

## TORAH STUDY FOR CHRISTIANS

Villa Maria Education and Spirituality Center, April 19, 2017

### THE SYMBOLS OF PASSOVER

#### INTRODUCTION

Although Pesach (Passover) concluded last night, at sundown, it is still a good time to learn more about the symbolic foods used at the Passover seder. Symbolic foods should pose no problem for Christians, especially Catholics – communion, after all, makes consuming a wafer and wine a highly spiritual act. When Jews use/eat the symbols of Pesach, the feeling is different (I imagine; I've, for obvious reasons, never taken communion, so I cannot attest to the religious feeling of that experience). When I eat matzah on Passover or, for instance, dip the parsley into the salt water, make a blessing, and then eat it (at the seder), I feel as if I am connecting to an age-old Jewish tradition, fulfilling a commandment, and attaching myself that much more closely to my people and their story. And who is to say that by doing so, I am not connecting to G-d as well?

#### MATZAH - UNLEAVENED BREAD

Unleavened bread is the most well-known of all of the Passover symbols; the holiday is also called Chag HaMatzot – the Feast of Matzahs. The simple reason why Jews eat matzah (plural is matzot) on Pesach is because it is commanded in the Torah. The following passage was one that we read together last month when I discussed the four special sabbath readings leading up to Passover; this section is specifically about the matzah.

#### Exodus 12:14-20

יד והיה היום הזה לכם לזכרון וחגתם אותו חג ליהוה לדרתיכם תקות עולם תחגגו: טו שבעת ימים מצות תאכלו אף ביום הראשון תשביתו שאר מבתים כי | כל-אכל חמץ ונכרתה הנפש ההוא מישראל מיום הראשון עד יום השבעי: טז וביום הראשון מקרא-קדש וביום השביעי מקרא-קדש יהיה לכם כל-מלאכה לא-יעשה בהם אף אשר יאכל לכל-נפש הוא לבדו יעשה לכם: יז ושמרתם את-המצות כי בעצם היום הזה הוצאתי את-צבאותיכם מארץ מצרים ושמרתם את-היום הזה לדרתיכם תקות עולם: יח בראשון בארבעה עשר יום לחדש בערב תאכלו מצת עד יום האחד ועשרים לחדש בערב: יט שבעת ימים שאר לא ימצא בבתים כי | כל-אכל מחמצת ונכרתה הנפש ההוא מעדת ישראל בגר ובאזרח הארץ: כ כל-מחמצת לא תאכלו בכל מושבתיכם תאכלו מצות:

<sup>14</sup> This day shall be for you a memorial day, and you shall keep it as a feast to the Lord; throughout your generations, as a statute forever, you shall keep it as a feast. <sup>15</sup> Seven days you shall eat unleavened bread. On the first day you shall remove leaven out of your houses, for if anyone eats what is leavened, from the first day until the seventh day, that person shall be cut off from Israel. <sup>16</sup> On the first day you shall hold a holy assembly, and on the seventh day a holy assembly. No work shall be done on those days. But what everyone needs to eat, that alone may be prepared by you. <sup>17</sup> And you shall observe the Feast of Unleavened Bread, for on this very day I brought your hosts out of the land of Egypt. Therefore you shall observe this day, throughout your generations, as a statute forever. <sup>18</sup> In the first month, from the fourteenth day of the month at evening, you shall eat unleavened bread until the twenty-first day of the month at evening. <sup>19</sup> For seven days no leaven is to be found in your houses. If anyone eats what is leavened, that person will be cut off from the congregation of Israel, whether he is a sojourner or a native of the land. <sup>20</sup> You shall eat nothing leavened; in all your dwelling places you shall eat unleavened bread.

## TORAH STUDY FOR CHRISTIANS

Villa Maria Education and Spirituality Center, April 19, 2017

Here is what the *haggadah* (the book that contains the text used in the seder) has to say about matzah. We start with the Four Questions:

Why is this night different from all other nights?

1. On all other nights, we are not required to dip even once. On this night, we dip twice?
2. On all other nights, we eat chametz (leaven) or matzah. On this night, only matzah?
3. On all other nights, we eat any type of vegetables. On this night, we eat *maror* (bitter herbs)?
4. On all other nights, we eat either sitting upright or reclining. On this night, we all recline?

