

Pesah, Matzah, and Maror

Rabbi Norman Lamm

Chancellor and Rosh HaYeshiva, Yeshiva University

The whole of the Seder shows the development from the impersonal to the personal, from the historical to the biographical, from recounting to reliving. Thus the central portion of the Haggadah explains each of the major symbols: *pesah*, *matzah*, *maror*. Each of these is defined in a manner more historical than personal. Thus, the reason for the Passover sacrifice is: God passed over our ancestor's homes in Egypt. We eat *matzah*: because the dough of our ancestors did not have time to ferment. And we eat the *maror*: because the Egyptians embittered the lives of our ancestors in Egypt. All the holiday seems to be a historical recollection. However, immediately thereafter we join the personal to the historical. We declare that we too are participants in the Exodus story. The redemption was not only of our ancestors, but of ourselves as well. Hence, immediately before the *Hallel* we raise our cups and declare, "Therefore we are obligated to praise and thank Almighty God who performed all these miracles both for our ancestors and for us!" And in anticipation of the great *Hallel* of this Passover Seder, we shall recite before God a new *shirah*, a new song. No longer are we historians; now we are participants. We are ourselves involved with the great experience of redemption. May that be our call this Passover, this year, and throughout our lives. May we learn to pierce the harsh facade of impersonality of modern life with the warm rays of a Jewish heart and soul. May we, and all Israel, and indeed all the world, recite before our Father in heaven a new *shirah*, a new song, singing of the redemption of all men and all mankind: *Haleluyah*, praise the Lord!

פסח - Pesah

Maharal notes that the Passover sacrifice could not be offered on the altar with any of its parts missing or burned separately; the entire animal had to be offered as one - hence, the principle of an unfragmented unity. Similarly, the very idea of *matzah* suggests the same theme. It consists of nothing but flour and water, the simplest and most minimal ingredients for bread, without any additives such as yeast or sourdough. The commandment to eat *matzah* and to refrain from *hametz* is thus again suggestive of the unity theme. Finally, we are not permitted to offer up the Passover sacrifice outside of the Temple Mount in Jerusalem. Every family had to come to the

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center of the nation and there, on the Temple Mount, offer the paschal lamb, slaughter it, and eat it. Here the principle of geographical unity is affirmed in the laws of Passover. Hence, from all these laws, we learn to rededicate ourselves to the concept of oneness.

But Passover suggests not only the oneness of God but also the oneness of mankind; not only preachment but prophecy; not only doctrine but vision of the future. Hence, we read in the Haftarah of the last day of Passover the immortal words of Isaiah, who speaks of the redemption to come in the end of days when the Messiah will arrive. Isaiah's words are known to all mankind: "And the wolf shall dwell with the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the kid ... and the cow and the bear shall feed together." (Isaiah 11:6-7). In these metaphors does the prophet paint for all the picture of cosmic unity that will prevail when Israel will be redeemed. It is a vision of human oneness, reflecting and proclaiming the oneness of God, which has fascinated civilization for some twenty-five centuries.

מצה - Matzah

Matzah can be described as a dialectic baked into unleavened dough. It oscillates between two opposite poles: It recalls the magnificence of the Exodus when our ancestors were commanded to hurry to leave Egypt, before even allowing the dough to rise, and hence a token of divine redemption. It also is, physically, a sign of poverty. Thus, the Seder begins by holding the *matzah* aloft and saying, *ha lahmah anya*, this is the bread of affliction, the pauper's bread that we ate as slaves in Egypt. We declare that now we are slaves, but by next year we hope to be free, thus defining the two poles of the Seder experience: slavery and freedom.

Think of the *matzah* therefore as a kind of mirror held up to us as we gather round the seder table; our very own Royal Table. We acknowledge our humble beginnings as slaves (*'avadim hayinu*), and as well, our lowly origins as pagans (*'ovedei 'avodah zarah hayu avoteinu*), and then recount the wonders of God, who then granted us national freedom and spiritual excellence.

We eat bitter herbs to recall the bitterness of servitude under the Egyptian taskmasters, but we recite a blessing as we do so, thus overcoming the harshness by elevating it to a blessing, a typical Jewish maneuver.

We recount the seder that took place on the eve of the Bar Kokhba rebellion against the Romans — a seder attended by five of the most distinguished scholars in Jewish history — and yet the seder is constructed so as to attract the attention and participation of even very young children.

Traditionally we begin the actual meal by eating a hard-boiled egg — the symbol of grief, especially as the first day of Passover falls on the same day of the week as does Tish'ah be-Av, the national day of mourning marking the destruction of the two Temples in Jerusalem. Yet we also drink the four cups of wine, celebrating our joy at our four-fold deliverance by the God of Israel.

