

Black Carrot #12

☆The Jewish Issue☆



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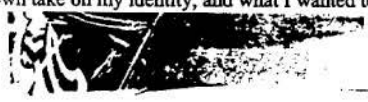
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Welcome to Black Carrot #12. The Jewish Issue.


In the past year or two, I've been thinking a lot about what it means for me to be Jewish. I'm a part of some hard to get into club. I'm a member for life no matter what I think, say, or do. I can even say "I'm not a Jew anymore.. Take my card, give me the Baconater Burger and lets never talk again.." and it simply wouldn't be... true. I can't think of anything in the world that would make me stop being a Jew. In my mind, the only thing that could come close would be to Intermarry (to a non-Jew) and bear a child and not tell him to her about their Jewish heritage and there you go - end of the line, no more. But that would never happen, not in a million years. (Or six thousand..)

But it's been on my mind, and certainly not because I was trying to think of some sort of loop hole of how to stop being a Jew, or how to turn my back forever on my culture or history. I've been more and more interested in it - and I've been studying in my own ways to find out how did I get here, and why am I a Jew, and what's even the point after all? Haven't I been paying attention to my punk records for the past fifteen years telling me to stay away from religion? That it's the opiate of the masses, that religion is the cause of a lot of war, and that all in all, its defiantly not punk to be into religion. The exceptions are if you're fifteen years old and you're sort of Goth and decide to become a nature worshipping Wiccan just to cheese off your Lutheran or Catholic parents. But then again, when you're fifteen and punk, pretty much everything you do will cheese off (or scare) your parents. All it takes is a cigarette and some sort of pentagram necklace from the mall.

And that's sort of what I bought into, to a small extent. Not being into my religion or wanting to be a part of it right around when I came into punk and such. I'm not saying that Crass got me to quit Hebrew school, or The Dead Kennedy's told me to denounce my religion with the song Moral Majority off of Plastic Surgery Disasters...) But I gave up a Jewish life for a secular life. I was starting to find my own take on my identity, and what I wanted to do and who I wanted to

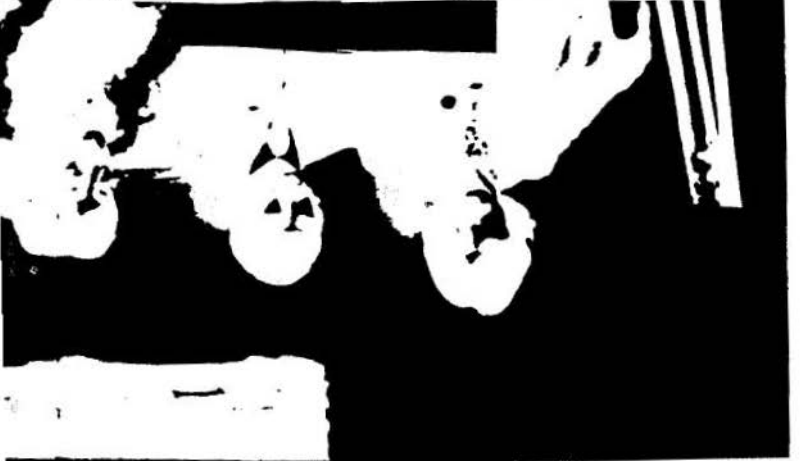



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hang out with. And it wasn't the geeks from Hebrew school, it wasn't going to Services on Friday night I wanted to live in the world of the cool, and go to a show or skateboard and get high or all the other wonderful harmless things you want to do as soon as you get your hands on them. I think I would have done the same thing no matter what religion I was, but what other one makes you miss out your weekend nights?

As an adult, I need to realize and acknowledge that my parents were not asking for anything that was unreasonable. This was not in my scope of understanding at the age of eleven, twelve, etc. Part of it now is that I live in Chicago now, and if I want to stay out all night on a weekday, I'll do it - or if I want to sit inside and read quietly and go to bed at ten pm on Friday - nobody can tell me otherwise. But asking me to give up my precious weekend night was too much to ask for. My parents were not strict about it, and I'm pretty sure it broke their hearts - but I made the choice for punk rock over a religious education. But it gets a bit more complicated after that.



