

The Seder of the Seder

The word seder means order — and yet the order of the seder seems very strange.

The ritual of Passover night is divided into three distinct parts. The first is comprised of all the readings from the Haggadah until the section known as *shulchan orech*, the prepared table.

At this point we pause to eat our festive meal. Then we return to the text to conclude the readings and final portions of the holiday text.

Simply put, it is pray, eat, and pray again.

Somehow that begs for an explanation. With regard to our morning prayers, Jewish law is quite clear. We must first take care of our spiritual obligations to God before we are permitted to satisfy our physical wants. We have to complete our prayers before we are allowed to sit down for our morning meal.

Yet at the seder, Jewish law seems unable to make up its mind about proper priorities. Yes, prayers to God do come first. We spend considerable time until we get to our food. But in what would appear to be “the middle of the book,” we halt our God-talk to placate our hunger. We recline and leisurely eat until we are satiated and then our slowly closing eyes are pulled back open to conclude the closing unit of the Haggadah.

Is this simply a concession to human frailty, an acknowledgment that it would be too difficult to continue reading from a text without some sustenance? Is the placement of the meal in the middle no more



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meaningful than an intermission made necessary by a Rabbinic recognition that people couldn't be expected to pray for so long a time without a break for nourishment?

Or is there in fact some greater meaning, some profound order, to the seder of the seder?

The answer becomes clear when we take note of the exact placement of the meal in the context of the entire Haggadah. Hallel is a magnificent selection of Psalms that are customarily recited on holidays. It consists of a number of chapters that together form a self-contained unit. When recited in the synagogue, the Hallel begins with a blessing and closes with a blessing — a clear indication that it is meant to be uninterrupted, an organic whole with a clearly defined structure.

How remarkable then that at the seder, we read but the first two chapters of Hallel, chapters 113 and 114 of the Book of Psalms, and then move on to the meal only to return to the concluding portion, chapters 115-118, after we have eaten our fill.

Our original question becomes even stronger. If we feel that it is only right, just as with our daily morning practice, to fulfill the spiritual

obligation of praise to God before tending to our physical needs and we therefore recite the beginning of Hallel, why not at the very least finish it? Would it really be so hard to delay eating for just a little bit longer? And if indeed a complete Hallel is out of place because of its length and the rabbis felt that the seder participants were entitled at long last to start the meal, couldn't they have deferred the first two paragraphs to the after-meal location accorded to the major portion of the prayer?

Surely the exact place where we make the break in Hallel has a great deal of significance. And once we identify the thematic difference between the first two chapters of Hallel and the remainder, we will have the key to understanding the reason for the remarkable sequence we've identified as pray-eat-pray.

The seder consists of three main units because it is on Passover night that we as a people first came to accept and understand God.

The English word God is a contraction of good. It conveys only one aspect of His being: His goodness. In Hebrew, the four letter name of God, the Tetragrammaton, is a combination of three words that express the three

categories of time: *Hoyah* means was; *Hoveh* means is; *Yihyeh* means will be. These three words combined together are the most powerful way we refer to the Almighty. By using this name, we acknowledge God's presence for all time. God was in the past, the all-powerful Creator of the world Who revealed Himself to our ancestors. He is in the present as the ongoing source of all of our daily blessings. And He will continue to be in the future, fulfilling all the promises He made as part of our covenantal relationship.

To believe in a God who is limited to a presence that fails to encompass all three aspects of time is to make a mockery of His greatness. And so every year on the first night of Passover we conduct a seder divided into three acts:

- The first is devoted to explaining the role of God in the past.
- The second emphasizes His closeness to us in the present.
- The last stresses our firm belief that just as He redeemed us long ago from the slavery of Egypt, He will finally bring about the promised messianic redemption in the future.

Look carefully at the prayers and the rituals before the meal and you will see that their intent is to elaborate on God's role in the past. The response to the young children's four questions, the Mah Nishtanah, about the meaning of this night, begins with the paragraph that recounts how "we were slaves to Pharaoh in Egypt and the Lord our God took us out from there with a strong hand and an outstretched arm." We go back to the time when our ancestors at first were idolaters and then the Lord drew us near to His service. We talk about Laban, the wandering Aramean, and

how we ended up in Egypt. We recite the 10 plagues and, with Dayenu, express our gratitude for all the things that God did for us, each one of which alone would have warranted gratitude. That, we then sum up, is why we have the Paschal lamb, the matzoh, and the bitter herbs.

And that is why we then recite only the two chapters from the Book

of Psalms out of the larger prayer commonly recited as Hallel, chapters 113 and 114.

These chapters share this emphasis on praise for past kindnesses. We who were once slaves to Pharaoh are now servants of the Lord (Psalm 113). God intervened on our behalf with great miracles, with the splitting of the sea and the trembling of the

What's on the Seder Plate?

Although the history of the Seder goes back thousands of years, each item on the Seder Plate still has deep significance to our personal lives today.

EGG

Reminds us to **mourn** that we can no longer offer the **Korban Chagigah** (Holiday sacrifice) since we no longer have the Temple. An egg is a sign of **mourning** because it is round, symbolizing the cycle of life from birth to death.