The festival of Passover is the celebration of our freedom. Passover not only commemorates an act of liberation in the dim past, but also reminds us that the aspiration to and striving for freedom are unending tasks. Freedom is quixotic. One is never sure of it. It is not something which, once achieved, is forever certain, safe, and secure. It requires constant struggle. Judaism no doubt endorses the American Revolutionary slogan, "Eternal vigilance is the price of liberty."

All of Jewish history is, in a manner of speaking, a long record of freedom lost and regained; a drama of *galut* and *ge'ullah* (exile and redemption); of *herut* and *'avdut* (freedom and slavery). It is as if Jewish history were really a large Seder table, where sometimes we drink the Four Cups and are heady with freedom — and then bite into the bitter herbs and experience the agony of subjugation; where now we practice *hessebah*, inclining in a manner of aristocracy (in addition to health reasons as mentioned in the Talmud), and then taste the humiliation of the *haroset*. And sometimes, perhaps most times, life is more like the *matzah* — a peculiar and paradoxical blending of both motifs, of freedom (for *matzah* is the sign of that bread which did not rise because we were in a hurry to leave Egypt and emerge from servitude) and slavery (the “bread of affliction”).

Matzah is called “*lehem 'oni*, the poor man’s bread” — a denial of the ability of money or material influence to save us. It is a symbolic refutation of the omnipotence of science and technology by the very fact that *matzah* must be made from the simplest of substances, flour and water alone, in the most primitive of ways. The *matzah* is a bread which does not rise, it does not push itself up in boastfulness, and is thus a symbol of humility, a denial of the working of the ego in and of itself. Pleasure too is counted out: by custom we do not salt the *matzah* that we eat at the Seder as we do with the bread that we eat all year long. And even power is dismissed, symbolized by the fact that the *matzah* we eat at the Seder, in fulfillment of the special commandment, must be *perusah*, a broken *matzah*, a symbol of powerlessness. So the *matzah* itself is a symbol of iconoclasm or the breaking of the idols of our times, and thus becomes a most appropriate “food of faith,” as some Kabbalists refer to *matzah*.

מרור - Maror

The *maror* that we eat at the Seder is more than just a vegetable recalling the hard times inflicted upon our remote ancestors in ancient Egypt. It is the very symbol of human anguish through all the ages, and what we do with the *maror* is an expression of the Jewish philosophy of suffering as it issues out of the historical experience of the Jewish people.

Consider how astounding is our attitude towards this piece of food and how it speaks volumes to us. We do not weep when we eat it. We take this *maror*, this morsel of misery, and we recite a *berakhah* over it, as if to say, “Thank you, God, for the miserable memory!” We then take this bitter herb and dip it into *haroset*, the sweet paste of wine and nuts and fruit. Life, we say in effect, is neither all bitter nor all sweet. With rare exceptions, it is bittersweet, and we ought not to bemoan our fate but to bless God for it.

Ever since Adam and Eve ate of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil, our Kabbalists taught us, good and evil are comingled, and life offers us neither pure, unadulterated goodness nor pure, unredeemable wickedness. The pessimist deplors the bitter and the bad that corrupts the sweet and the good. The optimist is delighted that the sharp edge of bitterness is softened with sweetness, that there is some good everywhere. That is why when the Jew, the eternal optimist, dips his *maror* into the *haroset*, he makes a *berakhah*.

That too is why when we celebrate the *zeman herutenu*, the season of our liberation, we lean and recline as did ancient Roman noblemen while partaking of their banquet. Let others laugh at the comical Jew who tells himself he is a king while he is being tormented. We know it is true. Life is

bitter, but we have dipped it into the sweetness of *haroset*. Hence, as we come to *Pesah* this year and every year, we relearn our lesson. Many of us enter the holiday burdened with a secret sigh, a heavy heart, a distracted mind, and a soul sorely troubled. Yet, as Jews, we shall look for the sweet, we shall perform the *tibul maror beharoset*, the dipping of the *maror* in the *haroset*, and experience by sheer will the *simhat yom tov*, the happiness of the holiday.

But the message of *maror* is more than just the awareness of the bittersweet taste of life, more than just the idea that every black cloud has a silver lining. What *maror* wants to tell us is that misery is not meaningless, that pain is not pointless punishment, that human anguish has larger dimensions, and that the bitter leads to the sweet. In fact, without the foretaste of *maror*, *haroset* loses its value. There can be no sweet without bitter, no light without darkness before it, no joy without prior sadness. There can be no wealth without poverty, no faith without doubt, no freedom without slavery, no redemption without exile. A people that dips *maror* into *haroset* and makes a *berakhah* over it is defeated neither by fate nor by foe. A folk that can find the mellow in a morsel of misery can drive away the darkness with its own light, the outer sorrow with the inner joy.