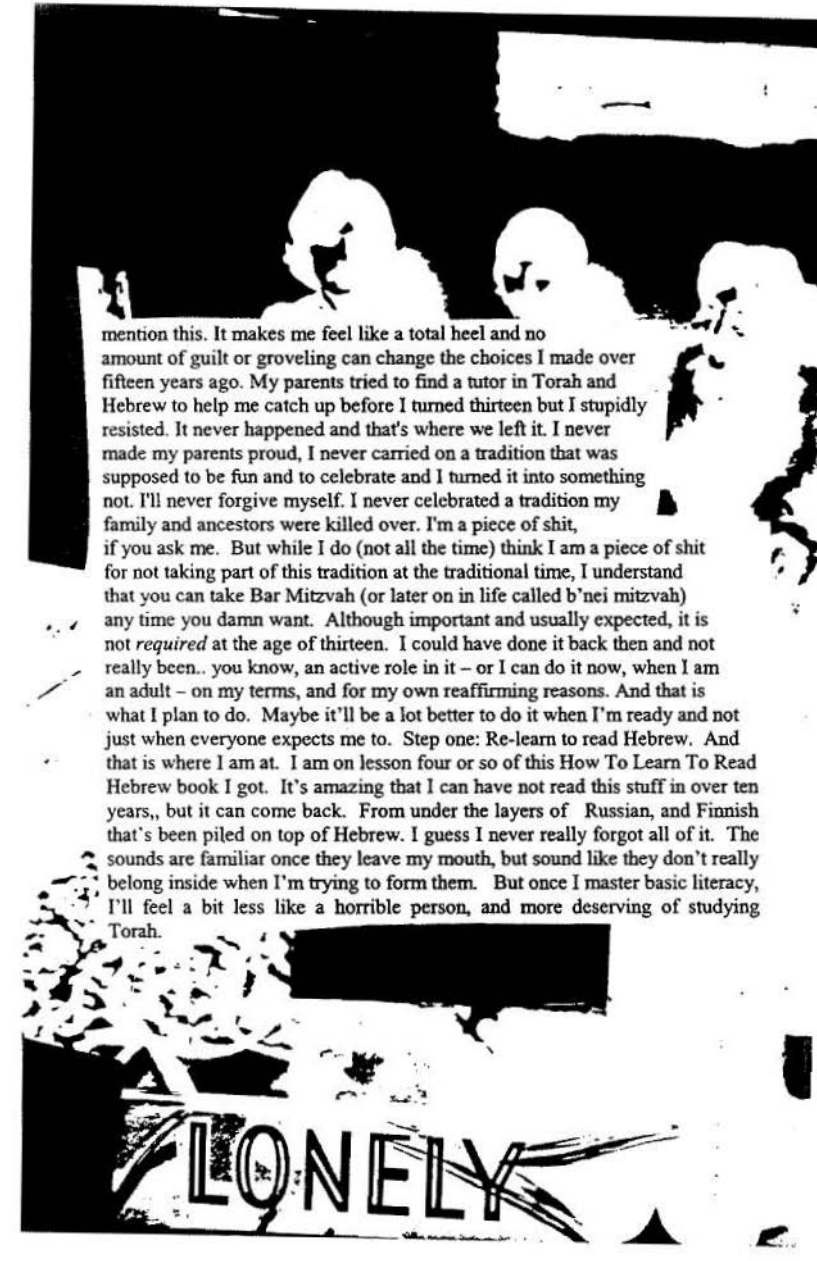
My best friend throughout all those years (and still up to today) is/was Jon Pixie. We became friends in the seventh grade. We were both outcasts and punk and were destined to be friends for the rest of our lives (which is how it's looking these days!). His parents were/are fairly devout Catholics. A religion and tradition that was pretty foreign to me. His parents didn't give him that 'choice' my parents did. And by choice, I mean - my parents eventually gave up on fighting with me over going to Services and other things at the Temple we belonged too. He was forced to get dressed up and go to Mass. He hated it, and I think resented being forced or blackmailed into going. As a teenager, your biggest enemy is anyone you think might be a hypocrite. Nothing makes a teenager more mad than someone who teaches one thing and does the opposite. Because people are constantly trying to instill some moral framework in the teenage mind, so they're fine tuned to bullshit. And a hippo critical parent is the most common. Getting busted for drinking, but your parents put away a bottle of wine a night over dinner? Hippocrates Getting told to get better marks in school, by your dad who got kicked out of college for some radical sixties yippie stunt? What a depressing hypocrite! And this is what Jon accused his parents of during these times. His parents wanted the picture of a perfectly adjusted happy church going family - but Jon knew the severe reality and it wasn't what his parents wanted to bring to church. But I wasn't forced to go. Jon and I had out Friday or Saturday nights free, and I'd just have to wait a few hours on Sunday till we could meet up at the parking lot we smoked at.. But I'm so much more insightful now as an adult, that I can think that my parents made the (difficult) but right decision. Even if they don't know it or not. By not forcing it on me, they didn't ruin it for me. They didn't turn it into a hassle or a chore. They didn't make me resent my religion or culture. I wonder that if it had been forced on me, and I went through everything - would I even be this interested in it now? Would it be just a boring part of my past, that I chose not to celebrate