We yearn for God to **redeem us from our present exile** so that we will be able to serve God in the most optimal way.

ROASTED BONE

Reminds us of the **Korban Pesach** (Paschal Lamb) that was eaten at the seder in the times of the Temple. Since we no longer have our Temple, we can't offer the Korban Pesach any more, and we don't eat this meat, either.

The Korban Pesach was **roasted** because roasted meat is considered something eaten only by **royals**; poor people are more likely to just boil their meat. The Korban Pesach reminds us to celebrate that God elevated us from a nation of slaves to a **holy nation of royalty**. We are not just regular people, we are **children of the King!**

LETTUCE

A form of Marror. Lettuce is not always bitter, but **it can become hard and bitter** if left in the ground for too long before being harvested. This hardening process parallels the **transformation in attitude** that the Egyptians had toward the Jews: Just as lettuce starts out soft and ends up hard and bitter, so too, the Egyptians originally welcomed Jacob and the Jewish people to Egypt with open arms, but **later turned their backs on the Jewish people** and subjected them to backbreaking labor.

The lettuce reminds us to remain **loyal and appreciative** toward the people who help us. We should not be like the Egyptians and the lettuce, which are soft at first but later become hard and bitter.

CHAROSET

A mixture of apples, cinnamon, nuts, and wine. Its appearance reminds us of the **bricks and mortar** the Jews used in Egypt.

We dip the bitter Marror into the Charoset to sweeten the bitterness of the Marror. This is a reminder that we can always find a **spark of goodness** and something to appreciate within every challenge we face in life. Every dark cloud has a silver lining.

HORSERADISH

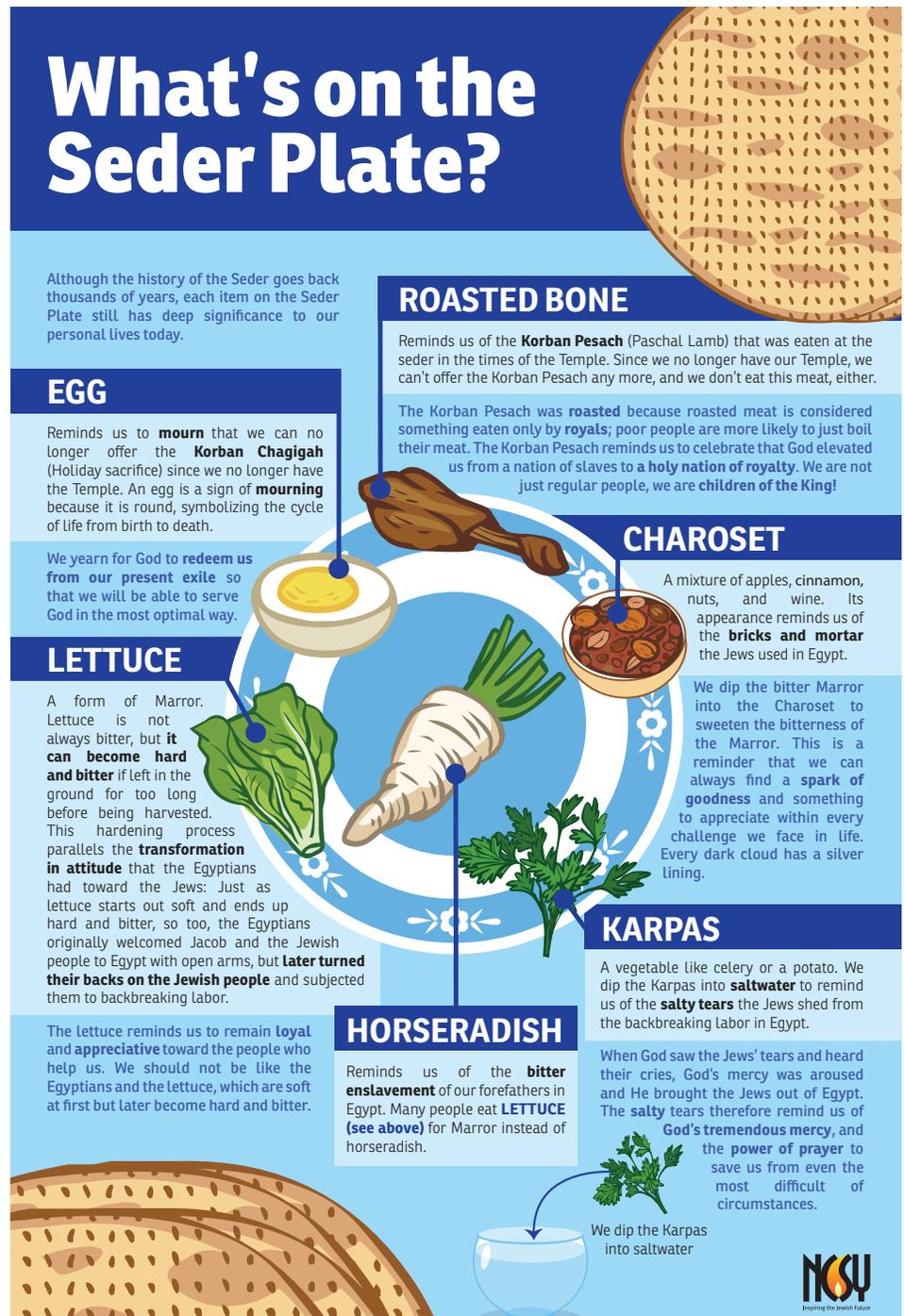
Reminds us of the **bitter enslavement** of our forefathers in Egypt. Many people eat **LETTUCE** (see above) for Marror instead of horseradish.