כורך - Korech

This is the famous “Hillel sandwich.” This version restricts it to *matzah* and *maror*. These two foodstuffs are most prominent in the seder, and they symbolize two opposites. *Matzah* is the symbol of freedom, and *maror* of pain and exile and suffering. Both together are the essential twin components of *zekher le-mikdash ke-Hillel*, of our historic Jewish national memory. Such memory oscillates between the two antonyms of freedom and exile. Jewish memory encompasses both of these poles which complement each other.

In an entirely different context, the two reappear not in the framework of a joyous banquet, but in the fatal confrontation of Israel with Amalek — the wild, untamed, and murderous tribe, symbol of all that is evil and despicable. And, just as in the tension between *matzah* and *maror* there are two elements clashing with each other, so with regard to Amalek: “*timheh et zekher Amalek*, you shall erase the memory of Amalek,” and “*lo tishkah*, you shall not forget.” (Deuteronomy 25:19). When we confront naked evil in all its ugliness, the Torah demands of us two different but related reactions: *remembering* and *not forgetting*. “Remembering” consists of conjuring up discreet events or attitudes, scenes that punctuate your life at certain set times. “Not forgetting.” is not characterized by specific acts, whether physical or psychological, but by that which endures through all seasons, insinuates itself into every crevice of your memory and becomes part of your very being. While “remembering” is called into action at certain set times, such as Purim or *Ta’anit Esther*, and when prodded is proclaimed with gusto, “not-forgetting” becomes an integral part of your psychic and spiritual reality, often residing just below the level of your consciousness, and springing into readiness to protest at the first sign of Amalekite cruelty; and holds for all times and not merely at previously designated occasions.

Hence, an interesting relationship: *matzah* is an episodic event or series of events, as is the commandment “Remember what Amalek did unto you,” while *maror* is parallel to “you shall not forget” — a constant and uninterrupted awareness of the Amalek-Nazi axis and the consuming bitterness of their victims, and, ultimately, a Holocaust awareness that is not confined to Purim

or Yom ha-Sho'ah but is sensitive to the murderous potential of anti-Semitism beyond a certain level of social or political venom.

In this age of polarization it is important to point out the danger of “Too Much of a Good Thing.” What I plead for is that in any moral or ethical problem — and life is full of them at every turn — we consider all values, both during and after the choice between competing values. Any one value, when taken to an extreme, can be corrupted. If we consider all positive values together, even if we must choose one over the other, there is less chance of debasing ourselves, our lives, or society.

We need a dialectic of virtues, a harmonization of competing goods. We need freedom and responsibility; peace and self-defense; love and morality; patience and toughness; discipline and independent thinking. Like Hillel, who would make a sandwich of *matzah* and the bitter herbs and eat them together, we must manage to combine two different *mitzvot*, one bland and the other bitter, and not overdo either one at the total expense of the other.

Jewish life today must reveal that idea of balance, of not overdoing things, of a Seder that comes to an end with the *afikoman*. Religious perfectionism is a good thing. It means insistence upon more Torah, more observance of commandments, more morality. But religious perfectionism overdone can lead to isolationism, the kind that characterizes too much of Orthodoxy today. This is too much of a good thing — and we are warned not to be too much of a *tzadik*. At the same time, tolerance and understanding and acceptance of those of different opinions are certainly virtuous. Without tolerance, society crumbles. But done to an extreme, these will lead to indifferentism, to deciding that it makes no difference what you believe, what you practice, what you want to do. This leads to the breakdown of Judaism. Instead, we must have a dialectic of various virtues, an equilibrium between them, not going too far in either direction.

להסיב - Leaning

We lean on the left side when we drink the four cups and eat the *matzah*, according to the Talmud, because of a hygienic reason: not to choke on our food. But beyond that, scholars suggest other dimensions. The leaning is a symbol of aristocracy and freedom. But this is puzzling: Why adopt for our Jewish religious purposes a form or posture that was unique to the Romans of two thousand years ago? Why retain this fossilized Roman custom when we have so many beautiful Jewish customs? The answer, I suggest, lies in irony. Why is our seder lacking and incomplete today? Why do we not observe the Passover sacrifice which was the center of our seder in the days of independence? Why are we today in exile? It is because the Romans of two thousand years ago destroyed the Temple. But we shall not allow that destruction to rob us of our authenticity and undo us as a people. And so, today, we practice that very Roman symbol of freedom, the inclining on the left side. We adopt the Roman posture of leisure — and we thereby celebrate *zekher le-Mikdash*, remembering everything that occurred in the Temple, while they, the Romans who ravaged the Temple, are no longer in existence!

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