



Week 1: Haroset: A Tale of Love and Darkness Miriam Lorie, Class of 2024

Why is there *charoset* on the Seder plate?

The Haggadah explains about *matzah*, the bread so dry it blocks your insides for a week.

The Haggadah explains about the horse-radish so bitter it blows the lid off your lungs and makes breathing so painful you wish you could just stop.

The Haggadah even explains about that scrawny chicken neck masquerading as a whole roast lamb.

But it never explains *charoset*.

[Rabbi Arthur Waskow](#)

Haroset is the quintessential apple-cinnamon taste of Pesach. But it doesn't get the coverage of the *pesach*, *matzah* or *maror*, and so to my mind, it always represented *minhag* over *halakha*—a rich *minhag* indeed, with a different recipe for every Jewish culture. However, start to investigate, and *haroset* does indeed contain multiple complex layers of halakhic, midrashic and symbolic meaning.

The first time we hear *haroset* mentioned is in [Mishna Pesachim 10:3](#):

The attendants **brought** vegetables **before** the leader of the seder prior to the meal, if there were no other vegetables on the table. **He dips the *hazeret*** into water or vinegar, to taste some food **before he reaches the** dessert of **the bread**, i.e., the bitter herbs, which were eaten after the *matza*. **They brought before him *matza* and *hazeret* and *haroset*, and at least two cooked dishes** in honor of the Festival. The *tanna* comments that this was the practice, **although eating *haroset* is not a mitzvah** but merely a custom. **Rabbi Eliezer ben Tzadok says:** Actually, it is **a mitzvah** to eat *haroset*. **And in** the period when **the Temple** stood and they offered the Paschal lamb, **they brought before him the body of the Paschal lamb.**

The Mishna leaves more questions than answers here—it doesn't explain what either *hazeret* or *haroset* is. There is an ambiguity over what is dipped (vegetables seemingly in *hazeret*?) and when each item is brought (*hazeret* at two stages?). And it leaves *haroset*'s status as a *mitzvah* contested.

The Gemara in [Pesachim 116a](#) characteristically has much to say. It poses the theory that *haroset* was a medicinal antidote to the *maror*, which can cause stomach aches, and suggests an incantation you can say to the offending greens while waiting for the *haroset* to arrive: “Poison, poison, I remember you, and your seven daughters, and your eight daughters-in-law.” Unsatisfied with this, the Gemara then picks up R. Elazar ben Tzadok's claim that *haroset* is not medicine but *mitzvah*:

The mishna states: **Rabbi Elazar, son of Rabbi Tzadok, says** that eating *haroset* is a **mitzvah**. The Gemara asks: “**What** is the nature of this **mitzvah**?” **Rabbi Levi says**: “It is in **remembrance of the apple**, as apple is one of the ingredients in *haroset*.” The verse states: “Who is this who comes up from the wilderness, reclining upon her beloved? Under the apple tree I awakened you” (Song of Songs 8:5), which is an allusion to the Jewish people leaving Egypt. **And Rabbi Yoḥanan says**: “The *haroset* is in **remembrance of the mortar** used by the Jews for their slave labor in Egypt.” **Abaye said**: “**Therefore**, to fulfill both opinions, one **must** prepare it **tart** and one **must** prepare it **thick**. One must prepare it **tart in remembrance of the apple**, and one **must** prepare it **thick in remembrance of the mortar**.”

This Gemara opens up a world of interpretation into *haroset*. Here is the well-known mortar symbolism, but also the less well known idea that it represents “the apple.” This, Rashi explains, refers to the apple trees in Egypt “beneath which [the Israelite women] gave birth to their children, without pain, so that the Egyptians would not notice them.”

Rashi here is making the connection to an *aggadah* in [Gemara in Sotah 11b](#). It starts with the famous line: “Rav Avira taught: In the merit of the righteous women that were in that generation, the Jewish people were redeemed from Egypt.” Our minds usually jump to the well-known women—[Miriam](#), Yocheved, Batya, the [midwives](#). In fact, the Gemara continues to tell a story of regular women working great acts of resistance through... love.

