

### ***What's in Your Charoset?***

Parashat Vayakhel-Pikudei/Shabbat Ha'Chodesh

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Soon after the outbreak of the American Civil War, a 19 year old Jewish kid from Cleveland, OH enlisted in the Union Army. In the spring of 1861 Joseph A. Joel was a soldier in the Army of the Potomac, encamped not far from here in the mountains along the West Virginia-Maryland border. It was “the calm before the storm.” That September Joseph Joel would find himself on the bloodiest battlefield of the entire Civil War, the Battle of Antietam, where he was injured on South Mountain. He was lucky to have survived. A few months earlier though, Private Joseph, along with 20 other Jewish soldiers, approached their commanding officer, Major Rutherford B. Hayes—the same Rutherford B. Hayes who would become the 19<sup>th</sup> President of the United States just 16 years later—and requested that he and his fellow soldiers be granted permission to have a Passover Seder at their camp in West Virginia. Major Hayes granted the request, and before long a supply train from Cincinnati arrived carrying seven barrels of matzoh, two kegs of cider, a whole lamb, several chickens, and some eggs. Two haggadahs were also included in the shipment. In an article that he wrote years later in the Jewish Messenger, a weekly New York Jewish newspaper, Joel said they did not have horseradish, but they found a weed out there in the woods that was far more bitter than any maror they had ever tasted. He reported that it was so “fiery” that they drank many more than the requisite four cups washing it down and getting a bit tipsy in the process. He also wrote, “The necessities of choroutzes [sic] we could not obtain, so we got a brick which, rather hard to digest, reminded us by looking at it, for what purpose it was intended.”<sup>i</sup>

A brick instead of charoset. Pretty resourceful if you ask me! Like most of you, along with my fellow Clevelander, Private Joseph Joel, I learned that charoset was symbolic of the mortar that our ancestors used to glue the bricks of the Egyptian edifices they were forced to build. Whether your recipe calls for sweet red wine and cinnamon like the traditional Askenazi versions; bananas and strawberries like the Persian concoction; hazelnuts and pecans as in the Libyan version; or anise and walnuts like the Syrian method, all haroset has that pasty texture that evokes muddy mortar and harsh labor.

Now remember that while I tell you this...

In our parasha we once again have a review of all the implements and construction details of the mishkan, the wilderness sanctuary. One of those items was the *kiyor*, the laver, where the priests would wash before performing their duties. The Torah says that the material for the lavers consisted of mirrors contributed by Israelite women.<sup>1</sup> Remember that mirrors in antiquity were not made of glass, but of highly polished metal, in this case *nechoshet*, copper. Rashi tells us that this was actually a very controversial gift! According to the Midrash, Moses did not want to accept the mirrors! He wanted to refuse this gift from the women. What are mirrors for after all? For outward appearance, for beautifying ourselves physically, even, as Moses suggested, for the *yetzer ha'ra*. Someone may be using a mirror in order to appear seductive or tempting...

But none other than God intervenes and insists that Moses accept the mirrors. In fact God says *Kibel! She'eilu chavivin alay min ha'kol!* You must certainly accept them. In fact, they are the most precious of all the donations to the mishkan! *Ki al yedeihim he'emidu ha'nashim tzevaot rabot be'Mitzrayim*, because with these mirrors, Jewish women raised vast armies within Egypt. What does this mean? By beautifying themselves with these mirrors, these Jewish women would go out to meet their exhausted, demoralized husbands, bring them food and drink, and remind them of the humanity that slavery sought to rob them of. These women would rekindle affection with their spouses, reinvigorate romance and love, and conceive a new generation of Israelites even in the midst of the brutal, terrifying circumstances of Egyptian servitude. Those mirrors were the symbols of hope, of the future. And the specific location where these brave women made sure that the generation in Egypt would not be the last generation of the Jewish people was *tachat ha'tapuach*, beneath the apple trees. In fragrant groves of fruit trees, the Jewish people's future was vouchsafed. And that's why some of your family charoset recipes have as ingredient number one: Apples.

So, we've got poor Private Joel's dirty brick sitting in the middle of his battlefield seder table representing hard labor and mortar, and the sweet concoction of apples that no doubt adorns your seder tables. recalling the fertility and hope of Israelite women defying Pharaoh's decrees.

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<sup>1</sup> Exodus 38:8

There is a debate among the sages about whether charoset is actually a mitzvah, a religious requirement of the seder, like matzah or maror.<sup>2</sup> Afterall, the Torah does not mention charoset, and we don't say a blessing before eating it. Nevertheless, Rabbi Eliezer bar Rabbi Tzadok says charoset is definitely a mitzvah! And to the Talmud's inquiry *Mai mitzvah*, just what kind of a mitzvah is this? Another Sage, Rabbi Levi responds *zeicher la'tapuach*, it is a remembrance of what happened among the apple trees. Not the mortar. Not the bricks. Not the harsh labor. It is a reminder of heroism of Israelite women who went out to the orchards and reunited with their husbands. Another sage, Abaye, who was also apparently a chef in his spare time, recommended that charoset be both tart in taste, and thick in consistency. The tartness was for the apple trees, and the thickness was for the mortar. So Abaye tries to satisfy both traditions of what we are supposed to be thinking about when we eat charoset at the seder. And perhaps the charoset is just one more opportunity at the seder to discuss various meanings and interpretations of the story.

I also happen to think that charoset is a metaphor for something so much larger than a fruity dip or condiment. Life is filled with *avodah kasha*, with hard labor, and with *m'rirut*, with undeserved bitterness. It's impossible to avoid! But the question is, during those inevitable moments of challenge and hardship, do we see only bricks and mortar, or can we also taste some sweetness. Do we emphasize the challenges and allow them to overwhelm us and cloud our vision, or do we also remind ourselves of the many reasons for hope and optimism?

Tomorrow we are planning a wonderful gala, celebrating so much growth and promise and hope at Har Shalom. We will be honoring some very special harbingers of that hope, who have helped us achieve so much. But I can't help thinking back to the very first board meetings I attended when I first came to Har Shalom 12 years ago. We were coming off of a painful history, years of instability, a bleeding membership. And I would listen with dismay as that narrative dominated the discourse. I remember the negative prognostications about membership, and the declarations that Har Shalom had passed its prime. People said that this was not a giving culture; there were debates about closing the preschool; about how the religious school was costing the shul so much money. But I wouldn't have even come to this place if I didn't also see tremendous promise and potential. If I couldn't taste the sweetness of the charoset in the midst of all that mortar. And look at us now! We are not only surviving, we are thriving! We are growing...new members

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<sup>2</sup> Talmud Bavli, Pesachim 116a

show up all year round, not just before the high holidays when they “need” to join. Our schools have grown exponentially. We have a great reputation in the community as a vibrant, healthy congregation that people want to be a part of. Har Shalom is a great example of this charoset debate...Okay, we surely have our challenges, some of which are precisely about bricks and mortar. But the sweetness and hope that makes this place so exciting overpowers all of that!

This year, when you eat a dollop of charoset at your seder, don’t only think of the heaviness, the weight, the burdens of life; let that sweetness really settle on your palate. And if you need proof that hope really does dominate, just think of your shul, and tremendous promise we are realizing every single day. While charoset may contain a hint of hardship, it is intensely sweet and bursting with possibility!

Shabbat Shalom!

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<sup>i</sup> Nathan, Joan. *Jewish Cooking in America*, pp. 391-392