

who gave voice to our silent questions. She reminds us that we find comfort in voicing our questions, whether or not we find answers. In response to this child who does not know to ask, we can take a moment in the seder to remember the parent, friend, teacher, or whomever it was who was able to alleviate some of our pain by creating the space for our questions.

In reinterpreting this ancient passage of the haggadah, we address the questioner in each of us: invoking the wise daughter to guide us in discerning who, what, and when to question; welcoming the "wicked child" to ask the questions that we have been conditioned to turn away from or repress; honoring the simple child who shows us the fundamental questions at the core of all our learning and discovery; and, above all, opening the silent child within us, learning to define and articulate questions that we have not been able to ask before. As we question and engage with our texts and traditions, our relationship to them grows stronger. We can learn from the four daughters how to celebrate both the question and she who asks it.



Orange on the Seder Plate

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Passover was high family drama in my childhood. Preparations began weeks in advance, with meticulous scrubbing, shopping, and organizing. Strong emotions came out in the two days before the holiday, when the kitchen was half kosher for Passover, half *chametz*, and everyone had to tread very carefully. One mistake could bring calamity. One year, the Passover dishes were mistakenly washed with the wrong

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sponge, prompting an emergency trip downtown to buy a new set of dishes just hours before the seder.

Then came the cooking. My mother ground the fish in a hand grinder, ground the liver and onions in another grinder, washed the masses of vegetables, separated dozens of egg yolks for ten sponge cakes, and put the right ingredients in the right pots—but it was up to my father to add the spices. He was the seasoning expert who would appear in the kitchen every few hours; taste the boiling sweet and sour carp, the chicken soup, the chopped liver; and determine which pots needed pinches of cloves, salt, garlic, sugar, and pepper.

The two days before Pesach were the most intense part of the holiday for our family. Searching with a candle for the *chametz* the night before the holiday, burning it in the morning, and then making anxious last-minute runs to the store until, in the afternoon, panic set in. My mother always became frantic. At that point, husband and daughter became too much, so she banished us from the apartment. We went across the street to Riverside Park, where we joined the sad, quiet parade of husbands and children banished from their homes while frenzied wives did their last-minute cooking in the hours before the holiday began. We walked for an hour or two, feeling our exile, worried about when we could return home and be welcomed, and feeling guilty that my mother was exhausting herself.

When we finally sat down at the table for the seder that evening, we heard the same liturgy from my mother every year: If the men had to do all this work, the Rabbis never would have made these laws! Only women understand the true meaning of Egypt; only women have to slave away for weeks of preparation for Passover!

No Exodus quite yet for my mother. While my father presided over the seder, with a dozen friends and colleagues present, my mother was back in the kitchen, hovering over the pots: preparing, serving, washing.

I never quite knew where I belonged. I wanted to be with my father, listening to his explanations of the haggadah, reading the Hebrew texts, enjoying the splendor of the beautiful table. But I also wanted to stay in the kitchen helping my mother and urging her to

sit down with the guests, to rest, and to enjoy the seder. Wherever I was, I felt guilty for abandoning the other parent.

There were, in effect, two seders taking place: the liturgical seder led by my father, and the seder of the meal and of serving the guests. Passover is about liturgy *and* food; both reenact slavery, the Exodus, and the promise of redemption. How could they be brought together? At the ritual commemoration of the Exodus, what could we do to recognize the slavery created by the obligations of the seder itself?

Frankly, recognition alone was not what I wanted. My mother once told a pious professor of Talmud, "If I met the Rabbis who created the Passover laws, I'd give them a piece of my mind." The male gender privilege is enacted each year as the men interpret the laws of preparing for Passover and preside as kings over the seder, without participating in the scrubbing, shopping, cooking, serving, and washing. Only a radical change, a social revolution, will change that.

My own experience of radical change came after the death of my father. I suddenly found myself in both positions—in charge of the kitchen work and also leading our family seder. I looked for various ways to bring the experience of preparation to the seder table. Preparing for Passover is an essential *mitzvah*, as important as the seder itself, but it has become for so many of us simply a chore, devoid of liturgical attention. When the matzah is baked before Passover (usually by men), the task is accompanied by the recitation of psalms. But women's food preparation for the holiday has come to be devalued as a secular activity, rather than respected as a *mitzvah*. I had long known that Chasidim understand setting the seder table and arranging the seder plate as religious acts, accompanied by kabbalistic meditations. I decided to share this idea with my guests and asked them to arrive early and participate in that process.

