IS RICE CHAMETZ?

We've already established that chametz comes specifically from one of five grains: wheat, barley, spelt, rye, and oats. That means rice, by definition, is *not* chametz — and this isn't a modern ruling or a recent leniency. It goes all the way back to the Gemara.

In fact, the Talmud records an explicit debate on this very question. Rabbi Yochanan ben Nuri — a sage from the Land of Israel who lived in the first century of the Common Era — argued that rice should not be eaten on Pesach. But the other sages pushed back, and the Gemara's conclusion is unambiguous: rice is not chametz, and it may be eaten on Pesach. The Talmud even tells us that Rabbah, one of the most celebrated sages of Babylonia, used to eat rice at the Pesach Seder itself. (Pesachim 114b)

So the halacha is clear. Case closed — or so you'd think.

SO WHY DON'T ASHKENAZIM EAT RICE ON PESACH?

Here's where things get interesting. Ashkenazi Jews refrain from eating rice on Pesach — but *not* because they consider it chametz. That's an important distinction. The Ashkenazi tradition is to avoid an entire category of foods known as **kitniyot**: legumes, certain grains, and related products. Rice falls into this category, and so Ashkenazim don't eat it on Pesach. This is a very old custom, and it remains widely observed to this day.

But where did this tradition come from? The answer is rooted in very practical, very real historical concerns.

Think about what the world looked like 100 or 200 years ago – or even more recently than that. Food wasn't sold the way it is today, neatly packaged in sealed bags on supermarket shelves with clear labels and ingredient lists. Food was sold in open-air markets, by weight, in bulk. Merchants would scoop out whatever you needed using shared scoops, pallets, and scales – the same tools they used for every other grain they sold. Rice and wheat sat in neighboring stalls. Sometimes in neighboring sacks.

And it gets even closer than that. The fields where rice was grown were often right next to – or even mixed in with – fields of wheat and barley. When harvest time came, it wasn't unusual at all for a few grains of wheat to end up mixed in with the rice.

Now here's why that matters so much: the prohibition of chametz during Pesach is extraordinarily strict. So strict, in fact – as we will discuss in more detail later – that a *single grain* of wheat is enough to render an entire plate of rice forbidden. Just one grain. Given that reality, and given how easily and how commonly wheat and rice got mixed together, it's completely understandable why communities developed the practice of avoiding rice on Pesach altogether. Why take the risk?

And there's another reason that reinforced this concern: rice and wheat look remarkably similar. The ears and grains of brown rice bear a strong resemblance to wheat. Rice flour and wheat flour are nearly indistinguishable by appearance alone. The average person – and even the careful person – could easily confuse one for the other.

Put all of that together: similar appearance, shared markets, shared tools, adjacent fields, and a prohibition so strict that one grain makes the difference – and the kitniyot custom starts to make a lot of sense.

BUT WAIT – ASHKENAZIM AREN'T THE ONLY ONES

It might surprise you to learn that avoiding rice on Pesach is not exclusively an Ashkenazi practice. Among Sephardic communities, the question of rice is actually a point of division.

Moroccan Jews and Jews from other North African communities – with the exception of Egypt – also refrain from eating rice during Pesach. So this caution around rice is not something unique to Eastern European Jewry.

On the other hand, Jews from Israel, Iran, Iraq, Syria, and other Middle Eastern communities do eat rice on Pesach – and rice plays a *central* role in their Pesach cooking. If potatoes are the Ashkenazi Pesach staple , rice is the Middle Eastern equivalent . It's on the Seder table, it's in the soups, it's in the side dishes – it's everywhere.

To address the concern about accidental wheat contamination, the custom in these communities is to check the rice carefully – not once, not twice, but **three times** – before using it for Pesach. That triple-checking is the practical safeguard that allows them to use rice with confidence.

ONE MORE THING WORTH KNOWING

Here's something that genuinely surprises many people, even those who are quite familiar with Pesach laws:

Even if you follow the tradition of not *eating* rice and other

kitniyot during Pesach, you are completely permitted to *keep* them in your home. You do not need to throw them out. You do not need to sell them. They can sit in your pantry throughout all of Pesach without any problem. This is explicitly stated in the Shulchan Aruch (Rama, 453:1). The kitniyot restriction is about *consumption* – not about possession.

And there's a further nuance, noted by Rabbi Eliezer Melamed in his *Penine Halacha*, based on the Mishna Berura (ibid., 9): the custom to avoid kitniyot applies when the kitniyot product *is* the food, or when kitniyot constitute the majority of a given product. But if kitniyot appear as a minor ingredient, or as a food additive – think corn starch, corn fructose, and similar substances – that food is not forbidden during Pesach, even for those who observe the kitniyot restriction.

As always, check with your rabbi about the specific traditions of your community.