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with honor and pride the way I do now? Maybe my parents made a smart choice for the long run, even if it broke their hearts back then?

Now comes a part that is sort of complicated and the hardest part to write about. And it is something that fills me with shame and maybe I need to just say it to get over it, or address it. This is something that I'll never let myself live down or get over. I never took a Bar Mitzvahs. I really hate to admit it, because its assumed that unless you spent your life in a cave, you were a part of this important, affirming ritual. And I never did. I was too into my own thing to finish my Hebrew School, and go through with it. And this is the "heart breaking" part that I kick myself for. I went to a handful of them and they were very fun, elaborate parties. They were catered and took place in hotels and there was a fun bus and karaoke for one of them. But not me. It was never my turn, and it wasn't really mentioned amongst my friends, and they probably figured I was either too cool or proud or too ashamed or thought my family couldn't afford such a schmaltzed up evening. (Or I didn't have enough friends to fill a bus) Kids usually get money and gifts from every living relative, no matter how old or distant. Kids can make a few thousand dollars, that gets put away "for college" but there is still a lot to be had. For my thirteenth birthday, my grandma gave me a check for a hundred dollars - and that was a lot more than the usual I'd get for my birthday. It really fills me with shame and embarrassment to even



mention this. It makes me feel like a total heel and no amount of guilt or groveling can change the choices I made over fifteen years ago. My parents tried to find a tutor in Torah and Hebrew to help me catch up before I turned thirteen but I stupidly resisted. It never happened and that's where we left it. I never made my parents proud, I never carried on a tradition that was supposed to be fun and to celebrate and I turned it into something not. I'll never forgive myself. I never celebrated a tradition my family and ancestors were killed over. I'm a piece of shit, if you ask me. But while I do (not all the time) think I am a piece of shit for not taking part of this tradition at the traditional time, I understand that you can take Bar Mitzvah (or later on in life called b'nei mitzvah) any time you damn want. Although important and usually expected, it is not *required* at the age of thirteen. I could have done it back then and not really been.. you know, an active role in it – or I can do it now, when I am an adult – on my terms, and for my own reaffirming reasons. And that is what I plan to do. Maybe it'll be a lot better to do it when I'm ready and not just when everyone expects me to. Step one: Re-learn to read Hebrew. And that is where I am at. I am on lesson four or so of this How To Learn To Read Hebrew book I got. It's amazing that I can have not read this stuff in over ten years,, but it can come back. From under the layers of Russian, and Finnish that's been piled on top of Hebrew. I guess I never really forgot all of it. The sounds are familiar once they leave my mouth, but sound like they don't really belong inside when I'm trying to form them. But once I master basic literacy, I'll feel a bit less like a horrible person, and more deserving of studying Torah.

