

SWEETENING THE BITTER: SPENDING TIME WITH MAROR

R. Elie Lehmann

I CAN STILL TASTE it in my mind: white sticks, freshly cut from the whole horseradish root, and stacked like a Lincoln Log tower on the Seder plate. This is the *maror*, the bitter herb (the real stuff; not the stuff from the jar) of my childhood. I remember watching my father chew several pieces slowly and carefully before, inevitably, getting red in the face and coughing. Every year the question would arise in my mind: why is he doing this to himself?

Eating *maror* has always been part of the Seder ritual, going back to the Mishnah itself.¹ In the final chapter of Massekhet Pesahim, which describes our earliest outline of the Seder, Rabban Gamliel lists *maror* as one of only three core elements that must be present and discussed at the Seder. The other two—the *pesah* sacrifice and the *matzah*—seem to be obvious inclusions in remembering the Exodus from Egypt. But why must the *maror* be part of our remembrance? What does its placement in the Seder ritual teach us?

Rabban Gamliel explains that we eat bitter herbs because the Egyptians embittered our ancestors' lives in Egypt, as it is stated in the Torah: "And they embittered their lives with hard labor, in mortar and in brick; in all manner of labor in the field, all the labor that they made them labor was with rigor" (Exodus 1:14). The dehumanizing, bitter treatment of the Egyptian taskmasters is tasted in our mouths, passed down through the millennia, and remembered on Seder night.

As an aid to remind us, generations later, this makes sense. But why then was eating bitter herbs part of the original Pesah itself? In Exodus 12, as God instructs Moses and Aaron regarding how the Israelites are to prepare for the auspicious night and their subsequent exodus from Egypt, the people are told to "eat the flesh [of the lamb] that same night; they shall eat it roasted over the fire, with unleavened bread and **with bitter herbs** (*merorim*)" (12:8). If the purpose of the *maror* is to remind us of the bitterness of slavery, this instruction adds insult to injury. Enslaved people need no external reminder of their lived degradation and suffering!

The commentator Hizkuni, perhaps with this concern in mind, explains the command to eat the sacrifice that night with *maror* as intended, instead, to show contempt for the animal that the ancient Egyptians venerated as an idol.

חזקוני שמות יב:ח

כל זה דרך בזיון שיאכלוהו עם דבר רע ומר ולא
עם דבר חשוב ומתוק.

Hizkuni to Exodus 12:8

All of this is to make it worse, that they should eat [the sacrifice] with something bad and bitter, and not with something nice and sweet.

This does help reframe the meaning of eating the *maror*. However, it does so at the cost of making the ritual about

1 Mishnah Pesahim 10:5, a *mishnah* that is also a central piece of the Maggid in our Haggadot.

what the Egyptians would think, shifting the focus away from the enslaved people and back to the oppressors. This detracts from the agency and attention that the slaves deserve on the eve of their liberation.

The *maror*'s placement in our Seder may offer another perspective on its central role on the original Pesah. We eat the *maror*, along with the other symbolic foods, only after the end of Maggid—not only after the prolonged discussion of the misery of slavery, but also after reading the myriad *midrashim* of God's miraculous redemption of the Israelites. By the time we finish telling the story and move into the eating section, we're already free. The *matzah* we bless and eat right before the *maror* is not the *matzah* of *lehem oni*, the bread of affliction, which we recall at the beginning of the Maggid section. Rather, it is the *matzah* that symbolizes our freedom, the Israelites leaving Egypt in haste when the dough did not have time to rise.² Only after we eat this *matzah* do we then eat the *maror*. If eating the *maror* were meant to remind us of the bitterness our ancestors experienced as slaves, then its placement in the Seder seems out of order. We should eat it much earlier than the *matzah*, when speaking about slavery in the early part of the Maggid section, not after crossing the sea, singing Dayyeinu and the psalms of Hallel. To make sense of its placement, we need a way to understand the *maror* that applies not only to our suffering in slavery, but also to our experience of freedom.

One way, then, that we can understand the Israelites eating the *pesah* lamb with *merorim*, and our own eating of the *maror* each year after tasting the *matzah* of liberation, is to recognize that *maror* is a fundamental part of life. Being human—not only being a slave—involves pain and suffering. When we take time to recognize and accept that reality, we can then learn to approach life with greater honesty, and a fuller set of tools to face the tougher moments.³

Furthermore, *maror* represents not only suffering, but also death itself. The gematria of *maror* (מרור) equals 446,

the same as the word “*mavet* - death” (מות). Escaping slavery—or any other existential challenge or hardship—does not mean that our life will break the bounds of what it is to be human. Everything continues to be transient. Life will have more moments of fragility. Change, weakness, and even death still lie ahead, even after an experience of liberation. This may sound sobering or feel painful in itself. However, it may also lead to a deeper appreciation of life's moments of peacefulness, success, and joy.

