



Shlomo's Drash



תורה היא וללמוד אני צריך

"IT IS A MATTER OF TORAH AND I NEED TO LEARN" BER 62A

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The World History of Haroset

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The Passover Seder is full of tradition and mitzvot. According to the NJPS 2001 demographic survey, it is one of the most observed holidays out of all of the Jewish calendar, with two thirds of all Jews, attending a seder. (NJPS, 7) Only lighting Hanukkah candles comes close. Part of its appeal was noted by Cohen and Eisen in their book **The Jew Within** a qualitative survey of Jewish practices in contemporary times. Cohen and Eisen concluded that here were some things that determined if moderately affiliated Jews found a motivating factor to perform a practice. One was the practice has meaning, another that there was a link to history, especially family history and tradition, and finally anything to do with food.

Given these three factors, it is no wonder that one of the most beloved parts of most Passover seders is eating haroset, the sweet combination of fruits, wine nuts and spices. Everyone has their own recipe, handed down through generations. Many people come for the seder just to have this sweet condiment. Most know about the symbolism of haroset as the clay of the bricks, which the Israelite slaves made for the Egyptian building projects. But what is the real history of this part of the Passover seder. Where did it come from and why is it really there? It is a commandment or something else? And why are there so many different recipes and customs about how to eat this?

There are no references to haroset in all the biblical text. The Torah never mentions eating it. Its first mention is in the Mishnah, the early part of the Talmud, where it instructs dipping the maror into it, but the rabbis argue whether it is a mitzvah or not:

Mishnah. They then set [the Passover foods] before him. He dips the lettuce before yet he has reached the aftercourse of the bread. They set before him matzah, lettuce [bitter herbs], and haroset and two dishes, though the haroset is not a mitzvah. R. Eleazar son of R. Zadok said: it is a mitzvah. [Pes. 114a]

In the later Gemara, the rabbis puzzle over this debate. If it isn't a religious requirement Why do it? One answer by R. Ammi is to remove something else known as kappa. There are ways to remove kappa, which the rabbis list:

R. Assi said: The kappa of lettuce [is counteracted by] radishes; the kappa of radishes, [by] leeks; the kappa of leeks, [by] hot water; the kappa of all these, [by] hot water. And in the meanwhile let him say thus: 'Kappa kappa, I remember you and your seven daughters and your eight daughters-in-law.' [Pes. 116a]

The Talmudic rabbis don't tell us what Kappa is, but the 12th century commentator Rashi tells us that it is *Aris*. This is a loan word from the Greek word which is also the root of our contemporary word Virus. Aris is something that makes you sick. One of the ways The Rabbis state one way to get rid of kappa is to recite an incantation. Incantations in the Babylonia of Talmudic times were a common method for dealing with demons, and several such incantation can be found in the Talmud. There is a tradition among to name demons in the opposite of its function so as to avoid invoking the demon. Kappa in Aramaic means to congeal, which does describe the process of making bricks. However, its opposite would therefore be to make liquid. If this were true then kappa could have been a case of diarrhea. As the Rabbis do mention sour liquids and in association with haroset, it may be a bacteria which dies under Hot water or under acidic conditions. There is one, *Clostridium perfringens* that would fit this bill. The Haroset's original function was to fulfill the mitzvah of eating maror without getting ill.

Other rabbis thought differently. Some believed it was a mitzvah, as it was a commemoration of the Exodus, but there was disagreement about what was being commemorated:

R. Levi said: In memory of the fruit-tree; R. Johanan said: In memory of the clay. Abaye observed: Therefore one must make it acrid and thicken it: make it acrid, in memory of the fruit-tree; and thicken it, in memory of the clay. It was taught in accordance with R. Johanan: The spices are in memory of the straw; the haroset is a reminder of the clay. [Pes. 116a]

R. Levi thought it had to do with the memory of a fruit tree, a reference to the Song of Songs 8:5. The rabbis tell a story that the Israelite women, to avoid the intercession by Egyptian authorities, would bear their children under fruit trees. (Gen. R. I:12, B. Sotah 11b) R. Johanan believed it had to do with the memory of the clay used for building by the slaves. R. Johanan's idea came from the root word for haroset, heres, which means clay. Much later, The Rabbi known as Abaye combined the ideas and includes both as ingredients in the finished condiment. Following the lead of R. Johanan's clay idea, it was later taught that the spices used were a reminder of the straw which the Israelites were denied by the Egyptians and had to find themselves in order to make bricks out of mud (Exodus 5).

But there was one more train of thought as to why we have Haroset on the table. We are commanded by the Mishnah to ask

Why is this night different from all other nights? For on all other nights we dip once, while on this night we dip twice.

In order to beg the question, the rabbis had this curious custom included so that we do dip twice, in the salt water with the karpas, and later the haroset with the bitter herbs. This was one of many tricks to keep the kids involved with the Seder.