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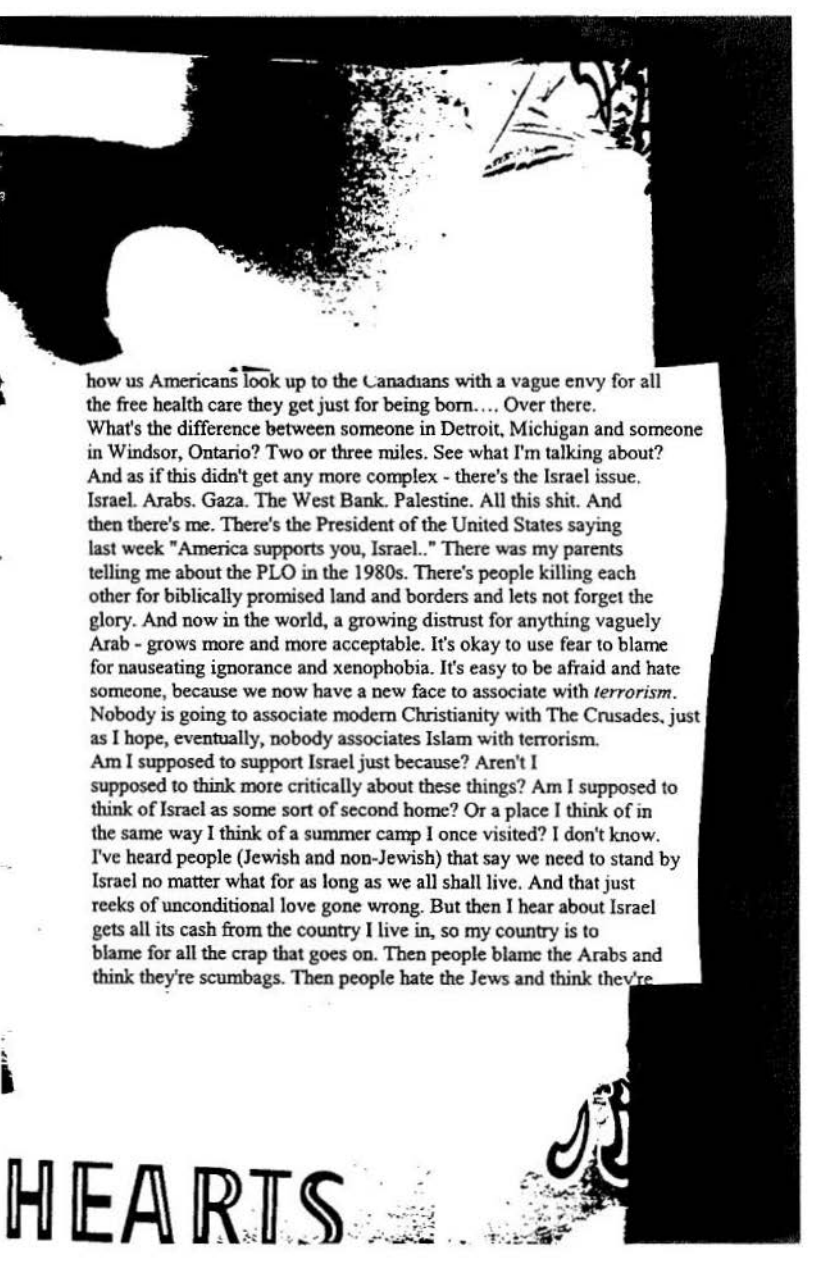
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I think people have a warmly naive view of Judaism, as a religion. And I mean "warmly" because some of the assumptions I've heard over the years are somewhat positive, but not always entirely correct. Sometimes I get the notion that people think Judaism is the "lesser of two evils" when it comes to religion, and comparing it to certain kinds of Evangelical Christianity. And I'm not really defending super shitty gone wrong Christianity, because a lot of it is nice ideas and nice people. I can't really get upset over people who think Jesus Christ is their pal and looks out for them, etc. Who really can? But a lot of mainstream out there Christianity is involved in a lot more than church picnics - and we all know the down side of some of it. Being anti-gay, sex negative... but since it's not my culture, I don't feel too compelled to bash it. Christianity does get a lot of bad rep though, because it seems some sects of it are the loudest and most vocal and active to crush progression/exterminate GLBT people, etc.. But some people don't know or just don't think about is that there are indeed really homophobic slants in some Orthodoxy. They just don't get the same kind of exposure as the godhatesfags crowd. Not all Jews embrace GLBT people, just like not all of any religion or culture do. But for some reason, people don't realize that Jews can be just as horrible as anyone else. Jews can hate homosexuals, fear blacks, distrust Arabs, you name it. Our long history of persecution, slavery, attempts at extermination does not exempt us from discrimination of others. And this is something we can't forget, that there is no nobility in the oppressed becoming the oppressor. I heard something depressing on the radio a few years ago.. Over the summer there was going to be a GLBT pride march/rally in the city of Jerusalem. And the local administration wanted to deny the permits needed. Making things difficult for GLBT to organize. And one of