Rav Avira taught: In the merit of the righteous women that were in that generation, the Jewish people were redeemed from Egypt. He tells of their righteous actions: **At the time** when these women **would go** to the river **to draw water, the Holy One, Blessed be He, would materialize for them small fish** that would enter **into their pitchers, and they would therefore draw** pitchers that were **half filled with water and half filled with fish. And they would then come and place two pots on the fire, one pot of hot water** for washing their husbands **and one pot of fish** with which to feed them. **And they would then take** what they prepared **to their husbands, to the field, and would bathe** their husbands **and anoint them** with oil **and feed them** the fish **and give them to drink and bond with them** in love **between the sheepfolds**, i.e., between the borders and fences of the fields, **as it is stated: “When you lie among the sheepfolds”** (Psalms 68:14). **And when** these women would **become pregnant, they would come back to their homes, and when the time for them to give birth would arrive they would go and give birth in the field under the apple tree, as it is stated: “Under the apple tree I awakened you; It was there your mother conceived you, There she who bore you conceived you.”** (Song of Songs 8:5).

We've heard about the hard work in Egypt. The bitterness and the rigor. But how often do we think about how intense and dark everyday lives and relationships would have been? The women's clandestine fight for love in this midrash tells us something of how crushed the men were feeling. How dark and despondent; how disinterested in love. It makes sense of other midrashim in which husbands and wives separate, because who would want to bring children into a world of Pharaoh's death sentence, who would want surviving children to live a life of servitude? But in this midrash, the women choose love and continuity against the odds. This midrash, with its dream-like escape into the liminal spaces of fields, sheepfolds and apple trees, credits women who seduce their husbands with the entire redemption from Egypt.

This is what the apple in *haroset* represents to Rabbi Levi in Pesachim. And this—love as resistance in a time of darkness—is *haroset*.

In our own dark times, I've seen conversations on social media which are not dissimilar: "I can't face intimacy with my spouse thinking about what happened on October 7th" and: "it feels unfair to celebrate our love when so many friends are called up and in Gaza." But the Gemara gives us two images to choose from: we can choose to see our lot as "mortar"—the symbol of our suffering, rigidity, and stuckness. But we can also choose to see it as "the apple," the symbol of our tiny seeds of hope and freedom hidden deep inside.

If the theme of this reader is "counting up, counting down," *haroset* embodies "eating up, eating down." Our seder food becomes a symbol of the choice between an optimistic or nihilistic view of the world. And we, like the righteous women of that generation, can choose life and love.

It's no coincidence that the ingredients in *haroset* (particularly the Sephardi recipes) are mentioned in the Tanakh's love song, *Shir HaShirim* (read, appropriately, on the Shabbat of Pesach).

["Feed me with apples and with raisin-cakes;"](#)

["Your love is sweeter than wine;"](#)

["The scent of your breath is like apples;"](#)

["Your cheeks are a bed of spices;"](#)

["The fig tree has ripened;"](#)

["Then I went down to the walnut grove."](#)

Cut this way, *Shir Hashirim* reads like a recipe. And perhaps conversely, we can also see our stained generations—old *haroset* recipes as love poems.

Returning finally to the Mishna's initial debate on whether *haroset* is a *mitzvah* or "mere" medicine, the Rambam is clear. In the [Mishneh Torah laws of Chametz and Matzah he writes](#):

The *haroset* is a *mitzvah* ordained by the words of the Sages, to commemorate the mortar with which [our forefathers] worked in Egypt. How is it made? We take dates, dried figs, or

raisins and the like, and crush them, add vinegar to them, and mix them with spices, as clay is mixed into straw.

Rambam pitches *haroset* as “*mi’divreiv sofirim*”—a level somewhere between a rabbinic law and a Torah law—pretty significant given the Mishna and Gemara’s uncertainty prevarication. He mentions Rabbi Yochanan’s “mortar” symbolism and ignores Rabbi Levi’s “apple,” but we can forgive him this, particularly as he shares his own family recipe!

This Pesach, when you taste the first *haroset* of the year, take a moment to consider both the mortar *and* the apple. Both the hardship, despondency, despair, and also those who resisted by choosing love, life and hope for the future.

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