By the middle ages there were several interpretations of this debate in the Talmud. Two commentators from two different parts of the world give differing perspective. Rabbi Shlomo ben Yitzchak, better known as Rashi, lived in late 11th to early 12th century France, whose views would parallel the regional view of northern and eastern Europe, what would eventually become the Ashkenazic world. In the Mediterranean, including Spain and much of the Southern Mediterranean, in essence what we know as Sephardic world there was Rabbi Moses Ben Maimon (1135-1204 CE), best known as either Maimonides or the Rambam. The Rambam, born

in Spain, traveled throughout most of the Sephardic world, spending the end of his life in Alexandria. Both of these giants of the middle ages, Rambam and Rashi, agree that the Haroset is in accordance with Johanan's idea commemorating clay.

While Rashi and Rambam agree on the symbol, their respective parts of the world didn't agree on the ingredients of haroset. And it is R. Levi's part that differs. The word for fruit tree is tapuach. Most who know modern Hebrew will recognize this as apple. This comes from the northern and eastern European translations of this word. Rashi, the French and eastern European Jews used apples, assuming this was a tapuach. On the other hand, the Mediterranean basin, where the Rambam lived, apples are rather uncommon, as they are not a native species. The Tapuach of the Song of Songs some have speculated may have been a Chinese import to the Persian courts: peaches and apricots. In Egypt, Spain and most of the Islamic controlled Mediterranean, apples were near impossible to come by, so Tapuach was interpreted to mean Dates. Sephardic haroset is usually Dates and other dried fruits and nuts.

Throughout the world there are amazing regional differences in the recipes for haroset. The traditional Ashkenazic variety is a variation of apples, chopped almonds, cinnamon, red wine, and *matzah* meal. Sephardic traditions have ingredients available in ancient Israel: grapes, *matzah* meal, dates, figs, olives, apricots, pomegranates, and almonds. Yemenite Jews will add julienne Chili peppers to resemble the straw, and also add ginger and sesame seeds. North African Jews will add Eggs pines nuts and ginger to the Sephardic recipe. One Italian recipe even included chestnuts. Iraqi and Indian Jews will make a date syrup and add nuts. While the mitzvah of Haroset continues, its implementation is indeed all over the map.

At the modern western seder table, another question arises: when and how to eat haroset, which in modern times takes several options. For all, it is clear it is eaten before the main meal and after eating the matzah, but the variation occur from there. In some families haroset is eaten with the maror. In others, haroset is eaten with maror and matzah as part of the korech, the Hillel sandwich. Finally, there are some Seders where the Korech is only matzah and haroset.

As already discussed, the most traditional, going back to the time of the Talmud is eating the maror with the haroset. Often there would be a special type of maror, known as hazeret, which was a leafy but bitter vegetable. Romaine lettuce and Belgian endive would be two examples of hazeret. In both cases the vegetable could be dipped into the haroset.

The variations center on the korech. The korech, better known as the Hillel sandwich, reputedly the first sandwich in recorded history, makes up another debate in the Talmud (B. Pes. 115a) about what is required and what is not at the Passover Seder. There was a time apparently where Hillel the Elder ate the Passover sacrifice with maror enclosed in matzah, in accordance with the commandment (Numbers 9:11) "*over matzahs and marors they shall eat it.*" However, with the destruction of the Temple, the Passover Sacrifice is impossible to do, and the Rabbis question if the Hillel sandwich is a valid practice, since there's a missing ingredient. Secondly, the question arises if eating them together invalidates the commandment for eating matzah. Since the Torah explicitly states that matzah is to be eaten by itself, eating it with the strongly tasting Maror makes it impossible to taste the neutral tasting matzah, invalidating the commandment to eat matzah. After five hundred years of debate R. Ashi comes to a compromise: matzah and maror are both eaten separately, and a separate blessing made for each at that time. After that the two are combined and eaten, in memory of Hillel and the Temple, but without a blessing.

The korech's role in the story of haroset goes back to an interpretation of the rules for Maror, most likely due to eliminating kappa again. Traditions rose up that the haroset had to accompany the Maror any time it was eaten, and in that case the korech would have the ingredients of Matzah Maror and haroset. After one ate the haroset and maror together, then the maror, often in the form of horseradish, was eaten in the korech. In some seders, the hazeret was eliminated and only ground horseradish was used. Since ground horseradish needed something to be eaten on, matzah was used. In these situations, the korech and the maror would essentially be the same thing. Thus, in order to differentiate the korech from the maror, the haroset and matzah became the Korech and the horseradish and matzah became the maror.

As I look at the myriad of observances and opinions about some little condiment, eaten on a few consecutive days a year, I am in awe. What started as a folk food safety practice for eating certain kinds of vegetables has evolved through two millennia as a point of deep spiritual meaning for many Jews today. What was probably just a sweetened dish of vinegar has inspired hundreds of recipes, and inspired traditions to be handed down for close to two thousand years. But what awes me the most is the dynamic nature of the practice of eating Haroset. While the commandment hasn't changed, the observance and ingredients varied widely. As I went through the Talmud, Maimonides, Rashi, and the Shulchan Aruch about haroset, I am reminded how dynamic, flexible and resilient Judaism can be.