the few times Jewish and Muslim and Christian authorities agreed, was in collective disgust over the very notion of GLBT people existing in their holy city. Later on, I heard someone was stabbed at one of the Israeli GLBT pride marches.. But I can't recall too many details at this point.. But this is so sad, that the only time religious leaders can come together was in opposition to queers. If there isn't a more clear example of how doomed we really are, that's it. Just because Jews aren't opening up Gay Brainwashing Reform Camps all over the United States, doesn't mean all Jews love same sex or gender blended relations. Every gay Jewish boy has choked a bit on his kugel when his mother talks about the happy day when he finds a "nice Jewish girl..", myself included.

So what's the allure of Judaism? Why in carnation would someone want to convert? Why do we see the occasional celebrity mention becoming involved in the Kabbalah? And all those dumb wrist bands or red bracelets? Why do some people think of Judaism as this 'cool' culture or religion? Is it because its sort of alternative but not too out there, so they can still be taken seriously by their peers or parents? Is it seen as "Christianity but without the middle man"? Even though Christianity is all about the middle man. Or people see Judaism as a way out of their guilt and privileged. To align oneself with a culture of people with a history of discrimination. I don't know. And I'm not claiming to know, because I was born Jewish and never had any say in the matter. So therefore, I've never had to question why I'm Jewish. I just am. And nothing will ever change that. So for someone to be so attracted to this religion or culture, that's something wholly other. Obviously the Jewish experience would be different for me, then to someone who found Judaism as the answer to a series of life's questions. A convert has to earn it, I just got it. It's like


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how us Americans look up to the Canadians with a vague envy for all the free health care they get just for being born.... Over there. What's the difference between someone in Detroit, Michigan and someone in Windsor, Ontario? Two or three miles. See what I'm talking about? And as if this didn't get any more complex - there's the Israel issue. Israel. Arabs. Gaza. The West Bank. Palestine. All this shit. And then there's me. There's the President of the United States saying last week "America supports you, Israel.." There was my parents telling me about the PLO in the 1980s. There's people killing each other for biblically promised land and borders and lets not forget the glory. And now in the world, a growing distrust for anything vaguely Arab - grows more and more acceptable. It's okay to use fear to blame for nauseating ignorance and xenophobia. It's easy to be afraid and hate someone, because we now have a new face to associate with *terrorism*. Nobody is going to associate modern Christianity with The Crusades, just as I hope, eventually, nobody associates Islam with terrorism. Am I supposed to support Israel just because? Aren't I supposed to think more critically about these things? Am I supposed to think of Israel as some sort of second home? Or a place I think of in the same way I think of a summer camp I once visited? I don't know. I've heard people (Jewish and non-Jewish) that say we need to stand by Israel no matter what for as long as we all shall live. And that just reeks of unconditional love gone wrong. But then I hear about Israel gets all its cash from the country I live in, so my country is to blame for all the crap that goes on. Then people blame the Arabs and think they're scumbags. Then people hate the Jews and think they're

