

## Passover menu change makes debut

Ashkenazic Jews may add banned grains to Seder table

By PEGGY WOLFF  
Chicago Tribune

On Friday night, Jews will gather at the Seder table and read from the Haggadah, a book full of questions, biblical passages, rabbinic tales and songs woven together around the themes of suffering and liberation. But this year, Jews will surely bring a new question to the Seder table.

Why on this night can we now eat kitniyot?

Since the 13th century, the Passover custom among Ashkenazic Jews has been to prohibit kitniyot, or legumes, rice, seeds and corn. Foods that have been off the table include chickpeas, popcorn, millet, lentils, edamame and corn on the cob.

But in December, the Committee on Jewish Law and Standards (CJLS), the legal body of the Conservative movement, voted on and passed two separate papers, allowing the eating of kitniyot on Passover.

That means this will be the first Passover in hundreds of years that Ashkenazic Jews are allowed to put a bowl of rice on the Seder table. A platter of corn, Lentil soup. The chickpea and sesame seed paste we know as hummus.

"My quick take?" said Beth Kopin, a congregant from Highland Park's north suburban Synagogue Beth EL. "This is a great decision.

It should've happened awhile ago. Corn chips! Green beans! Rice, popcorn and sushi! We couldn't have that before. In Israel, they eat that way, all blended. It's good."

"For some, it may be psychologically difficult to see some of these foods on Passover," said Rabbi David Lerner, president of the Massachusetts Board of Rabbis and senior rabbi of Temple Emunah in Lexington, Mass. "But there is no reason not to enjoy them. The ruling is long overdue. It's time to embrace healthier options and save kosher customers money."

Rabbi Amy Levin, the interim rabbi for Congregation Rodeph Shalom in Bridgeport, Conn., co-wrote one of the teshuvot (Jewish papers) with Rabbi Avram Israel Reischer, rabbi emeritus of Congregation Chevrat Ezerel in Baltimore and an adjunct professor at the Baltimore Hebrew Institute at Towson University.

Since it is recognized that Sephardim (Jews who have roots in the Mediterranean basin) permit the eating of kitniyot on Passover, although Ashkenazim traditionally do not do so, might kitniyot be permitted to Ashkenazim? Levin and Reischer posed this question,



Jonathan Lehrer unpacks his family's heirloom Passover dinner plates Thursday at his Lincolnwood home.

MICHAEL TERCHA/CHICAGO TRIBUNE

and their argument for permitting these foods was deep and convincing enough to get an overwhelming approval in favor of lifting the kitniyot ban.

What has happened in the U.S., Levin explained, is a demographic shift in which Jews from Israel, southern Europe and North Africa are living together. They are transforming the face of the American Jewish community, which is looking more and more like Israel, where Sephardic Jews are permitted to eat kitniyot.

The second paper, written by Rabbi David Golinkin of Israel, is "Rice, Beans and Kitniyot on Passover—Are They Really Forbidden?" and was also approved by a majority vote. Golinkin revised his earlier 1989 paper, which was aimed at Israel's Ashkenazic Jews, to make a case for Ashkenazic Jews everywhere to dispense with the custom. "This custom was mentioned for the first time in France in the 13th century," Golinkin wrote. "From there it spread to various countries and the list of prohibited foods continued to expand. Many rabbis called it a 'mistaken custom.'"

The explanation that rabbis are giving to congregants is that kitniyot are not — and never were — hametz, the five forbidden grains in the Torah: wheat, barley, rye, oats and spelt. But centuries ago, hametz was often found mixed with these grains in the same bins. Or they were harvested and processed and ground into flour just like hametz. Also, because cooked kitniyot porridges looked very similar to hametz, or because it was customary to prepare kitniyot and hametz together, the custom to avoid legumes took root.

In a recent email to her congregants, Rabbi Annie

Tucker of Beth Hillel Congregation B'nai Emunah in Wilmette asked: "Why must we still be bound by the restrictive practices of our ancestors?" Given current agricultural methods, we can now easily and accurately separate out hametz with food labeling and production, Tucker wrote.

This "foolish" custom, many rabbis say, detracts from the joy of the holiday by limiting the number of permitted foods. There's a lack of healthy packaged foods and an extremely inflated cost of products under Passover supervision. It causes unnecessary divisions among Jewish ethnic

groups. But will Conservative Jews take advantage of the new ruling?

"It was interesting to hear about," said Fran Shapiro, who agreed that all the arguments made sense to her. "But family tradition is very powerful. It's not going to change things for me."

What I do makes me feel connected to my parents and grandparents."

Jonathan Lehrer, past president of Beth Hillel Congregation B'nai Emunah, said he and his wife "respect and honor Jewish tradition, but as Conservative Jews, we respond to changing times." They will have some kitniyot dishes, but guests who prefer not to eat kitniyot will have enough other options.

Others say they'll do whatever the rules allow, even though they're still confused. Many couples are split: He wants to add kitniyot, for instance, and she doesn't.

Levin has heard the entire range of voices, from "Thank you, thank you; we've been waiting for this forever" to "I intellectually understand what the case is that you're making, and I intellectually agree with you, but I don't think I could actually put rice on my Seder table."

And, of course, Levin has heard the dissenting opinion. "Say whatever you want, but we're Ashkenazic. We're proud to be Ashkenazic, and we're going to cross over to the dark side of kitniyot."

Peggy Wolff is a freelance reporter.

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