Yet, overcoming the gap between kitchen and seder table was only a small gesture of social change. I also wanted the seder guests to be aware that while, on the one hand, we were celebrating the collective liberation of the Jewish people from Egyptian slavery, on the other

could we bring that reality to our consciousness?

During the years just after my father's death, I started reading some wonderful feminist analyses that helped me understand the enslavement my mother experienced and the conflicts I felt between kitchen and seder. Mary Daly's book *Beyond God the Father* rescued me from my confusion about the way Judaism honored religious study and synagogue observance while at the same time excluding women from full participation in these arenas. From Daly I learned that the problem was not laws relegating women to second-class status but rather a symbol-system that placed holiness in the male domain. "If God is male, then the male is God," Daly observed.¹ At the same time, I learned from Adrienne Rich about "compulsory heterosexuality" and the connections between social and sexual regulation of women.² I knew, from my own experience, that women who asked too many questions and rebelled against their prescribed status used to be charged with witchcraft and now were likely to be called lesbians—as if that were a status of shame. I also understood that women without husbands or fathers (like my mother and me) were left in a kind of social limbo in the Jewish community. "Lesbian" had become a whip in society's disciplinary regimen used against any woman who deviated from the strict gender rules.

In the early 1980s, the Hillel Foundation invited me to speak on a panel at Oberlin College. While on campus, I came across a haggadah that had been written by some Oberlin students to express feminist concerns. The haggadah included a wonderful story about a feminist *rebbe* at her *tisch* (table), surrounded by her disciples, celebrating the seder. One disciple asked her, "*Rebbe*, why is there a crust of bread on the seder plate?" She sighed and answered, "Years ago, a family of women was preparing for Passover, cooking and cleaning, singing and rejoicing, and the youngest, Puah, aged fifteen, announced, 'I have a question, and I'm going to ask the rabbi!' She went to see the rabbi of the town, known for his strictness and learning, and he was delighted to see her: a question just before Passover usually meant that a crumb of *chametz* had fallen into the chicken soup pot, and he could

pot, the whole kitchen—instructing the family that they had to start all over again. ‘Ask, my child,’ he said. She asked, ‘Rabbi, what room is there in Judaism for a lesbian?’ ‘What!’ screamed the rabbi, outraged. He jumped up, grabbed her by the shoulders (forgetting that he shouldn’t touch a woman), and shouted, ‘There’s as much room for a lesbian in Judaism as there is for a crust of bread on the seder plate!’”

“And that,” the feminist *rebbe* said, “is why we have a crust of bread on the seder plate.”

The Oberlin story was wonderful, and the ritual of placing a crust of bread on the seder plate in response to it was inspiring to me. But I couldn’t follow it literally. Including bread on the seder plate destroys Passover—it renders everything *chametz*. And its symbolism suggests that being a lesbian is being transgressive, violating Judaism, which is not true. I wanted to celebrate being gay or lesbian as one of many great ways to be Jewish and to mark the fruitfulness created in human society by the diversity of our sexualities. I also wanted to call attention to the links between the homophobia that has made the lives of gays and lesbians so difficult and the gender discrimination experienced by Jewish women.

So at our next Passover, I decided to place an orange (actually, I used a tangerine!) on our family’s seder plate. I chose an orange because it suggests the fruitfulness for all Jews when lesbians and gay men are contributing and active members of Jewish life. “Be fruitful and multiply”³ is the Bible’s first commandment, and we need to recognize the fruitfulness of gay and lesbian presence, and encourage that presence to multiply.

Early in the seder, I asked everyone to take a segment of the fruit, say the blessing over it, and eat it to symbolize our solidarity with Jewish lesbians and gay men as well as with others who are marginalized within the Jewish community. Since each tangerine segment has a few seeds, we added the gesture of spitting them out at that seder, recognizing and repudiating the sin of homophobia that poisons too many Jews

er, whose experience of social marginalization following the death of my father was painful to watch. No longer part of a couple, she was not invited to friends’ homes or to evenings at the theatre. While I didn’t say anything, I wanted to mention orphans, thinking of myself. In Jewish tradition, the loss of a father makes you an orphan, even if your mother is still alive. That is certainly also true in patriarchal societies. The death of my father had suddenly and radically altered my position—something I felt acutely in every social situation from the synagogue to interactions with friends. Losing a husband and father meant that our household had lost much of its status in patriarchal society.