And, a little further on in the seder, we have this direct answer to the question above:

This matzah we eat – what is its reason?

Because the dough of our ancestors did not have time to become leavened before the King of kings, the Holy One, blessed be He, revealed Himself to them and redeemed them, as it is stated [in Exodus 12:39]: "They baked matzah cakes from the dough that they had brought out of Egypt, because it had not risen; for they had been driven out of Egypt and could not delay; nor had they prepared any [other] provisions for themselves."

There are explanations beyond the simple ones in or derived from the Torah that elaborate on the symbolism of this most simple of breads. Some come from its very simplicity; matzah can be seen as a temporary repudiation of all that is *chametz* - "puffed-up" or inflated, both in what we eat, and more significantly in how we see ourselves. It is a back-to-basics food and encourages a return to simplicity and purity.

### DISCUSSION AND QUESTIONS:

1. Are we really what we eat? How are we changed or affected by the form or substance of our food? Can our diet affect our spiritual lives?
2. Can you think of other symbolic foods that we eat or display on other holidays or at other special times?

### THE SYMBOLS OF THE SEDER PLATE

*Zeroa* - the roasted shankbone (or beet) commemorating the Pesach - the paschal lamb sacrifice

We studied the passage in the Torah last session that makes this symbol obvious. Briefly, the shankbone represents the lamb or goat sacrificed at sunset, whose blood was painted on the doorposts and lintel to ward off the Destroyer (also called the Angel of Death) during the tenth plague, the death of the firstborn Egyptians. Vegetarians and some others roast and display a beet on the seder plate instead of a shankbone: first, it is not meat, and secondly, when roasted, its red juice is reminiscent of the blood of the sacrifice. Here is what the *haggadah* has to say about the *zeroa*, also called the *pesach*:

What is the meaning of the paschal lamb that our forefathers used to eat at the time when the Temple was still in existence? The paschal lamb is to remind us that the Holy One, praised be He, passed over the houses of our forefathers in Egypt, as it is written in the Torah: "You shall say that it is the sacrifice of the Lord's passover, for He passed over the houses of the Children of Israel in Egypt when He smote the

## TORAH STUDY FOR CHRISTIANS

*Villa Maria Education and Spirituality Center, April 19, 2017*

Egyptians, but spared our houses. The people bowed their heads and worshipped.”  
[Exodus 12:27]

*Karpas* – a green vegetable (often celery or parsley), dipped into salt water, symbolizing the bitter tears of slavery. Some say the original intention was to dip the karpas into the charoset (which we’ll learn about in a moment). Karpas, however, also symbolizes spring, as does the...

*Beitzah* – an egg, which is, of course, the ultimate symbol of rebirth, renewal, and rejuvenation. The oval shape also reminds us of the cycle of seasons, how life is always renewed, and perhaps how “what goes around, comes around.” Also, the Talmud talks about the necessity of two types of cooked dishes that needed to be served. The first is the *zeroa*, and the egg symbolizes the second cooked dish.

*Maror* – the bitter herb, often horseradish, generally grated, but sometimes romaine lettuce is used. Again, the bitterness of slavery is given as the reason for this symbol, but it is also important to note that the Torah tells us to eat the roasted lamb with matzah and bitter herbs – this could simply have been how this food was to be eaten, following established custom. Romaine lettuce might seem to be an odd choice - it hardly matches up to the pungency of horseradish, but the more you chew romaine, the more bitter it becomes. This reminds us that life in Egypt was at first good for the Israelites but became more bitter with the gradual advent of bondage to Pharaoh. According to the haggadah:

What is the meaning of the bitter herbs which we eat? The maror is to remind us that the Egyptians embittered the lives of our forefathers in Egypt, as the Bible explains: “They made their lives bitter with hard labor, with mortar and brick, and with every kind of work in the field. All of the labor which the Egyptians forced upon them was harsh.” [Exodus 1:14]

*Charoset* – an apple, nut, and sweet wine mixture resembling mortar (somewhat). Before the seder meal, it is combined with matzah as a sandwich in the step called “korech” (combine). It is otherwise not referred to directly in the seder. I find it more than a little odd that this, yet another symbol of slavery, is so sweet and delicious! Perhaps the message is that, yes, we were slaves, and must never forget that, but now we are free and can enjoy life’s sweetness!

