



פסח PESAH

*A Guide for Spiritual Humanistic Jews
Sephardic Tradition • Humanistic Reflection*

2026 | 5786

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*"In every generation, each person should see themselves
as if they personally left Egypt."*

Before the Seder

Preparing your home, your kitchen, and yourself

What is Hamets?

חמץ

The Torah in a number of places prohibits the possession and consumption of hamets (Ex. 12:15, 12:18–20, 13:7–8, Deut. 16:3). Only five types of grain can become hamets: wheat, barley, oats, spelt, and rye.

When mixed with water, if these grains are not baked within 18 minutes they become hamets and are forbidden on Pesah. Warm water and dough left standing speed up the fermentation process.

Matsa is made using special flour — guarded to ensure it has never contacted water — mixed with cold water. The dough is constantly kneaded until placed in the oven. The entire process takes less than 18 minutes.

Discussion

- The Torah treats hamets with unusual urgency — it must not merely be avoided but actively removed from your possession. What does it mean to you, as a Spiritual Humanistic Jew, to physically clear your home of something? Is there a non-theological meaning in the act of searching and removing?
- The 18-minute rule is precise, almost scientific — fermentation is a natural process, and the law is essentially a race against biology. How does grounding a sacred practice in the physical reality of the natural world resonate with your humanistic values?
- Hamets is often interpreted metaphorically as pride, ego, or the parts of ourselves that have “puffed up.” Do you find that metaphor useful? What would your personal hamets be this year — what would you want to clear out?
- Matzah is made under careful, controlled conditions — guarded flour, cold water, constant attention, against the clock. What human values does that discipline reflect? Is there something spiritually meaningful in the effort itself, separate from any divine command?

חמץ

Kitniyot (Legumes)

קיטניות

Kitniyot (legumes) are among the most common sources of confusion during Pesah. While prohibited in Ashkenazi communities, practices vary widely among Sephardim. Some communities permit fava beans (fresh, not dried); others avoid rice and chickpeas. If one has the custom of eating rice, it must be checked three times for hamets.

Only the five grains can become hamets. Legumes such as beans, lentils, rice, and quinoa can never become hamets. Kitniyot are forbidden to Ashkenazi Jews not because they can become hamets, but because they can be ground into flour resembling it — a rabbinic decree of caution.

Nevertheless, Ashkenazim may eat in Sephardic homes during Pesah, as long as they do not eat kitniyot and the pots and pans have not been used for kitniyot within the last 24 hours.

Discussion

- The kitniyot prohibition for Ashkenazim is a rabbinic decree — a fence built around the Torah's actual rule — not a biblical commandment. As a Spiritual Humanistic Jew, how do you think about the difference between laws rooted in text and laws rooted in communal tradition and caution? Does the origin of a practice affect its meaning or value for you?
- Sephardic communities vary widely on kitniyot — some eat fava beans, some avoid rice, some permit everything. What does it mean to you that there is no single “correct” Pesah? Does that variation feel like freedom, or does it create uncertainty?
- The rule about checking rice three times for stray grains is a striking example of taking responsibility seriously through careful, deliberate attention. Where else in your life do you practice that kind of mindful vigilance — not because you are commanded to, but because something matters enough?
- The ruling that Ashkenazim may eat at Sephardic tables, with care, is a small act of communal bridge-building across difference. Are there moments where you have adapted your own standards to be in relationship with others?

Cleaning for Pesah

Bedikat Hamets — בדיקת חמץ

The entire home must be searched for hamets. The search is performed with a candle (or flashlight). Offices, businesses, and cars must also be searched. The Torah requires removing hamets of at least a kazait (roughly half a pita) in size. Smaller crumbs, dust, and residue do not require removal.

The sages decreed bedikat hamets — checking for actual food-sized pieces that one might accidentally eat. They were not concerned with crumbs under beds or rotten residue. There is no need to move furniture looking for crumbs.

The purpose of bitul hamets is to nullify any small remaining pieces through a declaration. The purpose of bedikat hamets is to physically remove actual food. A “Pesah car wash” is not necessary.