KARPAS

A vegetable like celery or a potato. We dip the Karpas into **saltwater** to remind us of the **salty tears** the Jews shed from the backbreaking labor in Egypt.

When God saw the Jews' tears and heard their cries, God's mercy was aroused and He brought the Jews out of Egypt. The **salty tears** therefore remind us of **God's tremendous mercy**, and the **power of prayer** to save us from even the most difficult of circumstances.

We dip the Karpas into saltwater



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mountains (Psalm 114). We go no further at this point because we have not yet shifted our attention to the second major way in which we understand God's role in time as expressed by His very name — *Hoveh* — He Is.

An anonymous author put it very well when he said, "The past is history. The future is mystery. The here and now is a precious gift from God — and that's why we call it the present." We could not survive even for a moment without God's providential care. The most powerful way in which this is expressed is by way of our daily bread. Manna may no longer descend from heaven as it miraculously did for our ancestors in the desert, but we are spiritually sensitive enough to recognize that without the Almighty, we wouldn't be blessed with the most basic requirements for our continued existence. To eat our food is to know God in the present. *Shulchan orech*, the section of the seder in which we partake of our meal, is to absorb in both a literal and metaphorical way the reality of God's nearness. He feeds us — so we know that He loves us.

The meal portion of the seder is not an intermission. It is another moment of awareness, different and elevated. It moves us from the *Hoyah* to the *Hoveh*. It makes the concept of the God of the past developed in the first section much more meaningful, something that is relevant for us today. In this second section, the God of the present is personal. We sit at His table and we know that just like a concerned parent, God nudges us, "Eat my child, eat."

We express all of this every time we recite the Grace After Meals:

ברוך אתה ה', א-לוקינו מלך העולם, הון את
העולם כולו בטובו, בחן בחסד וברחמים, הוא

נותן לחם לכל בשר, כי לעולם חסדו ... כי הוא
א-ל זן ומפרנס לכל ומטיב לכל, ומכין מזון
לכל בריותיו אשר ברא.

Blessed are you, Hashem (the one whose name includes a relationship with us in the present) our God, King of the universe, who nourishes (present tense) the entire world in his goodness, with grace, with kindness, and with mercy. He provides (present tense) food to all flesh, for his kindness is eternal ... He is God who nourishes (present tense) and sustains (present tense) all, and He prepares (present tense) food for all of His creatures which He has created.

The seder has brought us from the past to the present. But it is still not enough. The seder still cannot be over. We need to move on to the final and most complete understanding of God's relationship with us. After the meal we at last turn to *tzofun*, the Hebrew word for hidden. It represents the matzoh we set aside at the beginning of the meal to be "saved for later." It is not the matzoh of the past but the matzoh of the future. It is not the matzoh of memory that recalls the Exodus from Egypt. It is the matzoh of hope for a not as yet fulfilled redemption from the bitterness of the exile and the diaspora. It is the matzoh that was wrapped up for the children in the firm belief that they will enjoy a long awaited future of messianic joy. *Tzofun* serves as a bridge to the third part of the seder when we move from gratitude for what is to even greater anticipation of what will be.

It is the third part of the seder that captures the real significance of the Passover festival. This is not meant to be a holiday designated primarily as a trip down memory lane, a nostalgic reminder of an ancient story that has no realistic relevance to us. The conclusion of the seder comes to

affirm that what happened before will happen again. The first *ge'ulah* (redemption) was but a preview of coming attractions. There will assuredly be a *ge'ulah sh'lemah* — a final and complete redemption.

And so we open the door for Elijah, the prophet Jewish tradition identifies as the one who comes to announce the arrival of the Messiah. Better yet, we ask our children to perform this task. After all, it is a ritual that relates to the future and it is the young who will most benefit from its fulfillment.

We ask God to pour forth his wrath upon the nations who so viciously abused us. We recite those passages of Hallel rooted in our hopes for the future that we did not yet say in the first section of the seder concentrating on the past. We pray for the return to Jerusalem, not just the city but the rebuilt city, the city of King David's dreams and King Solomon's Temple. We close with the *nirtzah*, in which we express the hope that soon and speedily God "will redeem us to Zion with glad song," and Passover will at last fulfill its full promise.

Pray, eat, and then pray again. The seder captures the three tenses of God's name. It incorporates all of time. And that is what makes the seder timeless.