

Our Seder Plate Traditions

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I am unsure as to whether I have shared this story with you before, but it is such an important personal narrative that I hold dear to my heart.

Perhaps one of the best experiences of my first year of Rabbinical school was participating in the Former Soviet Union Pesach Project, where my classmates and I travelled to the FSU and led Passover Seders in communities without clergy and where Jewish identity, in some cases, needed to be kept hidden. I spent my Passover in 2008 in Belarus, particularly in the areas of Minsk and Vitebsk, and was profoundly impacted by the sense of pride in tradition that these Belarussian Jews felt. Despite being pressured to hide as a Jew—so much so that there was one Seder that I led in which I was told that we had exactly 1 hour, and all ritual items needed to be stored immediately so that they were not confiscated—each and every individual I encountered spoke of the need to preserve Judaism in any way that they could. They were committed to following the traditions of Passover exactly as they should be followed, even if the remainder of the year their Jewish identity, like the ritual items, was stored away.

Tradition is a powerful thing. The rituals we observe, the melodies we sing, and the customs we pass down—whether frequent or intermittent, rituals are the language that shape our identity as individuals and communities. We pass them down from generation to generation knowing that in those traditions we are connected to something bigger than our individual selves. We take these

traditions very seriously, and we get very, very upset when someone changes them.

We forget, though, that traditions are not at all logical. Why turkey and not chicken on Thanksgiving? Why sing “Take Me Out to the Ball Game” during the seventh inning and not the sixth? And, when it comes to ritual, there is only one answer: Because! “Because this is the way I received it, this is the way I do it, and this is the only way it should be done.” When it comes to ritual, logic has nothing to do with it. The answer is in our *kishkes*; it is the way it should be.

Tradition is so powerful that there are many Jews who do not keep kosher on a regular basis, but also rid their houses of *chametz*, leavened bread, and keep kosher for Passover. To me, this is such a fascinating phenomenon—that traditions such as Passover observance are so ingrained in our souls that it simply doesn’t matter how we practice Judaism the rest of the year.

Tradition is so important that in many cases, it becomes mistaken as law. As we may know, for Ashkenazic Jews (most Jews of Central and Eastern European descent), the tradition on Passover has been to not eat foods considered *kitniyot*, which includes beans, rice, corn, and seeds. There have been many reasons Ashkenazic communities refrained from eating *kitniyot*. For example, there was a concern that because *kitniyot* can be ground to make flour and then baked, one could mistakenly assume that their neighbor was eating chametz. Furthermore, there was concern that chametz grain might get mixed up with the *kitniyot* if they were stored in close proximity. Yet, none of these reasons are law. As such, most

Mizrahi Jews (Jews of Spanish or Middle Eastern descent) – have been eating *kitniyot* during Passover for years.

And the Conservative movement declared *kitniyot* as kosher for Passover, which dramatically changed how many of us observed the festival. When this announcement was made a few years ago, people began to question whether it was *now* okay to eat *kitniyot*. The truth is, though, that it was never *not* okay to eat *kitniyot*.

There is only one reason to observe this custom: the desire to preserve an old custom. This desire can be very strong, and there are those of us who will always stick to the "custom of our ancestors," and who will be drawn to that tradition, even though they know that it is permitted to eat *kitniyot* on Pesach.

So it is with other traditions as well: eating apples and honey on Rosh Hashanah, chicken soup on Shabbat, or even Thanksgiving turkey. Yet now that our season of freedom and redemption has begun, now that Passover quickly approaches us, I think about how our connections to tradition are constrained by time. Will our connection to the traditions of Passover be left behind, stored away with the Seder plates and Haggadot until next year? Perhaps we can consider how we can retain the positive feelings associated with our holidays and traditions year-round.

We do not need holidays such as Passover (or even Thanksgiving for that matter) in order for our families to come together. We do not need special occasions—graduation, birthdays, and even B’nai Mitzvah—for us to celebrate together. We

do not need times of loss in order to show concern for those we love. Indeed, traditions, holidays, and special occasions contribute to a sense of comfort and belonging. They reinforce important values, enable us to show gratitude, serve as an avenue for creating lasting memories, and present us with a context for meaningful pause and reflection. But what if what was once solely considered tradition joins the fabric of our lives each and every day?

One hour had quickly passed and we expeditiously put away Seder plates, Haggadot, and even a flag of Israel in a locked cabinet in the room. As we walked out of the room, I noticed a piece of art with a particular signature; in Hebrew script was the word *Shema*. Because this was believed to be the name of the artist, the picture, with the word *Shema*, hung proudly in a room that needed to be bare of any sense of Jewishness. Next to the signature, usually where there is a marking indicating the edition number and size, was 1/1. Tradition, even in the smallest of ways, could be present every day.

May we forever hold our traditions in our hearts, may they never be in hiding, and may they transform us each and every day.

Shabbat Shalom.