Discussion

- The sages drew a careful line: remove what someone might actually eat and nullify what remains. This is a strikingly practical legal philosophy — the law serves human behaviour, not the other way around. How does this kind of reasoning resonate with your humanistic values?
- Bitul — nullification — is a sincere internal act of letting go that is legally sufficient. Where in your own life have you experienced the liberation of mentally releasing something you could not fully control?
- By stating that there is no need to move the bed because crumbs don't count, the sages were protecting people from anxiety and unnecessary burden. How do you navigate the tension between taking a practice seriously and not letting it become overwhelming?

Preparing Your Home — Cleaning in Just a Day!

Pesah cleaning doesn't have to be a full spring cleaning. We are not required — nor is it recommended — to arrive at the Seder exhausted.

Kitchen:

Thoroughly clean; no crumb of hamets left. Dishes and shelves not used on Pesah may be sealed. Crumbs in hamets dishes are covered by the sale of hamets.

Food Pantry, Bathroom Cabinets:

Do not clean. Seal, mark, and include in the sale of hamets.

Dining Room, Table, Couch:

Clean where people eat. Cover the table with a tablecloth. Check between couch cushions. Child's high chair: immerse in boiling water with cleaning agents and clean cracks with a stiff brush.

Discussion

- We should not arrive at the Seder exhausted. Rest and presence are treated as Jewish values in themselves, not luxuries. How do you relate to the idea that how you arrive at a sacred moment matters as much as the preparations you made to get there?
- Much of what people do for Pesah turns out to be unnecessary — driven by anxiety, custom, or social pressure rather than actual law. Can you think of other areas of your Jewish practice where you carry obligations that are self-imposed rather than real? What would it feel like to put them down?
- There is something almost meditative in the methodical movement through your own space before a major festival. What could your own Pesah preparation feel like — a burden, a ritual, a form of mindfulness, or all three?

בדיקת חמץ

Pre-Pesah Basics

Sale of Hamets • Travelling

Sale of Hamets

Jews may not own hamets during Pesah. One way to avoid this prohibition is to sell your hamets to a non-Jew before the holiday. Sold hamets is put away in a clearly marked, closed place. After the holiday it is purchased back and may be used again about one hour after Pesah ends. Please check with your rabbi for exact times.

Travelling for Pesah

If you will not be home for the entire holiday, you may be lenient and not clean. Sell all the hamets in the house — including cabinets and closets. If someone is staying in your home, clean the rooms they will use and tape off unused rooms. Sell any hamets in those rooms.

Discussion

- The sale of hamets is one of Judaism's most well-known legal fictions. As a Spiritual Humanistic Jew, what do you make of a communal agreement to treat a symbolic act as legally real? Is there honesty in it, or does it trouble you?
- The travelling provision shows the law bending to meet human circumstance. What does it mean to you that halacha contains this kind of built-in flexibility? Does it change how you think about Jewish law more broadly?
- The hamets you sell is always yours, albeit temporarily reassigned. Are there things in your own life — habits, attitudes, comforts — that you have found value in temporarily setting aside, even knowing you would return to them?

The Seder Essentials

14 stages from Kadesh to Nirtsah — from the first cup of wine to the closing songs in Ladino

What You Need for the Seder

- ☐ **Wine**
- ☐ **Matsa**
- ☐ **Karpas**
- ☐ **Maror**
- ☐ **Haroset**
- ☐ **Hard Boiled Eggs**
- ☐ **Shank Bone or Beetroot**
- ☐ **Tapuz**

The Seder Plate

Ke'ara — קערה

Matsa

Use handmade Matsa Shemura if possible. Three matsot sit on the Seder plate — the Sephardic custom, as opposed to a separate tray.

Karpas

The Sephardic custom is celery dipped in vinegar, as opposed to the Ashkenazi custom of parsley and salt water.

Maror (Bitter Herb)

The Sephardic custom is romaine lettuce. Maror is eaten twice during the Seder.

Haroset

Reminds us of the mortar Jews made in Egypt. In Greek and Turkish communities: ground dates, raisins, apples, walnuts, orange rind/juice, and wine — spreadable like a jam or paste on matsa.