The Shulhan Arukh, following the view of Rava (in Pesahim 115b) and many Rishonim, codifies that one must chew the *maror* before swallowing it.⁴ In fact, one who swallows the *maror* without first chewing it has not fulfilled their obligation. To most of us, this sounds like insisting on a fuller measure of suffering rather than minimizing it. Some commentators, however, especially those with mystic orientations, have seen it quite differently. For example, R. Hayyim Vital,⁵ the great student of R. Isaac Luria, describes this process of chewing the *maror* as “sweetening the harsh decree.”⁶ R. Yeshayahu Horowitz⁷ says that our teeth represent 32 levels of wisdom, and chewing the *maror* sweetens it by going through these stages of contemplation and understanding.⁸ Chewing the *maror* asks us not to ignore that which causes us discomfort and challenges us, but to take a few moments to focus on it as a whole, discover its root, then break it down into more digestible pieces.

Many of us have had the experience of tears welling up in our eyes as we eat the *maror*. Tears generally recall feelings of sadness, but the Alter Rebbe, Shneur Zalman of Liadi, suggests there is a difference between sadness (*atzvut*) and bitterness (*merirut*). *Atzvut* implies that the heart is “dull like a stone and is devoid of vitality,” while *merirut* stems from an agitated heart, bitter in its desire for change.⁹ The current reality is far from ideal, and our hearts do strive to reach their highest potential for loving engagement with the world. Just as the choreography of the Seder can help us understand that *maror* is a part of

² See Exodus 12:39.

³ With appreciation to R. Joey Rosenfeld for opening this framing to me.

⁴ Shulhan Arukh, Orah Hayyim 475:3. See also the Tur there, and Mishneh Torah, Hilkhos Hameitz u-Matzah 6:2.

⁵ 16th-17th century, Eretz Yisrael.

⁶ Peri Eitz Hayyim, Sha'ar Hag ha-Matzot 3:3.

⁷ 16th-17th century, Eastern Europe and Eretz Yisrael; also known as the Holy Shela”h or the Shenei Luhot ha-Berit.

⁸ See his commentary on the Haggadah: “One needs to chew it with 32 teeth that correspond to 32 levels of wisdom, and while chewing them the bitterness that is in them becomes sweet.”

⁹ Tanya, Part I; Likkutei Amarim 31:6.

life even after liberation, it can also awaken within us a desire to reach for life's sweetness.

After eating the *maror* on its own, the Seder continues with *Koreikh*, which the later Kabbalists describe as *mamtikin*, sweetening that which is bitter. We bring the *maror* together with the sweet *haroset* and *matzah* of liberation. After this we move into the grand feast of *Shulhan Oreikh*. Through the combination of patience and perseverance, we still hold out hope for a more fully realized salvation, when all bitterness may be sweetened. Our feast is followed by opening the door for Elijah, the mythic harbinger of such an era.

This year, may we allow ourselves to spend a little more time at the Seder with the *maror*. May we have the courage, patience, and awareness to chew through the bitterness a bit longer, understanding that, though *maror* is present in many different moments of life, it also does not define life. May we live with the right dose of anticipation of a time beyond all bitterness, while knowing that for the time being we have the tools to break it down in size. Perhaps we'll cough, or even shed a tear, but who knows what inner awareness and understanding may awaken in our hearts as we chew the *maror* between our teeth. ♦

THE “OBLIGATION” TO SING AFTER MIRACLES¹

Joey Weisenberg, Rising Song Institute

SINGING IS THE ultimate expression of freedom, an essential rejoicing at the end of a cycle of suffering. Music is a recognition of the miracles of life.

The most famous freedom song of our tradition is the Song of the Sea. It begins, “And thus Moses sang, with all of the Children of Israel, this song to God.”² This song recounts the stunning moment when Moses and the Israelites escaped the slavery of Egypt by walking through the Sea of Reeds on dry land. It was sung by Moses, Miriam, the dancing women, and the entire

Jewish people,³ and has become the most important song of freedom in our tradition, reminding us of the birth of our nation. According to one *midrash*, even the fetuses in their mothers’ bellies sang along.⁴

But the Song of the Sea was only one of many songs of freedom sung by our ancestors. Almost all of the war heroes and righteous leaders of the Tanakh immediately sang songs and praises upon averting tragedy, or upon bringing their people from suffering to freedom, as can be

1 Adapted from Weisenberg’s essay, “Freedom and Miracles” in *The Torah of Music: Reflections on a Tradition of Singing and Song* (2017), pg. 107. Translations by Joshua Schwartz. Full texts for the sources referenced in this essay can be found in *The Torah of Music*. See parentheses in the following footnotes (e.g. *ToM* #83).

2 Exodus 15:1-21.

3 The Talmud discusses various ways in which Moses traded verses with the people. Talmud Bavli Sotah 30b (see *ToM* #57).

4 Talmud Bavli Sotah 30b-31a (*ToM* #58).