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## Innermost Secrets of Passover Seder: Charoset

By Rabbi Arthur Waskow

### Earth and Eros in the Passover Celebration

There it sits on the Seder plate: *charoset*, a delicious paste of chopped nuts, chopped fruits, spices, and wine. So the question would seem obvious: Why is there *charoset* on the Seder plate? That's the most secret Question at the Seder — so secret that nobody even asks it. And it's got the most secret answer: None.

The Haggadah explains about *matzah*, the bread so dry that it blocks your insides for a week. The Haggadah explains about the horseradish so bitter that it blows the lid off your lungs and makes breathing so painful that you wish you could just stop. The Haggadah even explains about that scrawny chicken neck, or maybe the roasted beet, masquerading as a whole roast lamb. But it never explains *charoset*.

Yes, there's an oral tradition. (How fitting for something that tastes so delicious!) You've probably heard somebody at a Passover Seder claim that *charoset* is the mortar that the ancient Israelite slaves had to paste between the bricks and stones of those giant warehouses that they were building for Pharaoh.

But that's a cover story. And it's really dumb. You think that mortar was so sweet, so spicy, so delicious that every ancient Israelite just had to slather some mortar on his tongue? You think it wasn't leeks and onions they waited for after they crossed the Sea of Blood but the mortar they were pasting on their masters' mansions? You think they were whining, "Give me mortar or give me death?" Forbid it, Almighty God!

OK, maybe it's a midrash, a tale spun by those bitter-hearted rabbis, always fresh from some pogrom or exile, claiming that to the Israelites slavery was sweet, so sweet that it reminds us that slavery may taste sweet but that this is itself a deeper kind of slavery?

No. The oral tradition transmitted by *charošet* is not by word of mouth but by taste of mouth, a kiss of mouth, a full-bodied, full-tongued, “kisses sweeter than wine” taste of mouth.

*Charošet* is an embodiment of by far the earthiest, sexiest, kissyest, bodyest book of the Hebrew Bible: the Song of Songs. *Charošet* is literally a full-bodied taste of the Song. The Song is the recipe for *charošet*.

You think they were going to tell you that when you were 6 years old, just learning how to stumble through “*Mah nishtanah*,” the Four Questions? Or maybe when you were 14, just beginning to eye that good-looking guest sitting right across the table? Or maybe when you were 34 and they were all nagging you to settle down already and get married? That’s when you thought they might finally tell the truth about *charošet*? Face it: They were never going to tell you.

Maybe, without ever asking or answering about *charošet*, they might mention something that seemed entirely different: that the olden rabbis thought the Song of Songs should be recited during the festival of Passover, but quickly they’d explain that what seems so erotic in the Song was really about God’s loving effort to free the Israelites from Pharaoh.

And, especially important in our generation: The Song is by far the likeliest candidate of all biblical books to have been written, or collated, or edited, by a woman. A woman’s experience is central to it.

*And* it is filled with love not only between human beings but between human beings and the Earth. The luscious tastes of fruit, nuts, spices, wine are the delicious savors and flavors of the Earth.

It’s time to tell the passionate truth: that the Song of Songs is the recipe for *charošet*, and that *charošet* is the delicious embodiment of the Song.

Verses from the Song:

- “Feed me with apples and with raisin-cakes”
  - “Your kisses are sweeter than wine”
  - “The scent of your breath is like apricots”
  - “Your cheeks are a bed of spices”
  - “The fig tree has ripened”
  - “Then I went down to the walnut grove”

There are several kinds of freedom that we celebrate on Pesach:

- The freedom of people who rise up against Pharaoh, the tyrant.
- The freedom of Earth, the flowers that rise up against winter.
- The freedom of birth, of the lambs who trip and stagger in their skipping-over, passing-over dance called “*pesach*.” (The” Pass-Over, skip-over “*pesach*“ dance of God, skipping over the houses of Israelites when the plague of Death came, imitated the skipping, stumbling walk of newborn lambs, and imitated the shepherds’ dance that mimicked the lambs. What a wonderful stumbling, dancing God!)
- The freedom of sex that rises up against the prunish and the prudish. The text of the Song subtly, almost secretly, bears the recipe for *charoet*, and we might well see the absence of any specific written explanation of *charoet* as itself a subtle, secret pointer toward the “other” liberation of Pesach: the erotic, Earth-loving freedom celebrated in the Song of Songs, which we are taught to read on Passover.

