YESHIVAT HAR ETZION VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH PROJECT (VBM)

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CHAROSET

by Rav Eliezer Kwass

Charoset plays a secondary role on the seder night, never eaten by itself, only something to dip our bitter herbs in. What would have been missing had Chazal just left the marror alone and had us eat it straight? Without looking at sources we're tempted to say that marror is simply too bitter and the charoset sweetens things just a bit. Could there be truth to this? [A survey of charoset recipes throughout the generations reveals ingredients like vinegar and chestnuts alongside the traditional apples and sweet Concord wine. See R. Kasher's Hagadda Sheleima pp. 62-64.]

The main primary source material on charoset includes two lines in Mishna Pesachim (10:3) and the Gemara's explanations on Pesachim 116a. One approach sees charoset as a health precaution--it neutralizes the kapa poison in the marror (or its smell kills the kapa bug -- Tosafot vs. Rashi. Apparently, their charoset was either much stronger than ours or the kapa wasn't such a hearty bug.). R. Eliezer ben Tzadok, on the other hand, says that charoset is a mitzva.

Two reasons appear in the Bavli for the mitzva of charoset: R. Levi’s, that it is a reminder of the "tapuach" (maybe an apple), and R. Yochanan’s, that it is a reminder of the mortar -- "zekher latit." What the Gemara doesn't make clear, though, is how these reasons relate to the symbolism of the marror. [Even according to minority approaches that inflate the importance of charoset -- requiring a separate berakha (Rambam, commentary on the Mishna), eating a kezayit (Mordekhai end of Pesachim), or radical formulations of the mitzva like R. Moshe Shternbuch's (based on the Rambam) -- that the mitzva is essentially to bring it to the table, how this all relates to the already existing mitzva of marror still needs to be addressed.] Again, what does charoset add?

Let’s first deal with R. Yochanan -- charoset as a reminder of the mortar (zekher latit). We could simply say that while marror alone leaves you with a general feeling of bitterness -- ”they embittered our lives”, charoset comes and connects that feeling with the specific, the concrete -- ”with mortar, bricks...”.

We have to fine-tune our explanation, though, because of the Gemara’s comments on the recipe for charoset. One tacit assumption of all the sources that speak about R. Eliezer b. Tzadok’s approach is that every ingredient has symbolic meaning. Right after mentioning the two reasons for charoset, the Gemara quotes Abayei, who says, "therefore it must be thick, like mortar, and tart, like apples."

Recipes for charoset work at making charoset as mortar-like as possible. They used crushed dates, nuts, or chestnuts (Saloniki, Sefer Hamenucha) to get the thickness; they added pears (Leket Yosher) to get the brick color; the Shibbolei Haleket even records a custom of grinding in a little brick into the mixture! [R. Kasher’s Hagadda Sheleima p. 64 (our source for all these different customs) quotes the sharp reply of Maharam Lunzano: I was astounded to see such craziness. Maybe on Purim they'll draw some blood to remember the decree to kill [the Jews]?! Rather, the whole thing came about because of a misreading of the Rashbam -- cheres instead of charoset. Still, in Saloniki they ground rock into the charoset.].

One other ingredient, spices, could also be explained similarly. Our Gemara closes with a baraita quoting R. Eliezer b. Tzadok: The merchants of Yerushalayim used to call out, "Come and buy your spices for the mitzva." We can say that this is another way of making our charoset closer to the real thing -- the bricks had straw, so we put in spices like cinnamon and leave them straw-like (Mordekhai).

The image of straw, though, also calls to mind the end of Parashat Shemot (chapter 5), the stage in the slavery where Pharaoh refuses to supply straw to the Jewish brick-makers. This inspires us to suggest that beyond making charoset more life-like, the spices remind us of the straw story and what it added to the Egyptian slavery. This episode signals the beginning of a qualitatively different type of slavery.

Before Pharaoh changed his policy, the Jews suffered as slaves, but at least as slaves who were able to follow the orders of their taskmasters. By denying them straw, yet keeping the same orders for the amount of bricks they must produce, he put them in the no-win situation of one who can’t possibly do what is expected of him. Along with the physical pain of toil, the slave suffers from the loss of human dignity that comes with independence. Part of being be-tzelem Elokim (in God's image) is being self-directed, a free man -- and that was already taken away.

Pharaoh went further and took away the possibility of accomplishment. A normal slave can at least be efficient, at least follow orders properly. Now, without straw, he cannot even do that. He was a slave who doesn’t even have the dignity of being able to be a good slave.

Psychological oppression sometimes takes this form, lording over another, sometimes over large groups of people, and robbing them of their dignity. Though the following two examples are not carbon copies of Pharaoh's behavior, in each someone is left psychologically bruised, without their self-respect.

Midrash Eicha (3:Reish) tells how a Jew passed the Roman emperor Hadrian and greeted him. Hadrian asked, "Who are you?" -- "A Jew." Snapped Hadrian: "Does a Jew pass Hadrian and greet him?!" And he had the Jew beheaded. Another Jew saw what happened to the first one, so, when Hadrian passed by he was quiet. Hadrian: "Who are you?"--"A Jew." Hadrian: "Does a Jew pass by Hadrian without saying hello." Then, to his guards: "Go and behead him."

