

## Day 24: The Seder Plate Explained

As a response to questions from many readers, I would like to briefly explain the origin and meaning of the ingredients on the Seder Plate as well as issue a little warning: Beware of Symbolism.

As we shall see, several ingredients on the Seder plate started their life with one identity, plain and simple, but have evolved to entities with multiple aliases and layers. That evolution, with all of its complexity, can sometimes lead us astray from the original intention of the Seder.

Let me explain. At the time of the Temple, there was no need in external elements to intensify the experience of the Passover meal. People who gathered on the hilltops and rooftops of Jerusalem would roast their paschal lamb and bake their Matzah, and at the right time would eat a wrap of soft Matzah with roast meat and herbs (the first burger or perhaps McMatzah).

They would all simultaneously break into singing the Hallel, and the memory of that moment, with the powerful aroma, the delicious flavors, the sights and sounds, would become forever burned in the individual and collective consciousness of the participants.

After the destruction all that was lost, so the Sages instituted a lavish meal, Greek style, in order to recreate the sensation of Temple-time Passover. The focal point was the Matzah with the bitter herbs, and the meal served as a catalyst for a lively discussion and recounting of the Exodus, building up morale and encouraging people to have hope of and aspiration for the future redemption.

Over the centuries, however, some of the original practices and table manners have been forgotten, while others have been confused with each other. That development caused redundancy and lack of clarity regarding the role of some ingredients, and an abundant literature was created to explain the meaning of each element.

Unfortunately, since most of that literature was written in exile and other persecutions, there was a tendency to emphasize suffering. As a result, the Harosset for some is identified with blood, the salt water with tears or sweat, the Hazeret according to some should have a bite that will make you cry, and the bitter herbs are not bitter enough if they do not cause your facial muscles temporary paralysis.

### **Let us then look at the evolution of the Seder plate:**

The concept of a special receptacle designated for the Seder ingredients first appears in the writings of the school of Rashi, and it is actually a basket, not a plate. R Aharon ben Yaakov of Narbonne, Provence, writes in the 13th century:

They then bring the basket with three Matzoth, Karpas, Hazeret, and two dishes, one roasted and one cooked.[i] The basket contained all the ingredients for the Seder and the meal itself, so it might have very well been the predecessor of the famous Provençal picnic basket.

In the basket there were:

### **Three Matzoth:**

Originally one Matzah was used. Later on a second was added because of the practice to say HaMotzi on two loaves of bread. Eventually, a third Matzah was added because one of the Matzoth is split at the beginning of the Haggada and some rabbis felt that it is inappropriate to say the blessing over sliced or broken bread. We should therefore be careful not to get carried away with the symbolism of the number three.

### **Karpas:**

Karpas, which literally means celery, was added to the meal because the practice of noble Greeks was to have appetizers, usually green leaves and herbs, before the meal. Those vegetables were dipped in strong vinegar in order to get rid of parasitic worms, called kempe in Greek, which were dangerous if ingested.

Today we have no such concerns and we can simply enjoy the dip. Some use salt water and some use vinegar. My tradition is to have citrus juice from a fruit grown in Iran, called narunj. Since that fruit is no longer available we reconstruct the flavor by adding a little orange juice to lemon juice, which is the children's favorite.

### **Hazzeret:**

Hazzeret is one of the species of bitter herbs, or Maror. Because the early sources use the words Hazzeret and Maror interchangeably, we ended up with having an ingredient called Maror and another called Hazzeret on the Seder plate. As I mentioned before, none of the herbs or dips should cause anyone pain or suffering. The idea is to genuinely enjoy the Haggada and the meal.

### **Harosset:**

Harosset is not even mentioned as part of the ingredients of the basket because Harosset is the dip for the bitter herbs. That dip, as mentioned above, was an integral part of the appetizers course of each lavish meal. Indeed we find in the Talmud a discussion of the status of the Harosset dish and whether it can be made Kosher for Passover, meaning that it was used year round.

The ambiguity as to the nature of Harosset gave birth to many practices and explanations. The original Harosset was the same dip as the one used for the Karpas, but with the passage of time it evolved into a delicious dish with spicy and sweet ingredients, which softened the gastronomic blow of the bitter herbs.

Some traditions still kept vinegar in the recipe, as it was part of the worm-killing formula. In essence, each community created a Harosset based on the available ingredients.

I will mention here the two traditions we follow in our house: Moroccan Harosset is made of sweet dates soaked in red wine, mashed, and spiced with cinnamon, cardamom, and cloves.

The Iraqi Harosset is simply dates honey (silan) sprinkled with ground walnuts.

Here again, if we want to enter the symbolic realm, we should emphasize the sweetness. We could speak of our long journey in exile and how finally we can look at a brighter future as a nation, despite all problems.

### **Two dishes - shank bone and egg:**

The shank bone and egg, which are now symbolic components of the Seder plate, were the original two dishes of Passover. In other words - they were the meal.

The shank bone became a relic on many tables because people were afraid to eat roast on the Seder night. There was indeed a practice of not eating roast on Passover night but it only referred to a whole roasted lamb or goat, sacrifice style.

Today one can have the shank bone as a symbolic part of the plate or decide to eat it. Vegetarians who cannot tolerate meat on the table, even symbolically, can use any substitute, be it a veggie shank bone, a fake bone, or even a picture (3D printed will probably be too expensive).

The egg is eaten according to most traditions. Some eat it after the Maror and some eat it right after the Karpas, the first dip. The reason for the second practice is that it calms one's hunger and allows for better concentration and joy at the Haggada.

Bon Appetite

[1] משומרות מצות שלוש בו אשר סל לפניו מביאין כך ואחר: יד, הפסח ליל סדר, א חלק, חיים אורחות, מנרבונה יעקב בן אהרן רבי [1] ומטבל המרור על מברך כך ואחר... לחגיגה זכר והמבושל לפסח זכר הצלי, מבושל ואחד צלי אחד, תבשילין ושני, וחזרת, וכרפס שאם האוכלו בו יסתכן ולא ימיתנו שהחומץ קפא רבותינו בלשון הנקרא בו שנברא התולעת מפני בהרוסת להשקיע וצריך... בהרוסת לו אין אם ראשון בטבול הדין והוא ומרור תמכא עולשין חרחבינא כגון ירקות שאר יקח חזרת לו אין ואם... סכנה לידי יבא חי יאכלנו ירקות שאר יקח כרפס