

WTSeder?!

Everything you ever wanted to know about Passover history, context, and ritual.

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First things first: What even **IS** a Seder?

The word *Seder* (Say-der / סֵדֶר) in Hebrew literally means *order*. In other words, a Seder is a structured, home-based ritual that combines a series of choreographed rituals with education, food, singing and storytelling, all in a particular order of stage directions.

Intentionally designed to engage people of all ages, Seders are held on the first and often second night of Passover. With good food, good drink, a good story, and good conversation, no wonder Passover is the most celebrated Jewish holiday in the world.

Some Holy Nosh

The Seder plate is a great visual introduction to Passover. It has special spaces for specific symbolic foods that each tell different parts of the Passover story.

Maror/Bitter Herbs:

Representing the bitterness of slavery, Maror is an uncomfortably bitter and sometimes spicy herb or vegetable. Traditionally, people use horseradish, but fresh radishes, spicy peppers, and even wasabi can be used too.

Zaroa/Shank Bone:

This is symbolic of the biblical spring sacrifice of a young lamb called *Pesach*. People substitute other bones (e.g. a chicken neck or a leg) and vegetarians use a red beet or a sweet potato.

Beytza/ Roasted Egg:

Another spring symbol, representing the renewal of life. It also marks the birth of Israelites as a free people.

Roasting recalls the sacrificial times in Jerusalem.

Chazeret/Bitter Greens:

Romaine lettuce, endives, or chicory are used as a second symbol of bitterness sometimes used when making a sandwich with matzah.

Karpas/Parsley:

It can be any leafy green, but often is parsley. It is symbolic of the rebirth of spring and the flourishing of the Israelites prior to their enslavement in Egypt. It is dipped into saltwater or vinegar to remember the freshness of freedom and the sting of tears from oppression.

Charoset/Mortar:

This fruit and nut spread may taste sweet, but its name is derived from the Hebrew word for clay. Charoset represents the mortar used by the Israelites in their enslavement.

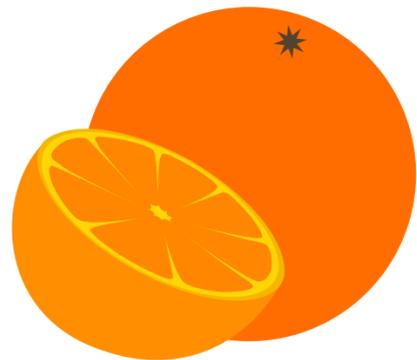


Why Is This Plate Different?

As we retell the Passover story, we are encouraged to interpret traditions and to find relevance in the time in which we live. One way of doing that is to connect contemporary events to the themes of Passover by placing new symbols on the Seder Plate. Here are a few, maybe they will inspire you to create your own. You have permission.

An Orange:

One of the first innovations, it has become a way to honor those who have been excluded from the Jewish community, especially women and LGBTQ people. Also attributed to the exclusion of women in the rabbinate.



Ruth's Mix/Almonds, Raisins & Chocolate:

Honoring Ruth, who married and/or converted into the Jewish people. This mix acknowledges that the Jewish community is sweeter by the presence and celebration of all Jews, Jews by choice, interfaith families, and our cherished allies.



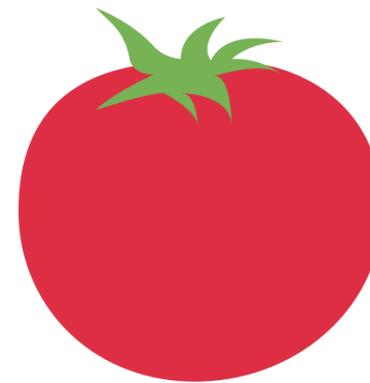
An Olive:

The olive branch has been a symbol of peace since the time of Noah. Some people place an olive on the seder plate in hopes of a time when Israelis and Palestinians live together in peace.



A Tomato:

In solidarity with migrant farmworkers some put a tomato supporting an end to modern-day slavery in our fields and a call to fair wages and safe working conditions.



