

PESACH: WHAT WE EAT AND WHY WE EAT IT

by Rabbi Yisrael Rutman

Red wine, matzah, marror, charoset. Given the centrality of food at the Pesach Seder, it's a wonder the Sages didn't ordain chopped liver molds in the shape of the Pesach lamb, or ice sculptures to depict the Splitting of the Sea. But even if they lacked our advanced culinary skills, the shapers of our tradition nevertheless had a deep and detailed vision for this most important meal of the year. The laws and customs of the night embrace not only the ingredients, but the method of preparation, style of eating, and even the thoughts one should have while eating.

Matzah, the unleavened bread, is pure flour and water. Since it is called lechem oni, the bread of affliction, representing the poor fare that was eaten by our ancestors in Egyptian slavery, it should be free of such enrichments as eggs, fruit juice or wine. The matzah has a dual, seemingly paradoxical, meaning. For as much as it represents slavery, it is also a symbol of freedom; since when the moment of liberation came, it was all so sudden and swift that there was no time to allow the bread to rise, and it became the food of triumphant departure.

This duality of matzah represents an important concept---that even in our freedom from enslavement to kings of flesh and blood, we remain subjugated to the King of the universe. When G-d said to Moses, "Let my people go," He didn't stop there. He also said, "...that they should serve Me on this mountain." The miraculous Exodus was brought about in order to give the Torah to the Jewish people on Mount Sinai fifty days later. Matzoh is a reminder that freedom is not absolute. Inevitably, one must serve some master. But better G-d than Pharaoh. Better the life of Torah than enslavement to the gods of pleasure, money and pride.

The preferred species of marror is lettuce; not, as one might think, the much more bitter taste of horseradish. (We're not speaking here of the red stuff in a jar, which is halachically questionable; but the powerful white horseradish root.) This is because lettuce is especially symbolic of the manner in which the slavery in Egypt began. At first, the Jews were welcomed into Egypt. Only after the death of Joseph did things take a turn for the worse. And even then, the anti-Jewish laws were quite mild. Only in the end did we suffer the avodat parech, the backbreaking work of building the cities of Pithom and Ramses. Likewise, the lettuce leaves are soft and mild; only afterwards, when you get

down to the stems, does it become harder and leaves a bitter aftertaste.

The four cups of wine correspond to the four expressions of redemption in the Torah: "I took you out...I rescued you...I liberated you...I took you to Me for a people." The preference here is for red wine. Here, too, the duality of Pesach: whereas the wine itself represents redemption, the color is reminiscent of the blood of Jewish children who were slaughtered for Pharaoh, who was advised to bathe in their blood to cure a medical condition. It has been one of history's cruel ironies that the blood libel---accusations against Jews using the blood of murdered gentile children for the making of wine and matzot---became the false pretext for numerous pogroms. And due to the danger, those who live in a place where blood libels occur are halachically exempted from using red wine, lest it be seized as "evidence" against them.

The Charoset is a dip whose recipe is also a halacha. The mixture should be of a thickness reminiscent of the mortar that the Jews were forced to make for the Egyptian building projects. It should contain wine to symbolize blood; and fruits, such as apples, figs, almonds, pomegranates, which are all fruits to which the Jewish people are compared in the Torah. Cinnamon or ginger is added to remind us of the straw used in the making of the bricks.

And how are these foods to be eaten? Reclining, in the olden manner of nobility. (Except for the marmor, which is exclusively representative of the bitterness of slavery.) In fact, the reclining is so important, it is seen to be an integral part of the mitzvah, and if the matzot and wine are taken without reclining, you may have to do it again.

One might have thought that if the essential message of the Seder is the telling over of the story of our people, that the recitation of the Haggadah would have been sufficient. But this is a story that is of our very essence; it is part of us. In order to ensure that the memory of the going out of Egypt stays with us in the deepest possible way, tradition ordains the partaking of a vivid array of foods. The world's great chefs might have created something more sumptuous, of greater visual splendor and gastronomic ingenuity. But the cookbook of the Jewish tradition is made up of the memories of slavery and redemption, bloodshed and nobility. These are the ingredients of ancient memory. These are the foods of the Pesach Seder.

A Kosher and Joyous Pesach to All!

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