

Simplifying Passover Restrictions



It's not your Bubbie's Passover any more. That is the expression I often use when I begin our annual "*Pesah* Bowl," our pre-holiday question and answer session, with fun and prizes for all. Many of the prizes I give out are selected from the plethora of products that are *kosher* for Passover, which seem to grow each year. In Bubbie's day, things were simpler. My mother always used to tell me that when she was growing up her mother only served meat and *pareve* meals, never dairy. In her small kitchen, it was just too much to have a full set of dishes for meat and dairy. For eight days, they could do without milk meals.

With all the special products available today, you would think Passover would be simpler. In fact, it is harder than ever. Products that were considered *kosher* for Passover ten or fifteen years ago are no longer certified. The Rabbinical Assembly, the Conservative Movement's rabbinic association, to which I belong, has introduced new restrictions on products based on whether they were purchased before or during Passover, and severely limited the products that need no special certification. Secondary restrictions have become more stringent than ever. Products that never come in contact with human food suddenly have *kosher* for Passover certification, like dog food and toilet bowl cleaners!

There are many reasons for these developments. But the net result is to put more and more obstacles before people who want to observe the laws of *kashrut* for Passover. Those of us who do observe shake our heads in dismay and confusion. Those who would like to begin are daunted by the multitude and complexity of restrictions. And we often look foolish to those who do not observe at all and have the benefit of being objective outside observers.

Kashrut generally, and *kashrut* for Passover in particular, was never meant to be this way, I believe. To me, these laws are spiritual and holy acts. They are meant to welcome God's presence into our lives, to identify with our ancestors who won their freedom after centuries of communal enslavement, and to express gratitude for one of the fundamental events that defines our people, the Exodus. These laws must not themselves become idols for a people forbidden to practice any form of idolatry. It is inappropriate to apply the laws of microscopic, chemical analysis to determine what is and what is not *kosher* for Passover (or year-round either, for that matter).

I am reminded of a passage in the *Talmud* where Moses comes back to earth after his death to observe the teachings of a great rabbi. After sitting through one of the lectures, Moses realizes that he does not recognize the rules discussed at all. He hears a student inquire of the rabbi, "What is the origin of these laws?" And the teacher answers, "Why, it is the law we received from Moses at Sinai, of course." Even then the rabbis recognized that the law could be taken to an absurd degree that even Moses would not recognize.

So in the Passover Preparations section for this year, you will see that I have begun to simplify our observance of Passover in several ways, at variance with the published guide of the Rabbinical Assembly. If you would like to see the RA's full guide, you can access it at <http://rabbinicalassembly.org/docs/Passover%205770.pdf>.

For the first time this year, our Guide states unequivocally that one may elect to eat foods known in Hebrew as *kitniot*, which include rice, corn, most beans, and legumes, without violating the strict dietary requirements of Passover. Let me explain.

The list of truly restricted foods is really rather limited. We are commanded not to consume anything that is *hametz* during the holiday. "*Hametz* is defined as the leavened products of five species of grain: wheat, oats, barley, rye, and spelt. These grains themselves are not forbidden, only the 'leavened' products of these grains, products made by the process of fermentation." Mixtures containing *hametz* are also prohibited.

But then there are foods which have been forbidden by custom only among Ashkenazic Jews. These are the *kitniot* foods. Sephardic Jews have never observed these prohibitions. They are, by all accounts, acknowledged as not being *hametz*. Nevertheless, in recent years, among Ashkenazic authorities, the restrictions on *kitniot* have been intensified, and in some ways are more stringent than those placed on what is truly *hametz*.

Several years ago, my colleague Rabbi Jeffrey Wohlberg, who is currently president of the Rabbinical Assembly, (whose father Cantor Max Wohlberg was a mentor of Cantor Davidson, and used to *daven* with us at AJ after his retirement, and whose son Rabbi Adam Wohlberg is the rabbi of Temple Sinai) told his congregation in Washington that he was recommending a suspension of all restrictions on *kitniot* and declaring them permitted for everyone during Passover. He based his opinion on a survey of the history of the prohibition, and the decision of the Rabbinical Assembly in Israel to abolish the prohibitions entirely. He wrote: "There is so much in Judaism which is beautiful and meaningful, so much which is worthy of observance that there is no need to maintain spurious customs which have neither purpose nor foundation.

We need to clearly distinguish between that which is important, which is an authentic practice, and which is not. The abstention from *kitniot* on *Pesah* falls within the latter category. It is confusing. It has no real basis in the law. It unnecessarily divides Jewish communities. From its inception, great scholars have opposed it."

I have often said from the *bima* that *kitniot* are not *hametz*, and that any Ashkenazic Jew who wants to add these foods to their Passover diet is not violating the holiday in any way. Now I have formally put it in writing in this year's Guide to practice. You will find in the Guide my opinion that "it is permissible to use these products (*kitniot*) on Passover, although one may elect to continue to refrain from them out of respect for ancestral tradition. If one continues to refrain from eating these foods on Passover, the prohibition is only on the foods themselves, or mixtures containing them; however, derivative products, like oils or sweeteners, are permitted. If one elects to use *kitniot* products on Passover, one must still be vigilant to be sure they do not contain any admixture of *hametz*."

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A Rabbinic Perspective *By Rabbi Seymour Rosenbloom*

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Simplifying Passover Restrictions *(continued)*

In addition, I encourage you to use good sense about products that have no *hametz* in them, like water packed tuna, and other minimally processed foods, like milk and cheeses. They do not require special certification, and there should be no distinction regarding when they have been purchased, whether before or during the holiday.

All of this is spelled out in our Guide for this year. I know that these changes may be shocking to some, and novel to others. Some will welcome them as long overdue, and others will be convinced that I am embarking on a "slippery slope" that will eventually lead us to abandon the special traditions of Passover.

But I firmly believe that unless we begin to restore sense and reason to these hallowed traditions, they will become discredited as picayune and silly, at best, and idolatrous, at worst.

As always, I welcome your comments, whether you agree or disagree.

Cindy and I and our children wish you a joyous Passover holiday, filled with family, love and marked by the cherished spiritual traditions of our people.

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