An Acorn:

Some Jews include an acorn as a way to remember adding indigenous land acknowledgments at our seders. It is a reminder to understand the oppression that occurred in this land, a call to repair and a recognition that we still benefit from such historic suffering.



A Lock & Key:

Representing the oppression built into our justice system, the lock & key are a potent reminder of how racial bias and unfair practices in our legal system have resulted in the mass incarceration of black and brown people.



Aside from the Seder plate, there are several more ritual objects on the festive Passover Table.

Wine or juice:
4 cups per person, to be exact. Each cup marks a different transition in the Seder.

Kiddush cup:
Like Shabbat, most of our Jewish festivals begin by reciting a blessing over the wine to sanctify the day.

Nerot/Candles
We sanctify the holiday by lighting festival candles and saying a special blessing.

Afikomen/Hidden Dessert:
The middle matzah is split in two and the larger half is hidden. At the end of the meal children (of all ages) are invited to search for it and retrieve it for a prize. Traditionally the Seder cannot resume until the Afikomen is returned and eaten—all before midnight!

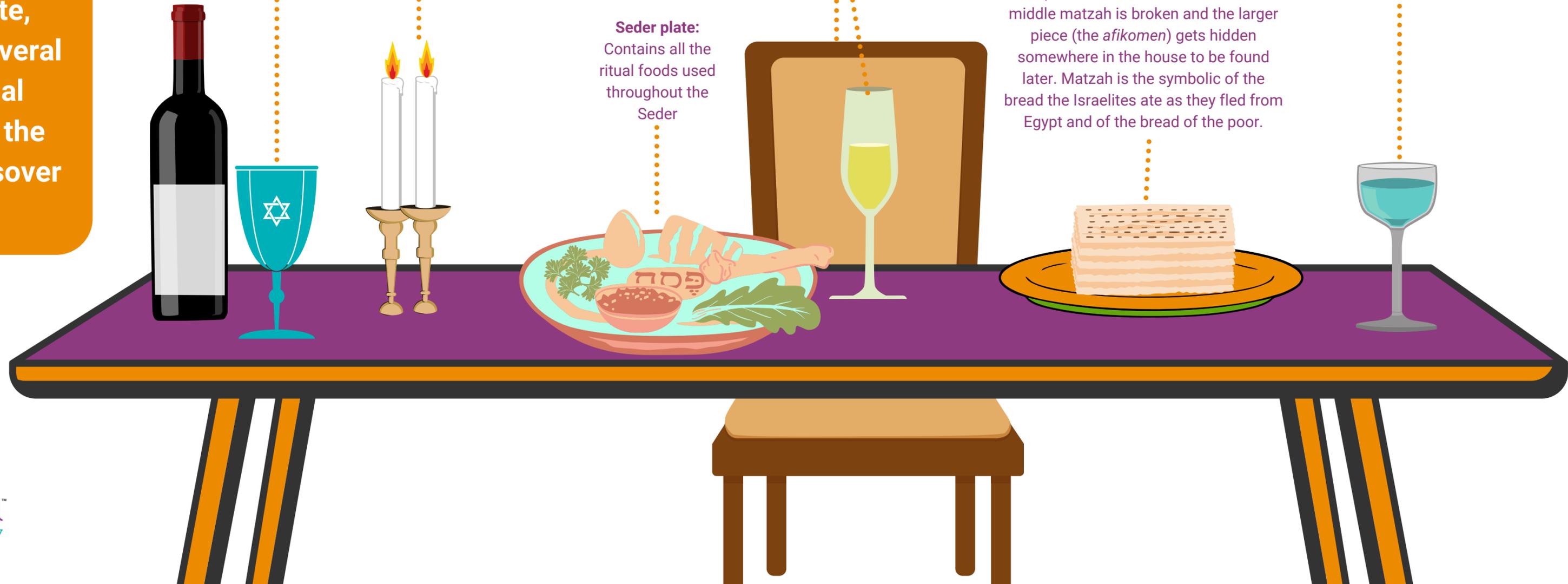
(Hidden sneakily somewhere inside your house)

Seder plate:
Contains all the ritual foods used throughout the Seder

Elijah's (empty) chair and cup of wine or juice:
The prophet Elijah is attributed to bringing about the World to Come, a time of redemption and liberation for all. This spirit of hope is invited to join the Seder as we open the door to figuratively "welcome" Elijah. Elijah also gets his very own cup of wine or juice, creatively called "Elijah's cup."