The Song of Songs is sacred not only to Jews but to Christians and Muslims, and especially to the mystics in all three traditions. Its Earth-and-human-loving erotic energy has swept away poets and rabbis, lovers and priests, dervishes and gardeners.

Yet this sacred power — “Love is strong as death,” sings the Song — has frightened many generations into limiting its power by redefining its flow as a highly structured allegory, hiding it from the young, or forbidding it from being sung in public places.

Even so, long tradition holds that on the Shabbat in the midst of Passover, Jews chant the Song of Songs.

Why is this time of year set aside for this extraordinary love poem? At one level, because it celebrates the springtime rebirth of life.

And the parallel goes far deeper, for the Song celebrates a new way of living in the world: the way of love between the Earth and her human Earthlings, beyond the future of conflict between them that accompanies the end of Eden; the way of love between women and men, with women celebrated as leaders and initiators, beyond the future of subjugation that accompanies the end of Eden; the way of bodies and sexuality celebrated, beyond the future of shame and guilt that accompanies the end of Eden; the way of God, so fully present in the whole of life that God needs no specific naming (for in the Song, God’s name is never mentioned); the way of adulthood, where there is no parent and there are no children — no one giving orders, and no one obeying them — but grownups, lovers, unlike the domination and submission that accompany the end of Eden.

In short, it's Eden for grown-ups, for a grown-up human race. Whereas the original Garden was childhood, bliss that was unconscious, unaware, the Garden of the Song is maturity. Death is known, conflict is recognized (as when the heroine's brothers beat her up), yet joy sustains all.

So the "recipe" points us toward apples, quinces, raisins, apricots, figs, nuts, wine. Within the framework of the free fruitfulness of the Earth, the "recipe" is free-form: no measures, no teaspoons, no amounts, not even a requirement for apples rather than apricots, cinnamon rather than cloves, figs rather than dates. So there is an enormous breadth for the tastes that appeal to Jews from Spain, Poland, Iraq, India, America.

Nevertheless, I will offer a recipe:

1. Take a pound of raw shelled almonds, two pounds of organic raisins, and a bottle of red wine. On the side have organic apricots, chopped apples, figs, and dates (no pits), and small bottles of powdered cinnamon, nutmeg, and cloves.
2. Assemble either an electric blender or your great-grandmother's cast-iron, hand-wound gefilte-fish chopper brought from the old country. If it's the blender, put it on "chop" rather than "paste" frequency.
3. Start feeding the almonds and raisins into the blender or mixer, in judicious mixture. (How do you know "judicious"? Whatever doesn't get the whole thing stuck so it won't keep grinding.) Whenever you feel like it, pour in some wine to lubricate the action. Stop the action every once in a while to poke around and stir up the ingredients.
4. Freely choose when to add apricots, apples, figs, and/or dates. Taste every 10 minutes or so. If you start feeling giddy, good! That's the idea.
5. Add in the spices. Clove is powerful, sweet and subtly sharp at the same time; a lot will get you just on the edge of high.
6. Keep stirring, keep chopping, keep dribbling wine, not until the *charoset* turns to paste but until there are still nubs of nuts, grains of raisin, suddenly a dollop of apricot spurting on your tongue.

You say this doesn't seem like a recipe, that it's too free? Ah, as the Song itself says again and again, "Do not stir up love until it pleases. Do not rouse the lovers till they're willing."

Serve your *charoset* at the Pesach Seder, and also on the night when you first make love to a delicious partner, and on every wedding anniversary, and on the day when you and your friends decide to move your money and/or protect our planet, because the planet is not abstract and theoretical but what we celebrate when we take *charoset* on our tongues.

Blessings of body and love, of creative mind and spirit!