*Chazeret* – another type of green, leafy or root vegetable, generally a bitter one. It is neither used nor referred to or explained at all during the course of the seder, making it the Rodney Dangerfield of seder symbols. Many people leave it off of their seder plates completely. So why is it there for those who include it? There was a rabbinic debate as to what constituted *maror*, and what could be used - the chazeret is included to honor the opinion of those who thought this was what was needed. In some way, including it reminds us to honor minority opinions as well as the winning majority opinion!

## TORAH STUDY FOR CHRISTIANS

Villa Maria Education and Spirituality Center, April 19, 2017

There is a more recent phenomenon of adding symbols to the seder plate:

**AN ORANGE?** Writer and professor Dr. Suzanna Heschel, daughter of the important 20<sup>th</sup> C philosopher Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, originated this symbol, as told by Anita Silvert in the JUF NEWS, March 22, 2012:

Heschel herself tells the story of the genesis of this new ritual in the 2003 book, *The Women's Passover Companion* (JLP). It all started with a story from Oberlin College in the early 1980's. Heschel was speaking at the Hillel, and while there, she came across a *haggadah* written by some Oberlin students to bring a feminist voice into the holiday. In it, a story is told about a young girl who asks a *Rebbe* what room there is in Judaism for a lesbian. The *Rebbe* rises in anger and shouts, "There's as much room for a lesbian in Judaism as there is for a crust of bread on the seder plate."

Though Heschel was inspired by the idea behind the story, she couldn't follow it literally. Besides the fact that it would make everything – the dish, the table, the meal, the house – unkosher for Passover, it carried a message that lesbians were a violation of Judaism itself, that these women were infecting the community with something impure.

So, the next year, Heschel put an orange on the family seder plate, "I chose an orange because it suggests the fruitfulness for all Jews when lesbians and gay men are contributing and active members of Jewish life."

This symbol and others have been added to seder plates to symbolize other changes needed in an ever-evolving world. These include:

**Olives** – To symbolize the ongoing challenge of finding a peaceful and equitable solution to Israel's painful conflict with her Palestinian neighbors, many Jews have olives on or near the seder plate. Why olives? The separation wall, which has protected Israelis from random incursion of terrorists bent on wreaking havoc, also separates many Palestinian farmers from their ancestral olive trees; also, some of their olive trees have been uprooted by Israeli settlers and soldiers. The olives also represent the olive branch – offers of peace – that has long been extended to Palestinian leaders, but which has too often been refused.

**Pineapple** – A pineapple has a long journey from faraway places to arrive on our shores. As has been suggested by Reconstructionist Judaism this year, we can include one on or near our seder plates to symbolize and honor the long and often perilous journey of refugees and immigrants and our commitment to remaining a nation of immigrants, while helping to rescue legitimate refugees. "In American colonial times, the pineapple was a symbol of welcome and prosperity. They were special gifts because of the great labor and expense required to ship them from the tropics," explains Rabbi Deborah Waxman, the president of Reconstructionist Rabbinical College, in a video posted to YouTube. As we think about those in the midst of crossing through danger and into unknown lands, we aim to bestow upon them the gifts of hospitality and a sweet welcome.

## **TORAH STUDY FOR CHRISTIANS**

*Villa Maria Education and Spirituality Center, April 19, 2017*

### ***RECLINING***

Finally, it is traditional to recline, or more to the point, to have a pillow on your chair at the seder. *Only free people have the luxury of reclining*, of dining in a leisurely manner, totally unlike that of an enslaved or persecuted person. However, the reclining might also be a remnant of the supposed origins of the seder in the style of the Roman forum, whose participants reclined. As someone who has sat for long periods of time at lengthy seder meals, I can tell you the pillow is much appreciated!

### **OTHER QUESTIONS ABOUT PASSOVER?**