And, thinking about my own family experience, I also saw the orange as representing the fruitfulness that results when women lead the seder. In so many ways, my life was one of struggling to be part of Judaism—struggling for a bat mitzvah, an *aliyah*, the right to say kad-dish, inclusion in the *minyan*. All the barriers that my generation of feminists was able to pull down needed public markers. Yet, celebrating women’s inclusion in the synagogue had become, even at that time, a mainstream, conventional act, whereas gay and lesbian Jews were still behind barriers. While the feminist movement was reaching a stage of acceptance in the Jewish community that made it unacceptable to ridicule its efforts, Jewish attitudes—even in the years after the Stonewall riot (the major gay revolt against homophobia, in New York City in 1969)—remained hostile and mocking toward gay liberation.

The connections between my struggles for recognition as a woman, my mother’s social banishment as a widow, and the erasure of gay and lesbians within the Jewish tradition were clear. The place for women is small and narrow, and sexual options are confined, and—if limited to heterosexuality only—unnatural.

Thus, while I originally placed an orange on my family seder plate for a combination of reasons that were indeed related to women’s marginality in Judaism, my fundamental message was clear: we ate the orange to express our solidarity with gay and lesbian Jews. To speak of slavery and long for liberation demands that we acknowledge our

Over the years, when lecturing, I often mentioned my custom as one of many new feminist rituals that had been developed in the past twenty years. I always identified it as an act of solidarity with lesbians and gay men. I talked about the celebration of homosexuality in medieval Hebrew poetry, about homoeroticism in classical rabbinic and kabbalistic texts, and about the ways in which a homosexual hermeneutic might help us understand some of the experiences underlying male-authored Jewish theology, which expresses passionate love of a male God. I drew parallels between the experiences of closeted gays and Jews who have hidden their identities in different historical eras, from the enslaved Israelites in Egypt to the Marranos who concealed their religious practices to modern Jews striving to assimilate. And I was ashamed when gay and lesbian Jews thanked me for naming homophobia a sin, because, they said, rarely did anyone in the Jewish community do so.

After a few years, I discovered a strange and disturbing phenomenon: strangers started telling me that they were placing an orange on their seder plate because they had heard a story about me. The story went like this: After a lecture I delivered in Miami Beach, a man stood up and angrily denounced feminism, saying that a woman no more belongs on the *bimah* than an orange belongs on the seder plate. After hearing this tale dozens of times, all over the country, I realized that my story had fallen victim to a kind of folktale process in which my custom was affirmed but my original intention was subverted. My idea—a woman's words—were attributed to a man, and my goal of affirming lesbians and gay men was erased.

For years I had read studies by feminist scholars about women who had ghostwritten men's books or whose scientific discoveries were attributed to men. I read such studies with a kind of distance, sure that such things could never happen today—and certainly not to me. Yet, I had experienced that same, typical patriarchal maneuver.

Nowadays I know of lots of people who place an orange on their seder plate, and I have even seen new seder plates designed with a place

seder are usually far removed from my original intentions. The orange has come to signify a general affirmation of Jewish women, rather than Jewish lesbians and gay men. While I am delighted by any effort to recognize women in a Jewish context, I worry about the process that led from my original goal to the present, more watered-down version. I certainly support the inclusion of women and the empowerment of women, but nowadays, outside the Orthodox community, that is hardly radical or controversial. What does remain a deep and intractable problem, however, is the pervasive homophobia in Jewish life. The issue is not merely one of inclusion but also one of removing a toxin that has infiltrated our minds and souls.

Passover remembers enslavement and celebrates liberation. The matzah itself is double-valenced—a symbol of slavery and of freedom. I would hope the orange can also have a double significance, reminding us of the ways homophobia poisons our lives and the ways homosexuality enriches our community.

The transformation of the orange's significance might itself prompt us to consider how deeply ingrained patriarchy remains in our modern society. But beyond that, my hope is for the orange to once again bear the meaning I originally intended for it: a ritual object that helps the Jewish community to take an important first step—speaking into existence gay and lesbian Jews.

