

Charoses Recipe

Category: Holidays, Pesach

In recent decades, new customs have cropped up to commemorate women's contributions to the Passover story. But did you know—women are actually commemorated in one of the time-old foods of the seder, perhaps the most favorite of them all.

What's In The Charoses?

I hope you all had a great Seder last night. I know I did. So I'd like to talk about some of the things you saw on the Seder table last night that you might have questions about—which, of course, is the idea. And specifically, I'd like to talk about one little detail on the Ka'arah, the Seder Plate: Charoses.

Any of you wondered what exactly Charoses is? Do you know how they make it? Do you know what the ingredients are?

The answer, my friends, is: It depends on who you ask.

An Ashkenazi will tell you that Charoses must contain apples and wine. If you ask a Sephardi, he will tell you that Charoses is a blend of dates and nuts with the addition of various spices. But apples? Who thought of that?

No matter what it is, Jews always have to disagree with each other. Even something as harmless as the ingredients of Charoses is a matter of disagreement.

Now why indeed do we eat Charoses? What does Charoses symbolize? We all know the answer: "To remember the cement." Charoses is an extension of the Marror that reminds us of the slave labor that the Jews performed in Egypt. In like manner does the Charoses remind us of those hard days.

So if there is a dispute on how we make Charoses, there is certainly a dispute on why we make Charoses—a dispute on what it is supposed to remind us.

The Talmud (Tractate Pesachim 167a) says that Rabbi Yochanan actually does say what we all know—namely that Charoses is "to remember the cement." But there

is a different opinion in the Talmud: “Rabbi Levi says, ‘It’s to remember the apple.’”

But how does an apple come to the Seder table?

The Apple Story

If you ask people what comes to mind when you say “apple,” most people will immediately say, “Adam’s Apple”—the forbidden fruit that Adam ate without permission, the Sin of the Tree of Knowledge. (Some people will guess “apples and honey,” which we eat on Rosh Hashanah.)

But my friends, this is very common misconception—nowhere in the Torah does it say that the Tree of Knowledge was an apple tree! The story of the “Forbidden Fruit” being an apple doesn’t come from Jewish sources. The Torah only states (Bereishis 3:3), “And from the tree which is within the garden, do not eat from it”—it doesn’t say what kind of tree it was!

Only after they had eaten from the tree already and their eyes had been opened does the Torah state, “And they tore off a date branch...” There for the first time does the Torah state what type of tree it was, on which Rashi comments, “That was the tree they ate from; in the matter in which they had become corrupted did they become corrected.”

And so, Rashi asks, why indeed does the Torah not state explicitly what type of tree it was? “For what reason was the tree not made famous? Because G-d didn’t want to punish a created being, so that they would not shame it and say, ‘This is what the whole world was punished because of.’ ”

So now we come back to Charoses. Rabbi Levi says that it’s to remind us of “the apple.” But what apple are we talking about here?

Rashi (in the Talmud, Tractate Pesachim 116b) explains that the Jewish women in Egypt “would give birth to their children without assistance so that the Egyptians would not find them out, as the verse states, ‘Under the apple did I arouse you.’ ”

What does that mean?

Rashi is hinting to a story that the Talmud mentions in Tractate Sotah (11b). The

Talmud states: “In the merit of the righteous women of that generation were the Jews redeemed from Egypt. When they would go to draw water, G-d would arrange small fish for them, and they’d draw half water and half fish, and they’d come and prepare two pots: one of hot water (to wash their husbands’ feet in the field) and one of fish, and they’d go to their husbands in the field and wash them and feed them and *‘join them privately’* ... and when they would become pregnant, they would go back home, and when their due dates arrived, they would go and give birth in the field under the apple trees, as the verse states, ‘Under the apple did I arouse you.’ ”

What the Talmud is telling us here is a story that reveals the essence of Jewish women.

The Jewish men who were slaves in Egypt had given up and didn’t want to have kids. As the story is told in the Parsha of Shmos, even Amram, the leader of the Jews in exile, was affected by this thinking, so much so that he separated from his wife, Yocheved, because of the Pharaoh’s decree (Shmos 2:1, Rashi).

