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“... that you may tell your children and grandchildren how I dealt harshly with the Egyptians and how I performed my signs among them, and that you may know that I am the LORD.”

— Exodus 10:2

The Seder Plate: Food for Thought



On all holidays, our festival meal and table are a central part of the celebration. However, on Passover, the dining experience goes far beyond this celebratory aspect. On Passover, our tables are brimming with symbolic foods and objects that are used throughout the evening. This is because on Passover, aside from being a place where we feed others and connect with God, our tables also become the place where we share our story, both personally and collectively.

The ritual Passover meal known as the *Seder* is the heart of the Passover celebration. It is through the *Seder* that we fulfill the biblical injunction to “tell your children and grandchildren how I dealt harshly with the Egyptians and how I performed my signs among them.” *Seder* literally means “order” and the Passover *Seder* is a deliberately designed experience involving 15 steps placed in a specific order. When followed correctly, each step leads us from the depths of oppression to the experience of redemption.

In the words of the *Haggadah*, the universal text that is used to narrate the *Seder*, “Every person must see himself or herself as having personally left Egypt.” The goal of the *Seder* is to help us experience the Exodus so that we can fully internalize its meaning. It is for this reason that the *Seder* is intended to be a completely hands-on and interactive experience.

Jewish tradition couples words with experiences and actions throughout the night in order to make the ideas of the

Bible real and to integrate its messages into our lives. In some homes the *Seder* begins with the leader of the *Seder* entering the room dressed as an ancient Israelite carrying *matzah* on his shoulder.

The guests all ask, “Where have you come from?” To which the leader replies, “I have come from Egypt.” Then the guests will ask, “And where are you going?” The leader answers, “I am going to Jerusalem.”

In keeping with the theme of reliving the Exodus on Passover, the traditional *seder* table is adorned with a *seder* plate, in Hebrew, *k'ara*, that contains six items. These foods help us see, taste, and feel the Exodus story. The *seder* plate contains a roasted bone, a roasted egg, a spring vegetable, bitter vegetables, bitter herbs, and a mixture called *haroset*. Each item abounds with meaning and symbolism.

They are, quite literally, food for thought on *seder* night.

In this month's *Limmud*, we will study the meaning of these six elements that have been used by the Jewish people to tell the Passover story for thousands of years. We will discover why these particular elements were chosen, how and when they are used in the *Seder*, and the messages they are meant to impart.

We will explore the rituals performed during the *Seder* using these foods and understand the goal of these ancient practices. As always, we will apply these teachings to our own lives and learn how these six food items can nurture and nourish our souls.



Karpas, the Vegetable

Observe the month of Aviv and celebrate the Passover of the LORD your God, because in the month of Aviv he brought you out of Egypt by night.

— Deuteronomy 16:1

One of the first steps we take as we begin the *Seder*, after the opening blessing and ritual hand-washing, is to dip vegetables into saltwater. Any vegetable can be used for this symbol known as *karpas*, but it is customary to choose something green such as parsley, celery, or a cucumber. This *seder* symbol reminds us that God took the Israelites out of Egypt during the spring — it is a symbol of redemption and renewal.

Another name for Passover is *Chag Ha'Aviv*, “the Holiday of Spring.” Scripture tells us, “*Observe the month of Aviv and celebrate the Passover of the LORD your God, because in the month of Aviv he brought you out of Egypt by night*” (Deuteronomy 16:1). Spring is a time of renewal and rejuvenation.

After the long imprisonment of winter when growth is dormant, spring ushers in a time for new life to come forth. Flowers bud and bloom as nature comes back to life and thrives once again. As we read in Song of Songs: “*See! The winter is past; the rains are over and gone. Flowers appear on the earth; the season of singing has come*” (2:11–12).

By linking Passover with spring, we make the connection between the liberation of the Israelites from Egypt and the budding of flowers; between the Song of the Sea (Exodus

15:1–21) that the Israelites sang after they witnessed the great miracle when the Red Sea parted with the “*season of singing*” referred to in Song of Songs. Egypt symbolizes the long cold winter season; the Exodus represents the spring of the nation of Israel.

At the start of the *Seder*, we dip the *karpas* into saltwater. At this point, we have neither begun our festive meal, nor have we begun in earnest to tell the Exodus story. We dip the vegetables in saltwater in order to arouse the curiosity of the children and awaken the inner child of each adult.

We want them to ask “why” and wonder what it is we are doing. An important aspect of the *seder* night is to ask questions. In order for the *Seder* to be an impactful learning experience, there has to be a desire to learn. We do things out of the ordinary in order to spark a passion for learning.