Matzah/Unleavened Bread:
Often the star of the evening, matzah has its own special plate or tray where three pieces of matzah are stacked. The middle matzah is broken and the larger piece (the *afikomen*) gets hidden somewhere in the house to be found later. Matzah is the symbolic of the bread the Israelites ate as they fled from Egypt and of the bread of the poor.

Miriam's Cup:
Miriam, the prophetess, is associated with water because she watched her baby brother (Moses) float down the Nile, she led the women during the parting of the sea, and according to Jewish legend, she became the bearer of a well that nourished and healed the Israelites on their wilderness journey. It has become a modern ritual to place a cup of water on the Seder table in her honor.





(What? This isn't what your family Passover Seder looks like?)

WTHaggadah?!

Over time, the Passover ritual was expanded and eventually written down in what we call *the haggadah*, the book of Passover Seder choreography we still use today! The word *Haggadah* in Hebrew means "the telling" which is an appropriate name for a book that tells the Passover story.

Scholars believe that ancient haggadah-writing rabbis adapted familiar (at the time) Graeco-Roman banquet/symposium customs to educate Jews about Passover while engaging in the ritual itself at the table. This could be one of the reasons that a traditional seder can take all night! Consider it a lecture series and a meal, all in one night.

While virtually every haggadah follows the same order, there are many ways to tell the same story and just as many points of view. That is why there are literally *hundreds* of different hagaddot. It can be overwhelming, but it also means you can find one that suits you.

Your Seder Cheat Sheet:

All the choreography and stage directions in one place!



1. Kadesh- We begin with a blessing over a cup of wine (or grape juice) to sanctify the holy day! Pace yourself, there will be a total of 4! *L'chaim*



2. Ur'chatz- We do a ritual hand-washing without the blessing. Sometimes the leader does this symbolically for everyone. It feels good to start the seder fresh.



3. Karpas – In honor of springtime and the freshness of freedom, we take a green vegetable or herb (commonly parsley), offer a blessing and eat. Remember, friends do not let friends speak with greens caught in their teeth!



4. Yachatz- Called “The Bread of Affliction”, we hold up the three matzot for this part of the ritual. The leader breaks the middle matzah and places the larger half aside for the *afikomen*, the piece of matzah that is hidden and eaten as “dessert”. (There better also be some chocolate. We didn't survive slavery to eat a cracker for dessert.)



5. Maggid- This section means “the telling” and is the main event! We begin to tell the story of The Exodus, learn about the rituals of Passover and sometimes even have conversations at the table. It is a time for questions, including the famed 4 Questions sometimes sung by the youngest person at the table. Alongside the traditional components, this is often where people bring creativity by acting out plays or trying some communal storytelling. Some even use props to help bring the teachings to life and make the seder memorable.



6. Rachtzah- You can never be too clean so it's time to wash your hands again. This time you do it with a blessing.



7. Motzi & Matzah- If one blessing is good, two is better. We bless and eat the Matzah, first with the blessing for all types of bread and then a special blessing just for matzah.



8. Maror- The bitter herbs remind us of the suffering of the Israelites' oppression. We say a blessing as we eat it, some choose to dip the bitter herbs in the sweet tasting haroset.



9. Korech (Hillel's Sandwich)- One of the many things Hillel was known for was taking what he thought was the 3 most important symbols, the lamb, the bitter herbs, and the matzah, and combine them into a Pesach sandwich! With no lamb, we add the bitter herbs (some use the green bitter herb, Hazeret), haroset and matzah. Consider it the first appetizer!



10. Shulchan Orech: Dinner time!



11. Tzafun: The Afikomen (which reappears from Step 4) must be eaten for the Seder to continue. With no sacrifices, ritually eating it represents the Pesach sacrifice. Often hidden, children search it out and receive a prize for its return. A small piece is eaten and the seder continues. It is almost over.