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the scumbags. I just love how easily people latch onto binary problems. Jew vs. Arab. Black vs. White. North side vs. South side. Cubs vs. Sox. Shit, can't we think a bit more in depth of these things? How am I supposed to support a country unconditionally that I've never even been to? It's really hard for me to do that. Why not stand beside Brooklyn? Skokie? Great Neck, Long Island? At least those places I've been to. But the most hopeful thing I've ever heard is something like this "...what they don't realize is that Jews and Arabs have always been cousins, and it is a shame when anyone kills anyone..." In some way, that is a lot easier to believe rather than as a Jew I have a naturally born enemy that I must crush to secure my existence. No way. No borders, no nations, no occupation, no army. Just stuffed eggplant, matzos, falafel and peace. Maybe I'm just too naive. Maybe I expect too much from humanity. And speaking of all those things. Matzos falafel and such. Maybe we're not known for our world famous cuisine, but Jews have made the mark in mainstream culture. I can't really confirm that Jews invented the bagel, it's associated as a cornerstone of our culture. Is there nothing more Jewish (and tasty) than bagels and lox? Or herring? The knish? Farfel? And the more tough to love gefilte fish? All the happiest memories I have are of sitting at the kitchen table in Seagate, Brooklyn eating food my grandma made. Eating matzo ball soup, and home made horse radish and kugels and kishka, brisket, and gefilte fish. I maintain that she is the best cook to ever walk the earth and credit her for a big part of my Jewish identity. Jewish food has a reputation for being hearty, but somewhat "bland" when you hold it against the food of places like Barbados, Thailand, India, etc. But when there is a bowl of freshly ground up beet horse radish, I never missed a bite. It wasn't till I was a lot older then I realized that all Jews didn't eat the same food. Other than shunning pork, some Jews came from Egypt and Morocco or Spain! Some Jews were



dark skinned, some didn't have big noses, some made lamb and lentils for Pesach. Some even (gasp) used hot peppers and olives in their food. Think about the region where Israel is and then think about the region where Poland is.. It was a happy, happy day when I met some Jews who opened my tongue to flavors not tasted in my Ashkenazi Kitchen. It was sort of when I learned what trans gender was. "This is Jewish food?!" I'd say - comparing it to when I thought of how my mind was wrapped around you don't need to have a dick to be a boy and you don't need to be a big nosed Eastern European to be Jewish. Life got better when I realized how varied the Jewish experience can be. But growing up, — there was - without a shadow of a moment of a doubt. For even a second. That all of my stuffed animals and toys were Jewish. It never occurred to me to think any different. Of course Pac Man is Jewish. I even thought He Man had some Semitic qualities. This is something I still believe today. Since being a Jew is something that just... happens to us, the ones that are born that way. The ones who have no choice one way or the other. It is something that will never change. I can never step foot in a synagogue for the rest of my life but I'll still be a Jew. There isn't much you can do to. Like I said, the only thing that comes close is to have children and not raise them as Jewish. But that's the thing, sure you can be born Jewish - and for some people that's just about all there is. And that's.. well, fine. But also being Jewish is a constant learning process. It can start in Jewish Day School as a kid. Or starting a conversion program with a Rabbi. It can just be reading Jewish history, or Jewish law.. It can be trying to find what your needs are



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and where Jewish life can be a part of it. Some religious people say that you can't pick and choose what aspects of faith you can subscribe to. But I think no matter what the religion, there'll always be a flavor or denomination that'll work for the individual. Not everyone can, should, or would want to be part of the Orthodoxy. Just as "Fire and Brimstone" doesn't feel right to every Christian. Or the reason not everyone handles snakes and speaks in tongues. Other than Judaism teaching the notion of free will, I think it (like other faiths) can run the gambit from very conservative to very liberal. It is up to me to decide what I need. And I find it funny that we "practice" our religion. But it also my personal responsibility to learn as much as I can about my history, and how I got here and why we do what we do. I'm just one Jew, in humble awe of all those before me and all those who will come after me. More or less, the traditions and practices are unchanged in the history of thousands of years. And that makes me feel good.

