

Maror

Contributed by [Pardes](#)

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The question of why we eat maror would at first glance appear to be an obvious one. When I probe a little deeper, however, two questions emerge for me. First, why would I want to evoke pain and suffering on a night when I want to feel celebratory? My second question goes to the ritual itself. How is eating lettuce or horseradish supposed to help me experience or relate to the bitterness of slavery? No matter how much fiery hot horseradish we put in our mouths, it seems to me we are not any closer to understanding the experience of the Israelites in Egypt.

I believe that our use of maror at the seder is less about experiencing the hardships of Egypt, but rather an opportunity to experience and reflect how we can meaningfully engage sorrow and pain in both our personal and national lives. Suffering and sadness are part of everyone's story. It is the unavoidable price we pay for being vulnerable and limited. We need tools and opportunities to integrate the hard and painful parts of our lives into our story without allowing them to erase all the joy and gratitude we still want to experience.

The Baal HaTanya (Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Liady, 1745-1812) draws a fascinating distinction between two types of sadness. The first he refers to as bitterness, a form of regret or sadness that emerges from a sense that things are broken, or less than ideal. This form of sadness is positive, he says, because it emerges from a place of idealism, hope, and a powerful desire to change. We are "bitter" because we sense that a vital and healthy part of ourselves is not finding expression in the world. It is precisely our capacity for hope and transformation that makes this type of sadness possible. Our sense of loss is informed by our appreciation for a whole. The second type of sadness is depression. This type of sadness "closes our hearts" with despair, numbs our feelings, and blocks out all joy. From this perspective, perhaps we eat maror to explore how to move from a sadness that holds us back to a sadness that can lead to growth and change. When dealing with hard things I often find I am choosing between allowing sadness to dominate my mood or trying to ignore it and put it aside altogether. The narrative of the seder refutes this false dichotomy. We don't deny the difficulties and pain, but maybe we can put it into a wider context that includes joy and gratitude. We make room for sadness but we don't let it take over. We eat the maror with the matza.

Another approach emerges from a comment of Rabbi Yeshayahu Horowitz (1568-1630) in a drasha about Pesach. Commenting on the talmudic requirement to chew the maror as opposed to just swallowing it, he writes that our teeth represent 32 levels of wisdom, and that by chewing the maror with our teeth we sweeten it. As opposed to denying difficulty or sadness we must engage it and reflect upon it. Although I am never grateful for going through the painful moments of my life, I am sometimes surprised at what they teach me about myself and who I am. Both as individuals and as a people, we are products of our challenges as much as our successes; sadness as well as joy. While I cannot deny the hard feelings associated with the difficult or sad moments of my life, I can "sweeten" them by accepting them as an essential part of my story. The suffering in Egypt and the memory of that suffering was part of what made the Jewish people.

Our eating of maror and talking about slavery might also carry with it a lesson about the negative power of shame. I don't like sharing my stories of pain or difficulty. They often feel like stories of failure. It often feels like my pain is a result of my inadequacy in managing my life or lack of success. If I were a better person, more capable, wiser, more powerful, my story would be all about happiness. Sadness becomes associated with failure. By including the pain and humiliation in our national story of birth and redemption we are reminding ourselves that pain, sadness, and difficulty are part of everyone's story. I don't need to paper over it or pretend it's not there. My challenge is to include fully the hard parts of my story, both individually and nationally, and still feel joy and gratitude. Our plates include bitter herbs right next to the matza and the

wine.

Rabbi Zvi Hirschfield teaches Talmud, Halakha and Jewish Thought.