12. Barech: We offer a blessing for the festival meal. We drink a third cup of wine. Open the door for the Elijah and welcome the spirit of Miriam.



13. Hallel: There are a list of traditional psalms that are sung, but many folks sing modern songs about freedom and liberation. (Bob Marley anyone?) The last cup of wine is blessed during this section.



14. Nirtzah: Hopefully when you reach this point, you have enjoyed good friends, good conversation, and good food! We typically conclude with the words, “L'shana haba'a b'Y'rushalayim!,” meaning “Next year in Jerusalem!”

Ok, but where
does Passover come
from? Who decided it
was a *thing*?



The way we observe Passover today has changed and evolved significantly since Biblical times when the holy day was first mentioned. There is mystery shrouded around the first Passover observances, but some scholars believe that it blended two ancient Israelite spring rituals.

Keep scrolling to learn about them!



Ancient Israelite spring ritual #1: Shepherds

Before they journeyed to better pastures, ancient Israelite shepherds would take one of the youngest lambs from their flock and sacrifice it, followed by a large family meal. They believed the ritual would protect them from harm on their journey. This ritual was called *Pesach*, The Paschal Sacrifice.

Time to move.
That lamb over there
looks ripe for the
sacrificin'!



What lamb?
Lamb who?



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Ancient Israelite spring ritual #2: Farmers

For ancient Israelite farmers, Winter was brutal. Not only was there not a ton to eat, but they also couldn't produce deliciously yeasted bread because they couldn't spare any excess grains used for fermentation. So by the time Spring rolled around, the first batches of the barley harvest were baked without any yeast. Voila, there was *matza*. They celebrated *Hag HaMatzot*, The Festival of Unleavened Bread, as a sign that the abundance of food was returning (and with it, much better bread).

Matzah again?
What, no
sourdough?



I know, right?
I was in the mood
for a bread bowl.



Artist's (bad) rendition of the first temple



Springtime RULES!
How do you want your lamb?

One week of matzah and meat? Oy... I better find some salad...

Bad guys

These Jews and their civilization They think they are so cool. Wanna displace them and ruin all their best stuff?

Well we ARE Babylonians... Yeah, I'm in.

Ancient Israelites on their Spring break

Eventually, the Israelites instituted a monarchy to unite everyone, which included merging rituals like the ones from the shepherds and the farmers). These two spring rites slowly evolved together. Ultimately, word got out and this ritual became a *thing*. On the first full moon of the first month of Spring, Israelites from all over made a pilgrimage to the temple in Jerusalem where they noshed on lamb and matzah for one week.

But then the Babylonians ruined everything by attacking Jerusalem and destroying the temple. With no temple to focus on, the Torah became the center of the Spring tradition instead. The story of the Exodus from Egypt was of primary interest. This makes a lot of sense because it's a story about overcoming oppression and being liberated. For ancient Israelites who just lost their temple, this was the hopeful message that hit hard.



When the Babylonians were overthrown, the Israelites returned to Jerusalem. When they rededicated the Temple, they reestablished Passover as newly liberated people. The priests of this time (there were priests back then) made some changes to the Passover ritual too.

Each head of the household was charged with taking care of the *Pesach* offering. In addition, they added songs of praise and joy and they paired wine with the celebration. Permission was granted to observe Passover anywhere in Jerusalem, not just in the Temple. Interestingly, this marks the time of the Passover ritual meal that would have happened at The Last Supper.

Wait, so not only did we get our temple back, we also don't have to schlep to Jerusalem AND we get to sing and drink wine while we celebrate our freedom?

Oh this just got interestingggggg....



But then the Romans destroyed the Temple in 70CE, and the Israelites were once again exiled and living under an oppressive rule. Passover, as it had been celebrated, was never observed the same way again.