WHY AN ORANGE ON
OUR, YOUR, THE SEDER
PLATE? LET US LEARN, READ
AND GROW? OR JUST READ ON....

Those Bay Area Jewish women who placed oranges on their Seder plates last week probably explained the act something like this:
It all began when Susannah Heschel, a leading Jewish feminist scholar, was lecturing at a synagogue in Miami. As she spoke, an elderly rabbi stood up and declared, "A woman belongs on the bimah like an orange belongs on the Seder plate."

Thus to show support for the changing role of women in American Jewish society, the tradition of placing an orange on the Seder plate began, and Heschel became a household name at many Passover celebrations around the globe.

The only problem is, according to Heschel herself, the story isn't true. "What you hear is not what actually happened," she recently told a crowd at the Marin Jewish Community Center program on "Women who Shook the Jewish World." "It's been circulating for a long time and it's become a bit of an urban legend."

Here's what actually happened:

Heschel was visiting a college in the Northeast where she learned that some of the students had started placing crusts of bread on their Seder plates as a way to express the exclusion of women and homosexuals from Judaism.

Heschel thought this was great. But since it violated the Passover dietary restrictions, she decided to modify the act, placing an orange on the plate instead of the bread crust to represent both women and homosexuals.

"The first year I used a tangerine," the mother of two revealed to the packed room of mostly women and some men. "Everyone at the Seder got a section of it and as we ate it we would spit out the seeds in solidarity with homosexuals - the seeds represented homophobia."

Heschel, chair of the Jewish studies program at Dartmouth College, said she was "horrified" at first by the way the story of the orange metamorphosed.

One, "they took my idea and put it into a man's mouth." Two, "they erased the whole idea of the homophobia that needs to be spit out."

On the whole, Heschel is proud of the way women's roles have evolved within Judaism and in the Passover Seder. While "American Jews always get a raw deal" because of their reputation for assimilation and intermarriage, "we also created the Jewish feminist movement and exported it to Israel, Europe -- wherever Jews exist."

But it wasn't always like this, even during Heschel's lifetime. "When I look back at what used to be," she said, "I would never have suspected what is today."

The daughter of the late Rabbi Abraham Heschel, a prominent Jewish scholar and civil rights leader, faced plenty of discrimination in her own life.

When she was 12, for instance, she wanted what most girls rarely had -- a bat mitzvah. When she asked her rabbi if she could have one, he said no and told her he'd throw her a party and bake her a chocolate cake instead.

Later when she asked another spiritual leader why women could not make an aliyah at the Torah, "He laughed and said: 'Because everyone in the congregation would look at her legs.'"

The final straw was on Simchat Torah when Heschel attended synagogue with a male friend. The other men swept him into a circle of dancing with the Torah, leaving Heschel on the side to watch.

"It was my idea to go," she said angrily. "He wanted to go to the movies!"

Heschel couldn't take it. She walked into the circle and started dancing.

Then one man scolded: "Who gave you permission?"

"And I said: 'God!'"

"And he said: 'Get out of here!'"

Heschel felt this was wrong. That "as much as men wanted women behind a curtain, God didn't."

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Like many women, Heschel stuck with Judaism because she loves it so much. Just as the agunot, who are not free to remarry by Jewish law, yet don't abandon the faith, she also feels "chained to the Torah, tied to Judaism in a way that's very deep and profound."

But for the longest time, "I felt so alone. So many women have stood alone. It has taken awhile for us to feel a sense of community."

And still, all isn't perfect.