Egg (Huevo Haminado)

Represents the Hagigah — the festival sacrifice offered in the Temple. Since we no longer have a Temple, the egg stands in place of that offering.

Shank Bone (or Beetroot)

Represents the Korban Pesah — the Passover Sacrifice. Since we no longer perform this commandment, we place a shank bone on the plate.

Discussion

- Each item on the Seder plate is a physical object carrying a story. The Sephardic versions — celery in vinegar, romaine, date-and-walnut haroset — are particular to specific communities and families. What does it mean to you that the symbols of a universal story of liberation are expressed through such local, particular ingredients? What could your family's Seder plate say about who you are?
- The egg represents a sacrifice that can no longer be performed. How do you relate to rituals that commemorate something that no longer exists? Can a symbol of loss also be a symbol of continuity or adaptation? If you have Christian neighbours, guests, or family perhaps adding a chocolate egg might represent another level of inclusivity and celebrate mixed families.
- Haroset has no standard recipe — it varies by community, family, and pantry. If you were to make a haroset that told your family's story, what would be in it?
- The Seder plate brings together sweetness, bitterness, sacrifice, and sustenance in one arrangement. What does the combination say to you about how Jewish memory holds joy and suffering together?
- You might not be vegetarian, but how might it feel to use a Beetroot instead of a bone?

Reclining

Heseba — הסיבה

On this night we are to feel complete freedom. Reclining was a common posture of people of nobility at their meals. Because on this night we are free, we recline at specific points in the Haggadah: when we drink each of the four cups of wine, and when we eat the matsa and afikomen.

Discussion

- Reclining was the posture of the free — of those who did not have to eat hunched over in haste or fear. The Seder asks us to perform freedom with our bodies before we may fully feel it in our hearts. How do you think about the relationship between physical practice and inner experience? How does embodied ritual create meaning?
- What does freedom mean to you personally, right now, in your own life? What would it take to feel it fully, even for one evening?
- Reclining is built into the structure of the Seder at specific moments — the four cups, the matsa, the afikomen. What moments are there in your own life where you pause to consciously inhabit a transition — to mark that something has changed?
- What is the Egypt you have left, or are still leaving?

Ha Lahma Anya — Passing the Seder Plate

הא לחמא עניא

The leader takes the Seder plate, adorned with all its ritual items, and walks around the table, circling the plate over each person's head, whilst the entire gathering chants in unison:

הא לחמא עניא בני חורין

Bivhilu yatsanu mimitsrayim halaḥma anya bené ḥorin

“In a hurry we left Egypt, with this bread we are free people.”

The Seder plate symbolises the calamities of the plagues as well as the oppression of slavery passing over us.

Discussion

- The Seder plate is carried over each person's head — the symbols of plague and slavery literally pass over every individual body in the room. What does it mean to you to let the memory of suffering physically touch you? Is there a difference between remembering oppression intellectually and allowing yourself to feel its weight?
- The chant declares simultaneously that this is the bread of affliction and that we are free people — poverty and freedom held in the same breath. How do you hold those two truths together in your own life?
- “In a hurry we left Egypt” — liberation rarely arrives on our own schedule. Can you think of a moment in your own life when freedom came suddenly, imperfectly, before you felt prepared? What did you carry with you, and what did you leave behind?
- The entire gathering chants in unison — one of the few moments where every voice speaks the same words at the same time. When have you experienced the particular power of a community speaking or acting as one?

The Four Questions

Arba HaKushiyot — ארבע הקושיות

We fill the glasses of wine and the youngest person present asks:

Why is this night different from all other nights?

On all other nights we eat either bread or matzah. Why on this night only matzah?

On all other nights we eat ordinary vegetables. Why on this night do we eat bitter herbs?

On all other nights we do not dip our food. Why on this night do we dip twice?

On all other nights we do not recline at a feast. On this night we recline.

מא נישתנא הלילא הזה מכל הלילות

Ma nishtana halaila hazé mikol haleilot?

