

Bitter Herbs

II. Judaism

The consumption of bitter herbs on the first night of Pesah is regarded as a rabbinic commandment (implied in *tPes* 2:22; *mPes* 2:6). They are eaten during the Pesah seder between the recitation of the first part of the Hallel and the meal, after the consumption of the matsah. Important debates concentrate on their use and meaning in the ritual and on their botanical identification.

1. Ritual Use. The requirement to eat bitter herbs during the seder derives from the biblical injunction regarding the first Pesah in Egypt, requiring the lamb to be eaten with matsah and bitter herbs (Exod 12:8). This practice is not mentioned in the Dead Sea Scrolls and it is not evident that the meat of the Pesah lamb was always or even usually gar-

nished with them. However, as the Pesah lamb could not be slaughtered and eaten any more after the destruction of the temple, only the consumption of unleavened bread and bitter herbs can still be performed (cf. *MekhY Bo* 17), either as a survival or as an element of the ritual that was reconstructed on the basis of the biblical text. The former garnish of the meat of the Pesah animal comes to replace the main dish (Bokser: 38–40).

The Tosefta (*tPes* 2:22) remarks that Hillel the Elder used to eat meat, unleavened bread and bitter herbs wrapped up together (as a literal interpretation of Exod 12:8; Num 9:11). After wondering whether or not the two acts of eating (viz. unleavened bread and bitter herbs) may be combined, the later sages of the Babylonian Talmud (*bPes* 115a) concur in the following ruling that is adhered to until today. Bitter Herbs must be eaten (in the minimum quantity of the size of an olive; Karo, *ShA OH* 473:5 as implied in *mPes* 2:6) with the appropriate blessing after the consumption of a piece of unleavened bread. Bitter herbs and unleavened bread are then eaten as a sandwich without blessing. The printed versions of the haggadah turn the explanation of the instruction to eat both of them together as a mimetic “sign referring to the temple” (Safrai/Safrai: 169) into a piece of liturgical text that should be recited. Some manuscripts of the (now extinct) Yerushalmi rite of the haggadah apparently emphasized this combined consumption of unleavened bread and bitter herbs, as they only contain a single blessing over unleavened bread and bitter herbs.

2. Identification. The Tosefta rules that the obligation (to eat bitter herbs at Pesah) can be fulfilled with two species, “lettuce” and “chick pea plant (?)” (*tPes* 2:21; cf. Friedman: 231). The Mishnah (*mPes* 2:6) replaces the second term by a list of 4 species in order to align the number of plants eligible for consumption as bitter herbs with the five cereals that may be used for baking unleavened bread just mentioned in the same text (Friedman: 230–48). Although the mishnaic list originated from literary rather than halakhic considerations, it provides the point of departure for all subsequent botanical, theological, and linguistic considerations that discuss the suitability of plants as bitter herbs until today (e.g., Zivotofsky).

The Talmudim suggest Aramaic and Greek translations of the mishnaic terms (with considerable variations in the MSS) that are later supplemented with Arabic ones or equated with plant names in European languages. With the spread of the Jewish Diaspora into North-Eastern Europe, it became difficult to obtain leaves or stalks of plants similar to those in the Mediterranean regions. Ashkenazi Jews began to use horseradish as bitter herbs (well attested from the 14th cent.; Schaffer). Despite the continuing opposition of renowned authorities

(e.g., against horseradish as a root), the custom spread also to other regions of the Diaspora. In line with this tradition, the first mishnaic term for bitter herbs, *hazeret* (“lettuce”) was adopted in Modern Hebrew as the word for horseradish.

Few of the species that are mentioned in the ancient texts as suitable for bitter herbs can be identified botanically. This makes it difficult to prove continual ritual use for any single species of bitter herbs. However, the same tradition goes on to stimulate the creativity of halakhic authorities to adapt the custom to new situations. It is thus debated whether the list in the Mishnah is exhaustive (e.g., Maimonides, *MishT Hamets u-Matsah* 7:13) or exemplary (implied e.g., in *bPes* 39a; Rashi, *Commentary to Exod* 12:8). The list includes maror (“bitter [herb]”) which may either be interpreted as a distinct species (*yPes* 2:6, 29c and Maimonides, *Commentary to the Mishnah*) and/or as a generic term (Maimonides, *MishT Hamets u-Matsah* 7:13 “Each one of these five sorts of vegetables is called maror”). The list may (Karo, *ShA*) or may not (Maimonides) imply a hierarchy of the species.

In the wake of the Tosefta, the sources also discuss the permissible and forbidden ways of processing bitter herbs before consumption. The idea that non-vegetarian bitter substances (e.g., “the gall bladder of a kufya-fish”) might replace bitter herbs is rejected (*bPes* 39a).

Bibliography: ■ Amar, Z., “The Five Species of Bitter Herbs According to the Method of Maimonides,” *Ha-Ma’ayan* 48 (2007/08) 108–16. [Available at www.shaalvim.co.il/torah; accessed September 24, 2009] [Heb.] ■ Anon., “Maror,” *The Oxford Dictionary of the Jewish Religion* (New York/Oxford 1997) 442. ■ Bokser, B. M., *The Origins of the Seder* (Berkeley/Los Angeles, Calif. 1984). ■ Feliks, J., *Mixed Sowing Breeding and Grafting: Kil’ayim* 1–3 (Tel Aviv 1967). [Heb.] ■ Feliks, J., “Maror,” *Encyclopaedia Judaica* 2 13 (Detroit, Mich. 2007) 558. ■ Friedman, S., *Tosefta Atiqta: Pesah Rishon* (Ramat-Gan 2002). [Heb.] ■ Leonhard, C., *The Jewish Pesah and the Origins of the Christian Easter* (SJ 35; Berlin/New York 2006). ■ Löw, I., *Die Flora der Juden*, vol. 1 (Vienna/Leipzig 1928). ■ Safrai, S./Z. Safrai, *Haggadah of the Sages* (Jerusalem 1998). [Heb.] ■ Schaffer, A., “The History of Horseradish as the Bitter Herb of Passover,” *Gesher* 8 (1981) 217–37. ■ Zivotofsky, A. Z., “What’s the Truth about ... Using Horseradish for Maror?,” *Jewish Action* 66 (2006) 74–77. [Available at www.ou.org; accessed September 24, 2009]

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