowed to eat bread, to go to non-kosher restaurants during the holiday, nor may we ease up on the extent of our preparations for the holiday to rid our homes of all leavened products. I welcome and encourage those who do not keep kosher throughout the year to do so during Passover.

The more we continue to be rigorous in our observance of the holiday and prepare our kitchens and homes and observe the dietary laws of the holiday, the greater the likelihood that we will connect to our past and thereby feel that the story is ours.

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