Discussion

- What does it mean to you that Judaism places the asking of questions at the very centre of its most important ritual? How do you cultivate that spirit of genuine inquiry in your own life?
- “Why is this night different from all other nights?” asks us to be present, to notice, to compare, to wonder. When did you last stop and ask yourself why this moment is distinct — what is different about where you are right now in your life, compared to where you have been?
- The questions are asked by the youngest, but they belong to everyone at the table. What question has a child asked you that you are still turning over?
- The four questions frame liberation not as the absence of constraint but as a deliberate, conscious change in how we live. How do you mark the difference between ordinary time and sacred time?

ארבע הקושיות

The Four Children

Arba Banim — ארבעה בנים

Within us all are four children:

The child who wants to learn — we give full and detailed explanations, searching deep for answers.

The child who feels alone — we speak of connection and community, explaining why this ritual helps us connect to each other.

The child who is simplistic — we speak from the heart, explaining why our ritual can change the world.

The child who doesn't know how to ask — we give them a voice, let them be present, and accept them unconditionally.

Discussion

- The traditional Haggadah includes a “wicked” child. This text replaces that child with one who “feels alone.” What does that substitution say about how we understand alienation and rebellion? Is a child who withdraws from community wicked, or are they in pain — and does the distinction matter?
- The text says within us all are four children — not four types of other people, but four voices within each of us. Which of the four feels most present in you right now? Which one do you find hardest to nourish in yourself?
- The child who doesn't know how to ask is given a voice, presence, and unconditional acceptance — not an answer. What does it look like to create space for people who are not yet able to articulate what they need or believe?
- Each child receives a different response. Think of someone in your life who needs a different kind of response than you naturally give. What would it take to meet them on their own terms?

The Ten Plagues

Eser Makot — עשר מכות

In *Haggadat Bene Horin* by Martin Hasan Di Maggio, the ten plagues are reframed as contemporary human failures:

I. Hunger (*Ra'av*)

II. War (*Milhama*)

III. Tyranny (*'Aritzut*)

IV. Greed (*Betza*)

V. Bigotry (*Kana'ut*)

VI. Injustice (*Avel*)

VII. Poverty (*Oni*)

VIII. Ignorance (*Burut*)

IX. Pollution (*Zihum*)

X. Indifference (*Adishut*)

Discussion

- The traditional ten plagues are acts of divine intervention — things done to Pharaoh from outside. These ten are all human-generated. What does that shift say about both the source of suffering and the responsibility for ending it?
- Look at the ten plagues listed here. Which feels most urgent to you right now, in this moment in history? Which one do you feel most implicated in — not as a victim but as someone who could do more?
- The traditional Seder asks us to pour wine away for each plague — diminishing our joy because others suffered. If you performed that gesture with this list, which drop would be hardest to remove?
- The final plague is indifference — *adishut*. It comes last, after poverty, pollution, and injustice. Do you think indifference is the culminating plague — the one that allows all others to persist? What is the opposite of indifference, and how do you practice it?

Tapuz — The Orange

תפוז

The orange is a symbol of the ongoing efforts we all need to make to ensure that sexual minorities feel truly included in our lives.

For many Gay and Lesbian people in the Global North, rights have been somewhat won — but this is not true everywhere, and other sexual and gender minorities still do not enjoy freedoms anywhere in the world, including here. Whilst we celebrate diversity and freedom, we recognise this ongoing struggle.

We put an orange on our Seder plate as a symbol of sex, sexuality, and gender liberation. We eat a piece of orange and spit out the seeds into a bowl — as a symbol of our disgust at human rights abuses against sex, sexuality, and gender-diverse people.

Discussion

- The orange is a relatively recent addition to the Seder plate — a living example of the tradition evolving to reflect new moral understanding. What gives a new symbol legitimacy? Does it need communal consensus, or can it begin with one table, one family, one havurah?
- The act of spitting out the seeds is deliberately visceral — disgust expressed through the body, not just declared in words. Is there something more honest or powerful about a gesture like this compared to a spoken statement?
- The text notes that for many LGBTQ+ people in the Global North, rights have been “somewhat won.” The word “somewhat” is doing a lot of work. What does incomplete liberation look like in your own community? Who is still waiting at the threshold?
- The Exodus story is about a people moving from exclusion toward dignity and belonging. As you place the orange on your Seder plate this year, whose story of exclusion are you holding? How does your havurah actively work to make belonging real — not just symbolic?

