

Pause for Parsley: Reflections on Karpas by Rabbi Aaron Lerner, Executive Director of Hillel at UCLA

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Source:

Of the many Passover rituals, there is one that strikes me as particularly strange - the dipping of parsley in salt water. Many Haggadahs give the *midrash* that parsley signifies Spring and rebirth, while salt water symbolizes our tears in Egypt. Other Haggadahs give no explanation of the *karpas* ritual at all.

Motivated to keep the seder on a timeline, many of us eat the parsley and move forward, hoping that the meal will come soon. This year, though, I'd like to encourage you to **pause for parsley**, and consider the following alternative explanation offered by Rashi:

- Parsley signifies fine wool or linen, specifically Joseph's coat of many colors. (*Rashi, Genesis 37:3*)
- Dipping in salt water reminds us that Joseph's brothers dipped his coat in blood to convince their father, Jacob, that Joseph had been killed.

If this commentary illuminates the true meaning of the *karpas* ritual, isn't this a peculiar start to the seder? On one hand we are prepared to celebrate freedom while on the other hand we symbolically drag out the family's dirty laundry: the horrific episode wherein our ancestors got jealous, sought to kill their brother, and then sold him into slavery.

On Passover, the questions are always better than the answers.

This year, I offer you this question to consider: **What do we gain by recalling the misdeeds done unto Joseph?**

Conversational prompts:

1. Explore our ancestors' culpability in events which led to our slavery in Egypt? As the Talmud states: "[Joseph's] brothers became jealous of him, and the matter unfolded, and [as a result] our forefathers descended to Egypt."?
2. Provide a moment for introspection about favoritism with our children? Could this be a counterbalance to the four sons found later in the Haggadah, some of whom may be viewed more favorably than others?
3. Focus our attention towards the perennial problem of the Jewish people – *sinat chinam*, hatred for our own brethren, and the ways in which that leads to our downfall?
4. Explore the idea that "pride comes before a fall?" After all, Joseph's pride in his appearance and insistence on relating his dreams contributed to the hatred his brothers felt for him.
5. Recognize the cost of a continued cover-up? Had the brothers not deceived their father, perhaps the family would have sent a search party for Joseph, redeeming him before he met Pharaoh, and averting Egyptian exile?
6. Would our kids ask us different questions if the Haggadah more explicitly told the story of Joseph's abuse by his brethren?
7. Should we all adopt the Persian custom of using red wine vinegar instead of salt water at this point in the seder?