In this case, the lesson to be learned comes from the symbolism of eating the vegetable and saltwater together. The vegetable symbolizes spring, which is when God redeemed the children of Israel. In contrast, the saltwater recalls the sweat and tears shed in slavery under Egyptian oppression. On Passover, we bring bondage and redemption together as a reminder that both difficulties and miracles are part of the process of salvation.





Zeroah, the Roasted Bone

“Therefore, say to the Israelites: ‘I am the LORD, and I will bring you out from under the yoke of the Egyptians. I will free you from being slaves to them, and I will redeem you with an outstretched arm and with mighty acts of judgment.’”

— Exodus 6:6

A roasted animal bone is placed on the *seder* plate and is an integral part of the evening. It represents the Passover offering that was first brought on the eve of the Exodus by the Israelites and then throughout all the years that the Temple stood in Jerusalem.

The roasted bone was instituted in order to remind us that during the plague of the firstborn, God “passed over” the houses of the Israelites who had placed the blood of a slaughtered lamb on their doorposts.

This symbol also alludes to the faith of the Israelites as they brought that first Passover offering. The lamb was considered a god by the Egyptians, and so slaughtering the lamb and publically displaying its blood posed significant danger for the Israelites, yet they chose to trust God anyway.

Moreover, the *zeroah* calls our attention to a verse where

God promised to redeem Israel with a “*zeroah netuya*,” an outstretched arm: “*I will free you from being slaves to them, and I will redeem you with an outstretched arm.*”

This item is one of three mentioned by the Jewish sages as critical for telling the Passover story. (The other two are the bitter herbs and the *matzah*; all three are mentioned in Exodus 12:8.) In fact, the sages teach that if the roasted bone is not talked about, the biblical requirement to tell the Exodus story has not been fulfilled. The *Haggadah* refers to the roasted bone mostly in the fifth step of the *Seder*, called the *Maggid*, which focuses on the actual telling of the Exodus story.

Finally, the roasted bone encourages us to remember that just as God saved the Israelites with an outstretched arm thousands of years ago, when we cry out in faith, God can do the same for us today.



Beitza, the Egg

“For seven days present a food offering to the LORD. And on the seventh day hold a sacred assembly and do no regular work.”

— Leviticus 23:8

The *beitza*, or egg, which is boiled and then roasted, represents a second offering that was brought during Temple times. Along with the Passover offering of the lamb, Jews would also bring a holiday sacrifice that was brought to the Temple on all festivals mentioned in the Bible.

The reason an egg was chosen to symbolize this offering is because in Judaism, an egg symbolizes mourning and is the traditional food of mourners. On Passover night we remember that we still mourn the loss of the Holy Temple and that we yearn for the time when the Third Temple will be built.

Moreover, in Aramaic, the language of the *Talmud*, an egg

is called a *beya*, which also means “to pray” or “to plead.” This alludes to our prayer that God redeem us just as He redeemed our ancestors in Egypt.

And while an egg recalls mourning, we cannot ignore the fact that an egg is also a symbol of birth, another theme of Passover. It is through the slavery in Egypt and the subsequent redemption that the nation of Israel was born.

While the egg of the *Seder* plate is not directly used during the *Seder* itself, it is customary to serve an egg in saltwater at the start of the festive meal to every guest. This reminds us of both the tears shed by the Israelites in slavery and their birth as God’s people in the redemption that followed.



Maror, Bitter Herbs, and Hazeret, Bitter Vegetable

“That same night they are to eat the meat roasted over the fire, along with bitter herbs, and bread made without yeast.”

— Exodus 12:8

The Bible commands us to eat something bitter on Passover night, yet what exactly that bitter food might be is subject to debate. Some call it herbs, some see it as a leafy vegetable, and most have the custom of having two types of bitter foods on the *seder* plate. *Maror*, generally translated as “bitter herbs,” is usually grated horseradish, while *hazeret*, known as the “bitter vegetable,” is traditionally something leafier like chard or endive.

Eating something bitter on Passover night helps us recall the bitterness of the cruel Egyptian slavery. To that end, many appreciate the two types of bitter foods because the leafy greens tend to be bitterer while the horseradish is sharper, giving a fuller “taste” of what the slavery was like.

Some have suggested that the bitter vegetable alludes to an additional lesson. At first, when one bites into the vegetable, one does not experience the bitterness right away. It comes as an aftertaste. This reminds us that the slavery didn’t begin in a harsh way.

In fact, according to Jewish tradition, Pharaoh lured the Israelites into slavery at first by paying them for their services and making it seem as though they were doing a

favor for Pharaoh. Only afterward, did Pharaoh gradually make the conditions worse until he had subjected the entire nation to slavery.

On this night when we celebrate our physical and spiritual freedom, we remember that the things people usually become enslaved to – such as temptations, addictions, or other vices – often start off innocuously before becoming enslaving and self-defeating. We remember how bitter slavery is – whether physical, emotional, or spiritual – and thank God for helping us achieve full freedom.