Dayenu — It Would Have Been Enough

דיינו

If we have our freedom, it is enough for us.

If we have our happiness, it is enough for us.

If we have our hope, it is enough for us.

If we have our health, it is enough for us.

If we have our knowledge, it is enough for us.

If we lived by all these values, is it enough?

Whilst singing we symbolically whip each other with leeks!

Discussion

- This version replaces divine gifts with human ones: freedom, happiness, hope, health, knowledge. Which of these five feels most like “enough” to you right now — and which feels most fragile?
- The final line turns the song into a question: if we lived by all these values, is it enough? What would it actually look like to live by all five? Are you living by them? Is your community?
- Dayenu is one of the most joyful, raucous moments of the Seder — gratitude expressed through collective singing rather than private prayer. How do you experience gratitude in community differently from gratitude felt alone?
- The Sephardic custom of whipping each other with leeks is playful, physical, and slightly absurd — and it has been passed down for generations. What role does physical, embodied joy play in your experience of Jewish ritual? Why make room in your Seder for something that makes no solemn sense at all?

Making Pesah Memories

Rubissa Sharona Hassan

The rabbinic tradition states: “In each and every generation one is obligated to see themselves as if they went out from Egypt, as it says (Shemot 13:8): Because of this, Hashem did for me when I went out from Egypt.”

The power of Jewish memory is that we are commanded to remember the past and transmit it to the next generation. From the first Pesah until today, we are delighting in our memories, sharing them, and creating new ones. But how will this year be more memorable than last? If the text and traditions are consistent, how do we create engaging and indelible moments?

During the Seder, you could assign parts and add sound effects for each animal or character.

Moadim LeSimha!

Discussion

- The rabbinic obligation is not merely to know the Exodus story but to experience it as your own — “as if you went out from Egypt.” As a Spiritual Humanistic Jew, what does it mean to take personal ownership of a story that happened thousands of years before you were born? What is the difference between inherited memory and lived memory — and can one become the other?
- What has made a particular Seder stay with you — a moment, a person, a story, a piece of food, something that went wrong? What made it stick?
- The text speaks of a “vibrant chain” of memory linking grandparents to grandchildren. What memory of Pesah do you most want to pass on? Is there something from your family’s Seder that you fear may be lost if you don’t actively carry it forward?
- The suggestion to share a story about a gato or perro is playful and specific, rooted in Sephardic storytelling tradition. What is the role of humour, play, and lightness in sacred ritual? How does your havurah or family make room for joy and silliness alongside the serious work of memory and meaning?

Un Kavretiko — One Little Goat

Ladino Had Gadya

Un Kavretiko is the Ladino version of Had Gadya — One Little Goat. When we hear or sing the words for each animal we make the corresponding noises and mime the flow of water, fire, and a knife cutting. Some people make ghost noises for the Angel of Death. It is all a bit of fun and we don’t need to take any of it seriously.

Un kavretiko ke lo merko mi padre por dos levanim, por dos levanim...

A little goat that my father bought for two coins — and the cat came and ate the little goat, and the dog came and bit the cat, and the stick came and beat the dog, and the fire burned the stick, and the water put out the fire, and the ox drank the water, and the shohet slaughtered the ox, and the Angel of Death came for the shohet, and the Holy Blessed One overcame death itself.

Discussion

- Un Kavretiko is performed with noise, mime, and laughter — animal sounds, ghost voices, water and fire acted out around the table. The Seder ends not with solemnity but with play. What does it say about Jewish wisdom that the night’s final word is joy and absurdity rather than gravity? How do you hold the serious and the playful together in your own spiritual life?

Haggadat Bene Horin can be purchased here:

UK: <https://amzn.eu/d/00L2vb7k>

USA: <https://amzn.eu/d/00L2vb7k>

CANADA: <https://amzn.eu/d/00L2vb7k>