And if the leader of the generation did so, certainly the ordinary people felt the same way. As the Midrash tells us, “They all got up and separated from their wives.”

After all, why should we have kids, they thought—so they could throw them into the river?! And even if they are saved, what kind of life is waiting for them? To grow up to become a slave?

They argued that it’s better to not have kids. In essence, this was exactly what the Egyptians wanted them to think—and thus, Amram, the father of Moshe Rabbeinu, was really the one who made the Egyptian plan a reality, until his daughter Miriam got him to change his mind.

The women, on the other hand, had not lost their faith in G-d. It was clear to them that the day would come when they’d be redeemed from this awful exile, and they explicitly wanted to have kids.

And when women want something, nothing will stop them.

So the Jewish women in Egypt prepared a good dinner for their husbands, brought along a little hot water so that their men could wash up, and thus

influenced them to have kids.

And so when it came time to give birth, they'd run into the fields because in the cities, the Egyptians would snatch the babies and kill them. But out in the fields, under the branches of the trees, they'd give birth. "And this is what caused such fear and fright upon the Pharaoh and Egypt—that despite all the troubles the Jews had, they still were fruitful and they still multiplied," the Rebbe said in a talk.

And this is what the apple reminds us of.

The Mirrors

We learn the importance of this story from yet another place in the Torah.

In the Torah portion of Vayakhel, we are told about the building of the Mishkan—how the entire Jewish nation brought donations so that the Mishkan could be built. And the Jewish women also brought donations—so much so that they were more passionate about donating to the Mishkan than the men.

Among the items the womenfolk brought for donation to the Mishkan were mirrors, the "makeup mirrors." When they brought the mirrors, Moshe Rabbeinu shouted, "Feh!" A mirror, after all, is good for your bedroom—but certainly not for the Mishkan.

"Moshe was repulsed by them because they were fitting for the yetzer harah," the evil inclination. But Rashi continues and says: "G-d said to him, 'Accept them, because they are dearer to me than everything else.'" Why? "Since because of them the women established numerous legions in Egypt"—because of these mirrors, they bore children who became the generation that was redeemed from Egypt. If not for those mirrors, there'd be no one to take out of Egypt.

And here too Rashi tells us the same thing, just with one new detail: "When their husbands were tired from slave labor, they would go out to them and bring them food and drink and feed them, and they would bring along mirrors—and each one would show herself to her husband in the mirror and would encourage him with words, saying, 'I'm better-looking than you,' and thus seduce their husbands and become intimate with them, and then become pregnant and then have children, as it says, 'Under the apple did I arouse you.'"

It's the same story as before, fish and hot water and all—just with the mirrors added. The result was that in their merit there emerged the next generations that eventually left Egypt.

The Women on the Seder Plate

So when the Sages said, “In the merit of the righteous women were the Jews redeemed from Egypt,” they didn't mean that they sat around and prayed all day, reciting Psalms. Rather, the Rebbe says, “Their essential righteousness was expressed in their fulfillment of the mitzvah of ‘Be fruitful and multiply,’ and they did it out of a sense and feeling of happiness at every Jewish boy born—because otherwise, there'd be nobody to redeem. There'd be nobody to take out of Egypt.

And so, my friends, when we sit around the Seder table, what does the Charoses remind us? It reminds us of the strength of the Jewish women, who even in such dire straits continued to bear children.

There are some feminists who put an orange on the Seder table to remind women of the role that Miriam the Prophetess had in the Exodus from Egypt. But the truth is, the Jewish Nation has been putting a symbol of the role of Jewish women on the Seder table for thousands of years now—with the apple in the Charoses.

So, the Charoses reminds us of two things: One, when we look at it, we are reminded of the cement, of the suffering of the Jews in Egypt—and two, when we taste it, it reminds us of the apple: the strength and the trust of the women of that generation.

Kabbalah teaches us that the generations before the coming of Moshiach are the reincarnation of the souls that lived in the generation of the Exodus from Egypt. And just like in that generation, the redemption occurred in the merit of the women of that generation, so too in our generation will the redemption come in the merit of the women.