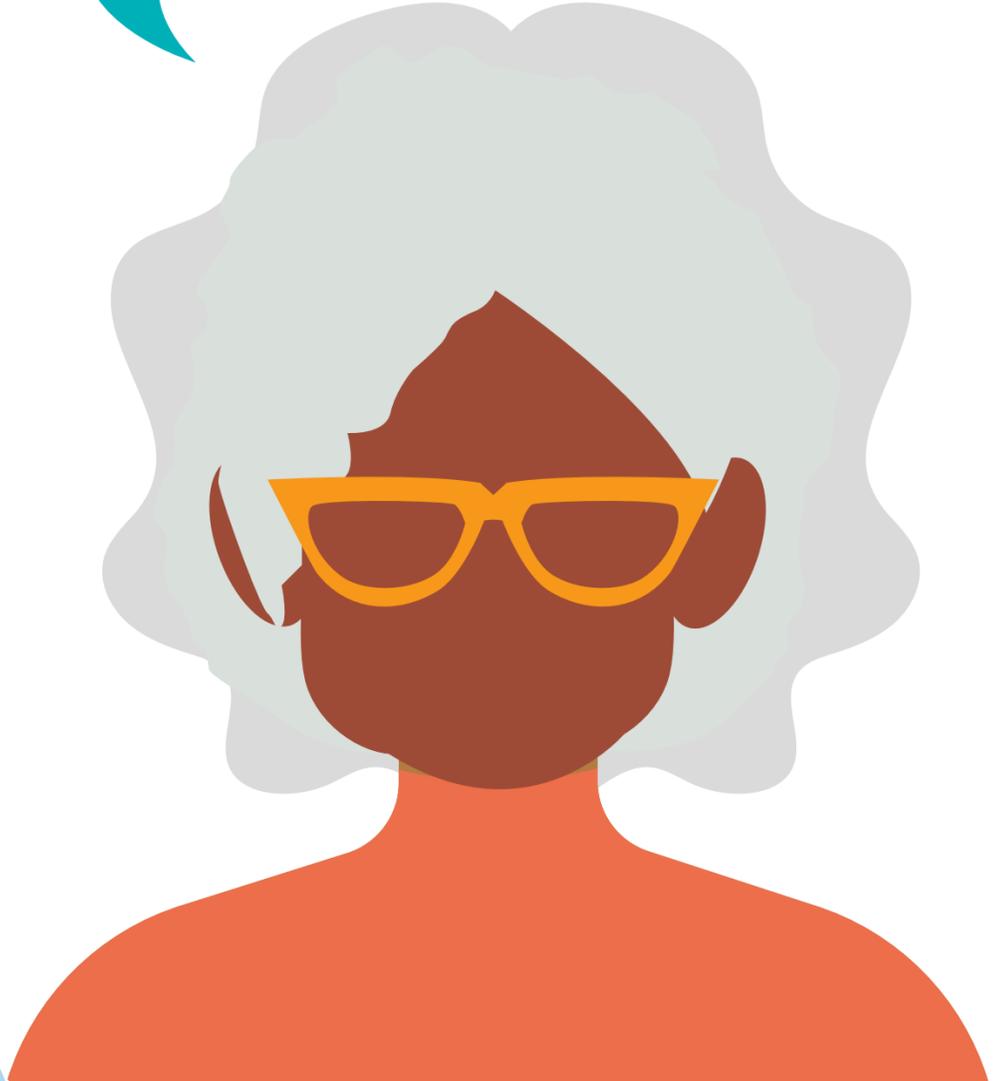
In response to the destruction, a group of innovative rabbis created a new approach to Judaism that didn't center around the Temple. Many of their adaptations and transformations radically changed Judaism, and became the foundation for the way Judaism is still observed today. The jobs of temple priests were outsourced to Rabbis and regular people, and they found ways of translating all the stuff that used to happen in the Great Temple into people's homes.

Passover was no exception. The rabbis discussed how to observe Passover, in what order, and figured out ways to make temple rituals accessible to everyone. This meant officially banning sacrifices, making Passover a home-based ritual, and positioning regular Jews (not rabbis or priests) as the leaders of the Seder.

Those ancient Roman *schmuks* thought they killed us when they destroyed our 2nd temple.
Well joke's on them!
AND we got brisket out of the deal!

Saul, will you hide the *afikomen* already? The kids will be here any minute!

Oy *this* again? Every year, the same rant...



This resource was lovingly written and designed by:



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