

The Jewish festival of Passover celebrates the exodus from Egypt three thousand years ago. As part of the festival, we retell the story of the Exodus during a ritual meal called the seder. And at the seder, there is a plate of ritual foods. The plate contains, for instance, bitter herbs to remind us of the bitterness of slavery, and a roasted egg to remind us of spring and rebirth. Several years ago, by a friend's house, the plate also contained an orange.

I asked a person sitting down near the seder plate: "Excuse

quoted in the Talmud, or thereabouts). Rabbi Heschel made a speech at some convocation of rabbis. One participant asks one of the oldtimers how he liked the speech. "Women belong on the bima (podium) like an orange belongs on the seder plate."

It's a wonderful story, and it is clear that the orange does now belong on the seder plate. But, then, as we get to the part of the seder where the foods on the seder plate are explained, the person talking about the orange has a slightly different

Why we put an orange on the seder plate

me, but I've never heard of an orange on a seder plate." It is explained to me, as to a clever male person with the sense to ask (to paraphrase a well-known seder parable), that this is because of something that happened to Susannah Heschel*, the first

woman ordained as a Reform Rabbi (and, therefore, the first woman ordained as a rabbi since the time of Bruria, the only woman

explanation: different event, different woman rabbi, same punch line.

Over the years, I have told and retold this story. I have gradually learned that the orange replaced a bread, a food forbidden on the holiday, placed there by lesbians** as a sign of their exclusion from the Jewish community. Professor (not Rabbi) Heschel, among others, did change the custom: an orange was substituted for bread, and generalized it to represent all of those marginalized by the Jewish community: from gays and lesbians, to widows and orphans. Others adapted the story to meet different needs and made the orange a feminist, but not specifically lesbian symbol. It was that latter story that was taught our youngest in bar mitzvah class a couple of years ago.

My favorite variant was told at the end of that seder where I first heard the story, when a third participant came up to me as we were cleaning up, presented a new lineage for the story in which her lover's mother was present, and told me her version. Then she described how her own mother, who has been slow at times to embrace new things, fell in love with the new custom, too. "Mom now puts an orange on the family seder plate, too. Except that," as my friend explained, "mom sometimes gets confused, so some years it's an orange, some years it's a grapefruit."

* Susannah Heschel, of course, is a professor, but not a rabbi. But then, this is not entirely her story.

** See Alpert, Rebecca, "Like Bread on the Seder Plate." New York: Columbia University Press, 1997.