"The old roles of women are maintained under the guise of liberal Judaism," she noted. "We're still marginalized even though we have supposed equality." In fact, she said, Orthodox women are less likely than Reform women to feel like an underclass.

"They say it's not sexist but liberating for them. They feel honored and respected."

Perhaps that is because "in Orthodoxy the mechitzah [the curtain or divider separating the sexes] is recognized," while "in Reform Judaism, there is still a mechitzah," which no one talks about.

It was at my friend Ruth's parents house where I first heard about the orange on the Seder plate. And I was told the story of "a woman on the bimah/orange on the Seder plate" analogy. And I thought it was pretty good, and felt it was a nice story (as nice as it could be...) that made someone literally eat their words. I started adopting it on the Seder plates of the Passover's to come. It only took a few years until I felt that it was... a part of my tradition. While I wouldn't feel right putting a crust of bread (or pizza) on my Seder plate, an orange fit in nicely. But then I read more about it, and was happy to find it had direct connection to the gays. The Jewish gays that I adore so much. And I've always been wary of the mechitzah, because it seems like it could potentially challenge everyone's ideas and force people to make very (shitty) judgments regarding trans gender Jews. Or maybe it would be very satisfying for a trans gender Jewish person to one day.... walk over to the other side or go behind the curtain. I don't know. I would hope that it wouldn't cause a fuss in any temple, and that person would be respected on any side they feel they belong. But like I said, maybe I expect too much from humanity. But the orange on the Seder plate... Kisha and I were hosting our first Seder at our new house this past Passover. My parents and sister came along, with my sisters husband - and Kisha's mom also came along. She had never been to a Seder before. And I don't think I've been with my family over Passover for a really long time. The Seders we had back when we were kids were held at my

grandparents place in Seagate, Brooklyn. They were... sort of boring and long. With my grandpa as the muttering, grumbling of the Haggadah. There was little audience participation, save for the reading of the four questions. His voice and accent just sounded like a motor idling. But hey, when you're from a country that doesn't exist anymore, lived through the butt end of World War II, and English is almost your sixth language - I can't get too upset about it, can I? And there was no orange on that Seder plate, and no mention of the liberation of GBLT people or the Stonewall Riots. But holy shit, was the food ever good. Anyways, Kisha and I knew we would put an orange on the Seder plate. My parents, with sensitivity to everyone's lack of patience and non Jews at the table, took the liberty of condensing the Haggadah into five or six pages. (Instead of four questions, there was just one big one!) But at one point someone asked "What's with the orange on the Seder plate?" and I leaned back in my chair and told the story. And it was probably the first time in my life I said the phrase "...solidarity with gay, lesbian, bisexual, trans gender Jews.." in front of my entire family. And then I tacked on "...or other people marginalized or made invisible..." And it was pretty satisfying to do so. At the end of the Seder, my parents told me they had never heard of the orange on the Seder plate, but were going to adopt it as part of their customs for years to come. And that was the best part about the Seder. I think I want more non Jews at Seders in the future, they always add to the party atmosphere!

Happy Jewish Memories:

- * Playing "What the fuck language are they arguing in now?" with my sister - when my grandparents would fight early in the morning.
- * Watching *Shalom Sesame* (Jewish Sesame Street) in Hebrew School. This made it even easier for me to believe 100% that Pac Man is a Jew. (I think he's Sephardic)
- * Watching the original Pinky and Yehudi skits.
- * Getting Lenny Bruce jokes before it was really appropriate.
- * Dressing up in dumb costumes and screaming your head off at Temple during Purim.
- * During Passover Seders, always finding the afikomen in the underpants hamper - and winning ten dollars.
- * High stakes dreidel games with cousins. We would play with cashews or nickels!

* Writing this zine, right now.



Black Carrot

Box 830

Chicago IL 60690

disdoom@gmail.com

gibt jews!
you are my
sisters + brothers,
any way you see
fit. i want to support
you, respect you, listen
to you - and stand
~~beside~~ beside you -
at any side of the
MECHITZAH



OR
WE
CAN
TEAR
IT
DOWN

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