



The Condiment of Sweet Cement & Hope

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The Pesach Seder hosts a number of foods eaten to recall different aspects of the Egyptian experience. Most of the foods remind us of either the slavery in Egypt or the luxuriousness of freedom. The bland matzah, aside from recalling the haste of leaving Egypt, is also lechem oni, the bread of affliction. It reminds us of the slavery that sapped the Jews of any pleasure. It must be eaten without any enhancement of taste. Similarly, the bitter marror reminds us of the bitter slavery they had to endure. The savory broiled Pesach lamb and the vegetable dip remind us of the eating habits of royalty. These are both understandable as we are meant to remember both the difficult origins of our nation, as well as Hashem's great kindness in freeing us from bondage.

What is more confusing, however, is the charoses. On the one hand its thick and pasty cement-like consistency reminds us of the back-breaking labor involved in making and laying the bricks and mortar. However, the sweet apple-cinnamon-wine taste hardly seem like a vehicle to arouse a sense of bitter suffering. To the contrary, it is actually a much anticipated appetizer that many look forward to eating! It is especially strange that the bitter marror is dipped into this sweet mixture. Why did the Rabbis find it necessary to add this condiment which has no source in the Torah, to the Seder?

Rashi (Pesachim 116a) suggests that the apples of the charoses allude to a fascinating Midrashic narrative. The Talmud (Sotah 11b) relates that after Pharaoh's decrees of forced labor and killing all the newborn baby boys in Egypt, the men became disillusioned and did not want to bring any more children into the world. The righteous women, however, had stronger faith and they gently encouraged their husbands not to despair. They reminded the men of Hashem's promise that he would yet redeem the Jewish people and take them to their Promised Land. The men were inspired by their wives' words, and with their faith invigorated they agreed to have more children.

The Talmud continues that when the women were ready to give birth, they would go out to the fragrant apple orchards and bear their children away from the eyes of the Egyptian spies. Hashem then sent angels to feed and sustain the children until they grew older. Rashi explains that the apples remind us of the orchards where the pure faith of the women in whose merit the Jewish people were

freed from slavery was manifest.

Rashi's interpretation may provide us with the background with which we can answer our questions. The Torah instructs us to eat foods that remind us both of the period of slavery as well as of the subsequent freedom. The Rabbis, however, felt that it is not sufficient to merely remember the different periods in our history. In the course of history, the Jew has learned to bear conflicting emotions at the same time. While suffering the pain and suffering of exile the Jew must also learn to dream, yearn and hope for redemption.

The Talmud (Shabbos 31a) relates that one of the first questions a person is asked after leaving this world is "tzipisa le'yeshua?" "Did you anticipate the redemption?" It seems that there is something special about yearning for the redemption.

The Rabbis actually considered this yearning to be so important that it is included as one of Maimonides' Thirteen Principles of Faith: I believe with perfect faith in the coming of the Moshiach, and even though he tarries I await his coming every day. Not only is belief in Moshiach mentioned, but the anticipation in his coming is listed as part of the principle as well. Why is the anticipation so significant?

Although Hashem may have found it necessary to keep His children in Exile, He still wants to make sure that they do not despair of Redemption. The yearning for Moshiach strengthens the relationship between the Jewish people and Hashem, allowing them to exude faith even when His Divine Presence is hidden from them.

It is this hope and longing that have helped the Jew maintain his strong faith and survive the pogroms, expulsions, Crusades, Inquisition, Holocaust, and other persecutions that have threatened his very existence throughout the ages. The Jew has been forced to often face a bleak present, while at the same time envisioning a rosier future.

This is the deeper meaning of the sweet charoses. Hope and faith in the midst of adversity. The message of the charoses speaks to the Jew not only at Pesach but throughout the year. Whenever we face hardship we are reminded of how the Jewish women's faith in Egypt paved the way for redemption, and this encourages us not to despair as well. 🍷