

Passover *Kitniyot*: Bean There, Done That

On Passover/*Pesach* we refrain from pizza and beer, buns, rolls and other baked goods, Wheaties and Raisin Bran. Our dietary restrictions are clearly stated in Torah: we do not eat *chametz*, leavened products from wheat, oats, barley, rye and spelt. But someone has added additional foods to be avoided during *Pesach*-- beans, corn, rice, lentils, peas, soybeans, buckwheat, poppy seeds, sesame seeds, sunflower seeds, and more recently peanuts. The rabbis called these *kitniyot*— but if they're not forbidden in Torah why can't we eat Rice Krispies or peanut butter during Passover?

The first reference to the avoidance of *kitniyot* during *Pesach* is found in the work of Rabbi Yitzchak of Courville France in the middle 1200's. He wrote that some communities have the custom of not eating these *kitniyot* during Passover, even though they are not *chametz*. He called them *kitniyot*, a word derived from the word *katan*—small. And they were added as forbidden-for-Passover because they might be grown in close proximity to planted rows of the specified five grains: wheat, oats, barley, rye and spelt. There is the chance, he thought, that some of the forbidden five grains might become intermingled with one of these *kitniyot*, making rice or corn or bean products inadvertently *chametz*. And then secondly, raw or processed *kitniyot* might be confused with raw or processed wheat, oats, barley, rye and spelt. God forbid we might confuse rye for rice! And if the *kitniyot* are banned, then strictly observant Jews should not even use derivatives of those grains like soybean oil and peanut butter.

Potatoes, however, provide an interesting and contrasting case. Unlike peas (included in the category of *kitniyot*), potatoes can in fact be made into a flour for cakes and brownies. But potatoes are surprisingly allowed! One of the leading Orthodox authorities of the 20th C. Rabbi Moshe Feinstein, argued that potatoes were initially allowed because they simply weren't known in 13th C Europe. And since, Rabbi Feinstein says, the whole *kitniyot* prohibition was a “foolish custom” to begin with, why then add more restrictions? Rabbi Feinstein also permitted peanuts, for the same reason, as well as peanut oil and peanut butter (though one wonders why, using the same logic, corn and soybeans, also unknown in 13th C France would not also be permitted!).

Objections to the *kitniyot* prohibition is first voiced by a 14th C, French rabbinic authority Yeruham ben Meshullam, who wrote “those accustomed to not eating rice and various kinds of cooked *kitniyot* on *Pesach* abide by a stupid custom which makes it harder on themselves (to observe and enjoy the festival) and I have no idea why they do so”. That sentiment is echoed by later rabbinic authorities. In the late 17th C and into the 18th C-- Rav Zvi Hirsch Ashkenazi known as “Zvi the Wise One” (1660-1718) and his son Rabbi Yaakov Amdan (1697-1776) vigorously opposed the custom of prohibiting *kitniyot* and wanted to eliminate it. They called it “a restriction that has no rhyme or reason for ever existing”. The great 18th C Rabbi Jacob Emden wrote that he would have abolished the custom had he had the authority to do so. And in the 19th C R. Israel Salanter, the founder of the *Musar* (ethics) movement in Lithuania, who also opposed Chasidic Judaism, ate *kitniyot* on Passover in public, dramatically demonstrating that *kitniyot* were not the same as *chametz*.

More recently, prior to *Pesach* some years ago, a Jerusalem (Orthodox) rabbinic court ruled that all Jews in the Land of Israel could consume *kitniyot* during the holiday. The court wrote: “The custom of refraining from eating *kitniyot* such as rice, lentils, beans etc. - during the *Pesach* holiday has always been a matter of debate.” Adding “the custom grew up in some Jewish communities during the Exile, but no one is quite sure how it began or why... and the explanations offered for the custom are unconvincing.” This Jerusalem rabbinic court concluded that these customs forbidding different foods creates unnecessary divisiveness because Sephardic Jews never knew from *kitniyot*, and the significant Sephardic community in Israel rejects these artificial Ashkenazic restrictions.

The Conservative Movement also is on record affirming that not only is *kitniyot* a “mistaken and foolish custom”, but that it detracts from the joy of the holiday by limiting the number of permitted foods. Additionally, the Conservative leadership said the prohibition of *kitniyot* not only emphasizes the insignificant and ignores the significant *chametz* which is forbidden, and but it causes people to scoff at the commandments in general and at the prohibition of *chametz* in particular.

So how does the Orthodox Ashkenazic community justify the continuation of what their own authorities have for over 600 years declared “foolish”? They admit that the only reason to follow this custom is because it’s “tradition”, because it was “the custom of our ancestors”.

So when you’re told not to eat corn flakes for breakfast, or peanut butter and jelly on matza for lunch, or any kind of beans with dinner—you can quote Rav Hirsch Ashkenazi known (appropriately!) as “Zvi the Wise One” who 300 years ago said: this is “a restriction that has no rhyme or reason for ever existing”. Enough said.

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