



Gibraltar

Preparing the Seder Plate

WHY IS A BRICK BEING USED TO MAKE CHAROSET?

When your parents cook a new dish and the texture doesn't come out right, they might say it's "thick as a brick." But can you imagine anyone actually eating a brick?

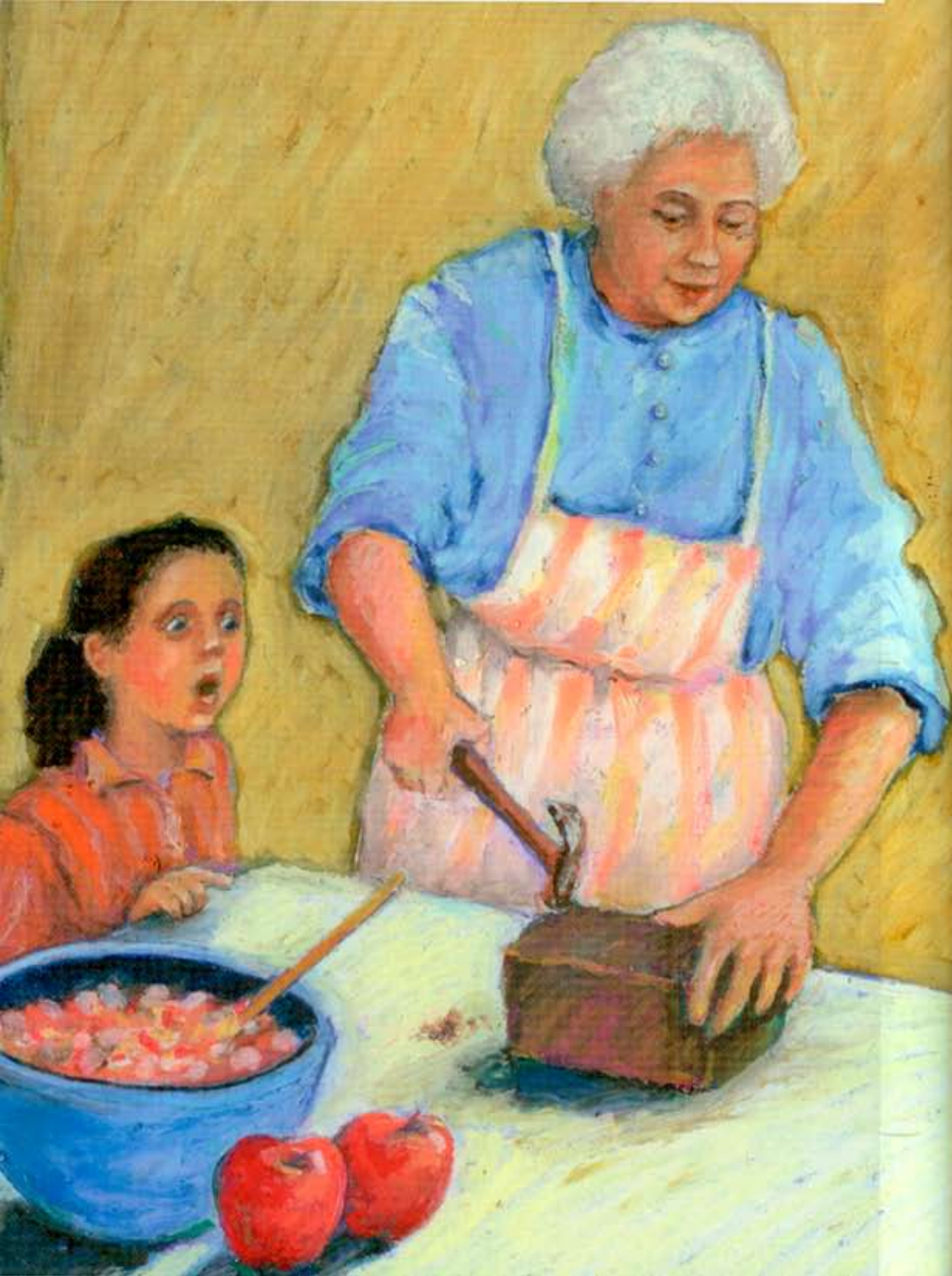
Meriam Pariente knows the answer. It's a secret she shares with her grandmother, Sarah Benady, who comes from Gibraltar. The Benadys first settled there in the 1730's. They have many unusual Passover customs that they've handed down from one generation to the next.

One of their traditions connects Sukkot with Passover. Every year, when Sukkot is over, Meriam helps her father wrap up the *lulav*—the long palm branch that symbolizes the harvest—as well as the *aravot* and *hadasim* (the willow and myrtle branches). They store them in a safe place, so that exactly six months later they can use them as fuel for baking matzah.

But what about the brick? Every year Meriam's grandmother reminds her how Pharaoh forced the Hebrew slaves to make bricks. "That's why we eat charoset," she explains. "It reminds us of the mortar the slaves used to lay the bricks." Meriam helps gather the ingredients for making Grandma Sarah's charoset recipe: dates, apples, nuts, almonds, bananas, wine, sugar, and cinnamon. Once the ingredients have been mixed to the right thickness, her grandmother says, "Go get the brick, please."

Gibraltar's Jewish community is a blend of Jews who fled from Spain and Portugal to England and Morocco and finally settled in Gibraltar, a peninsula on Spain's southern coast. The first Jews came in the 14th century. One hundred years later, all traces of Jewish life disappeared with the Spanish Inquisition. In 1704, Britain captured Gibraltar and in 1729, it signed an agreement with the Sultan of Morocco, permitting Jewish merchants to return to Gibraltar. Today, there are only six hundred Jews there, but all of its four original synagogues are still being used.





The first time her grandmother told her to do this, Meriam's eyes popped open wide as she watched Mrs. Benady break a few pieces off the brick and crush them into a powder. When her grandmother added the finely grated brick dust into the charoset. Meriam let out a gasp. Her grandmother held her close. "It's my secret ingredient for helping us remember how difficult a life our ancestors had."



The Missing Ingredient: Another Brick Story

What happens if you don't have the ingredients to make charoset? That's the question that a group of Jewish Union soldiers asked themselves during the Civil War. They were out in the wilderness of West Virginia, and they wanted to make a seder to celebrate Passover. They didn't seem to have any problem finding a bone, an egg, salt water, or even bitter herbs. But they couldn't obtain the ingredients for charoset. The solution? They put a real brick in its place on the seder plate. Little did they know that they were following a tradition of their fellow Jews on the distant peninsula of Gibraltar.

Charoset

Keeping in Step with the Rambam

Maimonides (Rambam) the great 12th century Jewish scholar, had his own recipe for Charoset.* It appears in the *Mishneh Torah*, his extensive commentary on the Talmud. His instructions call for stepping on the ingredients the same way one stomps on grapes to make wine:

"And how do you make Charoset? You take dates or dried figs, or raisins or something similar, tread on them and put vinegar on them, and spice them with spice like clay with straw, and bring it to the table on Passover eve."

* This recipe, provided by Dr. Susan Weingarten, is from her forthcoming book *Charoset: The Taste of History*.