

Why an egg on the seder plate?

In a few days we will again celebrate the festival of Passover, commemorating our miraculous deliverance from slavery in Egypt to freedom in the Promised Land. The seder plate on the table will contain all the foods that remind us of the holiday:

- The *matzah*, to remind us that the Israelites had to leave in a hurry and their bread did not have time to rise,
- The shankbone, or *zeroa*, to remind us of the Passover lamb eaten on the eve of the Exodus from Egypt,
- The bitter herbs, *maror* and *chazeret*, to remind us of the bitterness of slavery,
- The *charoset* paste, made of wine and dates or apples, to remind us of the mortar and bricks the Jewish slaves made to build Pharaoh's palaces,
- The vegetable, *karpas*, usually parsley, dipped in salt water to remind us of the tears shed by the slaves.

Did I forget anything? Oh yes, a roasted egg – *betzah*.

Why do we place an egg on the seder plate? That egg is never mentioned in the Haggadah, and is never eaten!

The answer is very simple: No one knows!

The first reference to it is by Rabbi Yitzhak ben Abba Mari in late 12th-century Marseilles, France. [*Sefer Ha'ittur* 2:133c] Let us speculate on its significance. But note carefully that none of these explanations appear in ancient Jewish sources!

First, the egg symbolizes the beginning of life, and the events of Pessah mark the true beginning of Judaism.

It also symbolizes the renewal that occurs in springtime, the season of Pessah.

Next, when the Temple stood, a festival animal offering, or *chagigah*, was brought on the afternoon before Pessah, in addition to the Pessah offering itself. It was also roasted and eaten at the Seder Meal. The Chafetz Hayyim, in his Mishna Berurah, published in 1904, believes the egg is a substitute for the *chagigah*. [Mishna Berurah 11]

Next, eating an egg is a sign of mourning. It is traditionally the first food after a funeral. So, although we are celebrating our freedom, we still mourn the loss of our Temple, and the fact that, because if it, we can't offer the Paschal sacrifice anymore. That's why many people eat a hard-boiled egg dipped in salt water at the beginning of the seder meal. Also, the egg is smooth and has no opening, like the mourner who grieves silently and appears composed on the surface.

The Rema, Rabbi Moshe Isserles, notes that the eve of Pessah is always on the same night of the week as Tisha B'Av – the day of the destruction of our Temple, another reason for mourning at the seder table. Also, Abraham died on the eve of Pessah.

Note, however, that Rabbi Moshe Feinstein, who died in 1985, rejected any sign of mourning at the Seder, and therefore rejected eating eggs at that time (but did not reject putting an egg on the seder plate). [Igrot Moshe, Orach Hayyim, 1:156]

Next, the egg is a symbol of fertility. A Sephardic custom I remember well from my youth in Egypt is that unmarried women would eat a hard-boiled egg behind a door, to express their hope that marriage and children were in the not-too-distant future.

Some say the roundness of the egg represents the cycle of life. Some also say that the egg reminds us that God has no beginning and no end. Some note that when the Jews left Egypt, they were like an unhatched egg. Only at Mount Sinai were they truly born, when God gave them the Torah. Political freedom without spiritual freedom is like an unhatched egg.

Rabbi Aharon Hachohen of Lunel, in 13th-century Provence, notes that, in Aramaic, the language of the people in everyday life, an "egg" is "*beyah*", which also means "wanted." So the egg means: "Please, God, we want to be freed from slavery!"

Rabbi Yehudah Dov Singer writes in 1977 that the egg is a symbol of freedom because the Romans ate it at their feasts. [Ziv Haminhagim, 3rd ed., 1977, p 51]

Rabbi Shemtob Gaguine notes in 1934 that we use a shankbone and an egg because the Egyptians did not eat meat or eggs, and we want to distance ourselves from them.

Another opinion is that peeling an egg frees it from its shell. It is not easy to do. Likewise, it is not easy to free yourself from the slave mentality. This is quite true, and that is why God made the Israelites wander in the desert for forty years -- to make sure the generation of the Exodus died out, and that only their children, born in freedom, would get to start the new country.

Yet another opinion is that an egg cannot stand without help. Likewise, our ancestors needed God's help to free them from slavery.

And finally, my personal favorite, due to the Chatam Sofer, 19th-century German sage: The egg represents the Jewish people. Most foods become softer as they are cooked. But the egg becomes harder. So it is with the Jewish people: the more they are oppressed, the stronger they become.

Take your pick.

Chag kasher ve-sameach! **חג כָּשֶׁר וְשִׂמְחָה**