Yet, the basic goal of the bitter foods is simply to further internalize the Exodus experience. We cannot fully appreciate God’s redemption if we have not fully recognized the bitterness of the Egyptian oppression. The bitter herbs and vegetables are consumed just after the telling of the Exodus story and before the festive meal begins.

While eating the bitter herbs and vegetables at these points during the meal, we remember the bitterness of oppression and how the suffering of the Israelites was connected with their redemption. It is through the painful experience of slavery that the nation of Israel was refined and made pure so that they might become God’s people.

think about it...

1. The entire *seder* meal is based around touching, seeing, and tasting specific Passover-related foods. What can we learn from this approach and how might we apply it to the way we learn and teach the next generation?
2. The Bible commands us to remember both the slavery of Egypt and the redemption. Why do you think it is important to remember our difficult times and not just focus on the good things God has done for us?
3. Make a list of your daily habits and assess where they may be leading you. What is on your list that may seem harmless now but could possibly become harmful down the road? What one step might you take to drop this habit?
4. Think of a challenge that you are facing right now. What lessons might God be trying to teach you through this challenge? How can you use this challenge to become a better, godlier person?
5. Consider those who are oppressed, enslaved, or suffering today. What one step can you take today to help alleviate their situation?
6. Contemplate the following: If God was able to free over a million weak and unarmed slaves from Egypt – the superpower of its time – what is possible for you? For our world? Remember that miracles are possible and believe that they can happen.



Haroset, the Paste

But the more they were oppressed, the more they multiplied and spread; so the Egyptians came to dread the Israelites and worked them ruthlessly.

— Exodus 1:12-13

Haroset is a mixture made of fruit, nuts, cinnamon, and wine, which are chopped finely or blended into a paste-like consistency. The *haroset*, which comes from the word *harsit* meaning “clay,” is meant to look like the mud and mortar that the Israelites were forced to use as slaves in order to build Egyptian cities. However, even though the *haroset* recalls the bitterness of slavery, it tastes sweet, reminding us that even in bitter times, we can always find something sweet in our lives and also that bitter times are eventually followed by the sweetness of redemption.

Another explanation for the teachings of *haroset* is that it is often through our challenging times that we grow and change for the better. From the outside, the *haroset* looks like a negative symbol. It resembles the mortar and mud that represent the harshness of the slavery.

In fact, the oppression reached its zenith when Moses first asked for freedom and Pharaoh responded by ordering the Israelites to not only produce the same amount of mud bricks as always, but also to supply their own straw. Yet, despite this, the Bible teaches: “*But the more they were*

oppressed, the more they multiplied and spread.”

Another way of saying this is that the more the Israelites were oppressed, the more they grew and the more they thrived. The sweetness of the *haroset* reminds us that while difficulties seem terrible on the surface, it is often through our greatest trials that we grow into our greatest selves.

A third teaching of *haroset* is from the latter part of the *Seder* when we dip the bitter herbs and vegetables into it, and afterward, when we create a ritual “sandwich” of *matzah*, bitter vegetables, and *haroset*. This tradition was established by Hillel, one of the great Jewish teachers from the 1st century.

In combining these elements together, Hillel underscored the teaching that oppression and redemption are all part of the same process. As he taught, our trials and our redemption are not two separate experiences; one cannot exist without the other.

These traditional actions help reinforce the idea for us that the bitter and the sweet are both part of the same story — the story of redemption and the story of all success.

apply it...

1. REMEMBER THE PAST IN A POSITIVE WAY.

When we remember the difficult times in our lives, it can either bring healing or be self-defeating. Revisit a challenging time in your life and focus on the lessons learned and the good that came out of it.

2. COOK UP SOME “SOUL” FOOD. Are there specific foods in your family that represent a meaningful aspect of your family’s history? Consider serving these foods at a set time each year and speak about their significance to your family.

3. IT’S TIME TO GROW. It’s not a coincidence that God took the nation of Israel out of

Egypt during the spring. Be inspired by nature to grow and blossom into a better person.

4. SHARE YOUR STORY. You can do this any time of year by sharing stories of God’s providence.

5. ALLOW YOURSELF TO FEEL PAIN. In our comfort-seeking society, it’s common to run away from unpleasant sensations. However, the bitter herbs teach us that feeling pain can be good for us – when it spurs us toward growth, empathy, prayer, and gratitude for the good in our lives.

6. LEAVE NEGATIVE HABITS OR SITUATIONS BEHIND. Just as the Israelites left Egypt, which was a horrible place of slavery for them, this is the ideal time of year to walk away from whatever is holding us back in life.