

(Dvar Torah continued from front page...)

Following the destruction of the Temple, the rabbis of the Mishnah made several important decisions with regard to the marror. First of all, they decided that Jews should continue eating it. This should not be taken for granted. After all, marror accompanied the sacrifice, and since the pesach was not to be eaten, maybe the marror should be treated the same. Second, they gave marror a symbolic meaning, connecting it with the bitter experience the Israelites had in Egypt. Third, they decided that lettuce should be the preferred form of marror, for lettuce, by that time cultivated to taste much better than its wild counterpart, was a common Greco-Roman food.

In northern parts of Europe, lettuce was not available in early spring, so Jews gradually began to turn to alternatives, specifically *meerrettich* or the misnamed horseradish in English. At first, Jews ate the leaves of this plant, which do sprout up early in the season. But quickly they began to eat the root, which after all, is the most significant part of the plant. Horseradish is not bitter, but still, what else could these Jews do when lettuce was not available? Sephardi Jews, who lived in warmer climates where lettuce was available by spring time, never changed the custom of eating lettuce for marror.

The final chapter in marror's history is happening now in Israel and to a lesser extent in the Diaspora. Israel's population is roughly half of Ashkenazi descent and half of Sephardi descent, but for several generations these populations have been mixing. Today in Israel most Jews, regardless of background, eat lettuce as marror, taking advantage of its easy availability to perform the mitzvah with rabbinic literature's preferred vegetable.

So when the Haggadah has us ask "This marror that we eat, what is it for?" we can not only answer with the story of the bitterness of slavery and the sweetness of liberation, we can tell the story of our people's particular journeys since then: We began as a nomadic people, our ancestors being simple shepherds. When our Temple was destroyed, we began to adopt many of the customs of the Greeks and Romans among whom we lived. Later in history those who would become known as the Ashkenazim left the Middle East and settled throughout Europe, causing massive change in their customs. Finally, with the return to the land of Israel, the split between Sephardi and Ashkenazi Jewry is gradually ending, and we face new challenges and opportunities.

To me, this is what Pesach, and perhaps all of Judaism, is about - connecting *nomos* and narrative, rules and stories, so that we can find the universal in the particular, and the timeless in the timely.

For Discussion: What are the customs or practices at your Seder Table that tell the story of your particular family?



TORAH SPARKS

Pesach I

March 31, 2018 | 15 Nisan 5778

Torah | Exodus 12:21-51 (Etz Hayim p. 385-390; Hertz p. 257-260)

Maftir | Numbers 28:16-25 (Etz Hayim p. 931-932; Hertz p. 695-696)

Haftarah | Joshua 3:5-7, 5:2-2-6:1, 6:27 (Etz Hayim p. 1300-1302; Hertz p. 1009-1011)

D'var Torah: The Message of Pesach is not Just Freedom

Dr. Joshua Kulp, Rosh Yeshiva & Conservative Yeshiva Faculty

There is a tendency in our world to universalize the message of Pesach, turning it into a holiday about freedom for all people everywhere, and not just a celebration of the Israelites leaving their servitude in Egypt. And indeed, as Jews, we should actively seek an end to slavery and other forms of oppression, not just for our particular religio-ethnic group, but for all people.

But while freedom is, and should be, a universal value, Pesach is a chance for us to celebrate our particular history. It is a chance for us to remember where we came from, how we, the Israelites/Jews came out of Egypt, how we ate the pesach sacrifice on that night and later on in Jerusalem at the Temple, how we eventually sat down at the seder table and ate a festive, Greco-Roman style banquet, and how our particular, quirky customs morphed as Jews moved all over the world.

One particular example of how a food can encapsulate all of the particularities of Jewish history is the marror. In the Torah, we are told to eat the pesach sacrifice with marror, but unlike the sacrifice itself and the matzah that accompanies it, we are not told why. In the Torah, marror has no symbolic meaning. In all likelihood marror, from its name some kind of bitter herb, was simply a wild spice used by nomads to improve the flavor of the lamb or goat.

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D'var Haftarah: Echoes of Moshe

Rabbi Mordechai Silverstein, Conservative Yeshiva Faculty

Joshua, Moshe's protégé, was chosen to lead the people after Moshe's death. Moshe had led them during the process of the exodus – through the political machinations in dealing with Pharaoh, the preparations for the sojourn, the circumcision of the males before the Pesach sacrifice, traversing the sea and the long road through the desert. Joshua was expected to pick up the mantle of leadership at the other end of the journey, to rally the people and bring them into the land.

This task in some ways mirrors Moshe's mission. No one had been circumcised during the fateful journey through the desert and only in the first year after the exodus from Egypt had Pesach been celebrated. As the entry into the land was at hand, so was the need to normalize the life of the people and to reestablish the role of the leader who would be at the head of the people for the next stage in its existence.

Joshua, like Moshe, circumcised the male population and celebrated Pesach with his people. After the reestablishment of these covenantal acts, Joshua is privy to an extraordinary religious experience: "Once, when Joshua was near Jericho, he looked up and saw a man before him, drawn sword in hand; Joshua went up to him, and asked him: 'Are you for us, or for our adversaries?' And he replied: 'No, I am captain of the Lord's host; Now I have come.' Joshua fell on his face to the earth, and bowed down, and said to him: 'What does my lord command to his servant?' And the captain of the Lord's host said to Joshua: 'Remove your shoes from your feet; for the place where you stand is holy.' And Joshua did so."

This revelation is seemingly odd. First, it is an angel and not God, Himself, who reveals Himself. In addition, Joshua appears clueless as to the identity of the angel. And finally, we are not privy to the content of the revelation. The key to understanding its significance is found in the angel's command: "Remove your shoes..." These words echo Moshe's initiation as a prophet at the burning bush, albeit with an angelic stand-in for God. Joshua's life now parallels the paradigm of his master and he is now ready to carry on the next phase in his people's journey.

For Discussion: What is gained by Joshua's initiation story paralleling that of Moshe's? Do we gain something when we see our lives through the prism of our traditional heroes?

Pesach I Self-Study

Vered Hollander-Goldfarb, Conservative Yeshiva Faculty

Pesach is the *Chag* of asking questions and telling the story of our exodus from Egypt. Here are a few questions to get you started.

1. Preparations for Pesach start long before the holiday arrives. The rabbis tell us that one starts to learn the laws of Pesach 30 days prior to the *Chag*. Why do you think that so much emphasis is put on the preparations, not just on the final product? What is your favorite part of preparing for Pesach?
2. In the opening of the Haggadah we read '*Ha Lachma Anya*'- 'this is the bread of affliction'. Why do you think that we emphasize the bread of affliction if we celebrate the Exodus – going into freedom and independence?
3. We say that 'in every generation, one should view himself/herself as if he/she went out of Egypt.' What issues in today's world might remind us that the story is just as relevant now?
4. In the core of the Haggadah is a concise text that gives the history of the People of Israel. If you were to tell the main points of the story in 3 lines, what would you say?
5. As part of the Haggadah we recite (or sing) the Hallel. Is there any part of the Hallel that relates to the story of Pesach? Why do you think that we say Hallel?

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