Hadrian had it within his power to murder Jews without trumped up charges if he wanted to. He had another agenda, though -- to also score a psychological victory. After the first Jew was killed, the second Jew thought he had figured out the proper etiquette for relating to the king. The king, besides just looking for an excuse for killing another Jew, was saying, "You'll never win with me. You just won't be able to meet my expectations." Hadrian didn't just chop off people's heads; he tied them in knots first.

A friend from the former Soviet Union told me that he used the following analogy when teaching the beginning of Shemot: Russian authors were first asked by the government to write about the standard Marxist-Leninist themes. This itself was painful for the free-thinking artist who valued his creativity. The next stage was more difficult, though. When authors were recognized as talented, they were offered promotions. This promotion included the privilege of choosing the topics they wanted to write about. The government, however, dictated which topics they should choose.

They were given the illusion of freedom, but had been really left with none; they were forced to become the system themselves. [They were now able to call the bricks their own, for they would make them from scratch, gathering their own straw.]

The second approach in the Amoraim, R. Levi's, takes an almost opposite direction. What is this tapuach (it might be an apple, might not) we are remembering? Rashi says it is based on Shir Hashirim (8:5) and refers us to Sota 11b: "R. `Avira expounded: It was because of the merit of the righteous women of that generation that the Jews were redeemed from Egypt...." He goes on to recount how the women would go to their working husbands and bathe and feed them, then would conceive children between the fields. When the women were ready to give birth, they'd leave their houses out of fear of the Egyptians. There they would lie underneath the apple trees and give birth. Here he quotes from Shir Hashirim: "Underneath the apple tree I aroused you." Rashi's explanation: God aroused the Jewish children to come out of their mother's wombs. He continues to develop how God acted as the midwife and how the children were miraculously protected from the Egyptians.

Within what realm does the symbolism of charoset lie according to R. Levi? It's not about the bitterness of slavery like the marror symbolism; and it predates the redemption, so it isn't like matza either. It must be related to slavery, though, because the charoset is dipped in marror.

Rather, says R. Levi, charoset is about the Jewish women's and God's way of relating to slavery and the slaves. True, the enslavement was bitter, both physically brutal and psychologically degrading, but the Jewish women didn't lose hope, and God was with us, raising a new generation of Jewish children. We dip our marror -- enslavement, in charoset -- hope and caring.

A close look at the structure of this midrash shows that R. `Avira views its two elements as interrelated, God responding to the actions of the righteous women, taking the cue from them, taking up where they leave off . R. `Avira lists a string of active verbs when telling his story: They'd go to draw water and God would summon fish to their buckets, they'd draw half fish half water, cook two pots [fish and hot water], bring them to the fields to their husbands, wash them, anoint them, feed them, give them drink, and they would have relations between the fields. When they'd go back to give birth, God is similarly described with a string of nurturing verbs: He sent an angel to clean off and straighten out the babies, and collect two clumps of oil and of honey to feed them. The women's caring for their husbands is mirrored by God's caring for the children. When the Egyptians come for the newborns they are miraculously swallowed into the ground and, despite the Egyptians plowing the ground, grow up from the land like sprouts, and eventually flock back home in droves.

The parallel between God's and the women's actions is further strengthened by the cap-off sentence of each subsection: Part I -- "As a reward they merited the spoils of Egypt..." (perhaps this refers to the spoils of the Red Sea); Part II -- "When they were redeemed these children recognized God first..."

Two comments very relevant to our previous discussion of straw:

1) The men are totally passive in this story. If our structural analysis is accurate, they, cared for by their wives, parallel the children cared for by God in the second half. This is slavery -- passivity, inaction born of the kind of debasement we spoke of earlier. The hot water, cleansing, and then anointing restores human dignity. The women not only hope and make sure the nation doesn't disappear, but try and relieve the psychological effects of the slavery.

2) The gemara uses agricultural imagery: the setting is the fields, the children get swallowed up into the ground, plowed over by the Egyptians, then shoot up out of the earth like sprouts. The position of the Egyptians is ironic. They try and kill the children by plowing them over, much as one would try and uproot the weeds in a field. Plowing, though, is quite a normal part of the process, and breaks up the soil for the plants. (There is even a second plowing after the seeds are sown -- Shabbat 73b) The whole situation, the birth under the apple tree, is generated by the Egyptian slavery. Its end result is a generation miraculously raised by God, one that can say "This is my God" at the Red Sea. Egypt becomes a place where a new type of Jew develops; the Egyptians "plow the land" of Israel's development.

Charoset's implications are, based on these observations, 1) that we were able to restore our own dignity during the slavery; 2) that we were never abandoned by God, even at the depths of slavery; 3) that in a strange way, there were some positive dynamics set into motion by the slavery.

It comes out that whereas R. Yochanan sees charoset as expressing the most intense aspect of slavery, the depths of the marror, the stage when human dignity was lost, R. Levi's charoset is one that balances off, that sweetens the bitter herbs. Perhaps our sweet kosher wine charoset recipe is not so far off the mark after all.

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