



Raquela's Seder

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Why are secrets hard to keep?

The Secret Underground

Life in Spain was a “golden age” for Jews -- until the era of the Inquisition, which lasted from 1478-1834. Jews who stayed in Spain, conversos, lived a double life—appearing non-Jewish on the outside, but keeping their Jewish identity on the inside. In this story, Raquela’s family literally goes underground and observes Shabbat in their cellar, where no one can see them perform Jewish rituals. Many conversos who wanted to keep kosher would “dress up” their cooking to make it appear more like their neighbors’ food. These secret habits and recipes stayed with some Sephardic (Jews of Spanish descent, many of whom emigrated to North Africa, the Mediterranean, and southern Europe) families for hundreds of years. To learn more, visit pjlibrary.org/raquelasseder.

HANDS ON!

Make Sephardic Charoset

Jews around the world have their own holiday dishes. Charoset, the sweet apple paste that represents the mortar the Jewish slaves used to construct buildings for the Egyptians, has many varieties. Try this easy recipe for Passover -- or any time.

Ingredients:

- 1 red apple, diced
- 1 cup pitted dates, chopped (Medjool are ideal)
- ½ cup of raisins
- 1 tsp cinnamon
- ¼ cup of grape juice
- ½ cup of walnuts, chopped (optional)
- ½ cup of chopped dried apricots (optional)
- Pinch of powdered ginger (optional)
- Splash of vinegar (optional)

You can prepare this in two ways:

Put everything except the grape juice in a mixing bowl. Stir until it is well combined, then pour in the grape juice and stir again.

Or, to make it look more like mortar, combine everything in a food processor and pulse until the mixture is a thick paste/

This charoset is great spread on matzah, or paired with cream cheese for a yummy sandwich. Happy Passover!

Waves of History

Raquela’s father, “the best fisherman in their town,” knows that his secret fishing place is a perfect spot for a seder. The ocean waves lapping at the sides of Papa’s boat remind us that water is an important part of the Passover story, too. Baby Moses’ mother puts him in a basket to float down the Nile, where he is rescued by Pharaoh’s daughter and raised in Pharaoh’s court. Later, when Moses leads the Hebrew slaves out of Egypt, God famously parts the Red Sea for them. As Raquela floats under the light of the moon, her parents tell her the whole story of how the Jewish people gained their freedom. As conversos, they too live under intolerant rulers who don’t allow them to practice Judaism. That is why Papa prays that “one day we will also be free.”

Why Is this Night Different?

The symbolic foods that Raquela’s family brings onto the boat are found wherever Jews celebrate Passover, but Sephardic communities have many distinct Passover customs as well. One is Bibhilu, the Moroccan ritual of holding the seder plate over guests’ heads as a blessing. Another is having someone arrive at the seder table dressed up as a traveler leaving Egypt for Jerusalem. Another folk tradition is mixing wine and water in a bowl to represent the first of the Ten Plagues, when the Nile turned red with blood; sometimes women take the bowl outside and pour it all onto the ground. And kids often enjoy smacking each other with scallions, pretending to be Egyptian taskmasters. Regional customs enrich the bigger Jewish story for us all.

TALK IT OVER WITH YOUR KIDS

IF you were Raquela, what do you think you would like about living in Spain? What do you think would be difficult?

IMAGINE having your next Passover seder on a small boat instead of in a house. What would be hard about it, and what would be fun? Name some other places that could be fun for a secret seder.

WHAT do you think might happen next in this story? Will Raquela and her family continue to live in Spain? Will they try to celebrate more Jewish holidays, and if so, how?