

The Humanistic Judaism Seder Plate

Contributed by [Society for Humanistic Judaism](#)

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Roasted Shank Bone (Zeroah)

“Passover is the amalgamation of two ancient festivals—one called Pesach, the other Chag Hamatzot. Pesach was originally a shepherd festival, observed in the early spring when the sheep gave birth to their young. It was customary for each family to sacrifice a lamb to assure a healthy flock. The presence of the shank bone on our seder table recalls the primitive beginnings of the festival we now call Passover and impresses us with the antiquity of our holiday celebration.”

— Rabbi Daniel Friedman, *Haggadah for Passover*

Beet (Selek)

[Some substitute a roasted beet for the shank bone at vegan/vegetarian Seders.]

“The redness of the beet symbolizes the blood of the Passover sacrifice. Our tradition tells us that Moses was chosen because he showed compassion to a lamb. We will show compassion by substituting the beet for the lamb. Our compassion extends to our care and devotion to all people and creatures.”

— Barry Swan, Madrikh (Ceremonial Leader), *The Seder, Beth Haskalah*, Rochester, NY

Roasted Egg (Baytzah)

“Baytzah, the egg, is a universal symbol of birth, wholeness, and potentiality, as folk customs to this day amply attest. Curiously though, the egg on the seder plate always appears roasted. This is taken by some scholars to symbolize the other Temple sacrifices at Passover. Much more interesting, however, is the lesser known symbolic of the egg with mourning, which helps to account for the ritual, in some communities, of eating eggs directly following a burial ceremony.... This fascinating connection is almost certainly the origin of serving hard-boiled egg in salt water prior to the rest of the festive meal.”

— Oraynu Congregation, *Roots and Branches*, Toronto, Ontario

Seeds (Z'raem)

[Some substitute seeds for the egg at vegan/vegetarian Seders.]

“Baytsa is the seed of life. Each of us begins as a seed and grows into womanhood or manhood. The seed is our potential. It is the power of our evolutionary past and the gift of our human inheritance. But the seed is fragile.... Growing life needs warmth and love, and security. It needs guidance, hope, and vision. Birth is only the beginning. Human life needs the gentle care of others. Life needs the encouragement of family and friends, and community.”

— Barry Swan, Madrikh (Ceremonial Leader), *The Seder, Beth Haskalah*, Rochester, NY

Bitter Herbs (Maror)

“Maror is the bitterness of the bitter herb. Tradition says that this root is the reminder of the suffering of slavery. We force ourselves to taste pain so that we more readily value pleasure. Scholars inform us that our ancestors ate bitter herbs at the time of the spring festival. The sharpness of the taste reawakened their senses and made them feel as one with the revival of nature. Maror is the stimulus of life reminding us that struggle is better than boredom, that striving is the equal of serenity.”

— Rabbi Sherwin Wine, *The Humanist Haggadah*

Matzah

“Matzah is the bread of our freedom. Legend has it that when our ancestor fled Egypt they moved so quickly that the bread they baked did not have time to rise. Scholars tell us that in ancient Israel flat bread was baked from the unfermented grain of the spring harvest to celebrate the newness of the reborn earth. Matzah

is the bread of dignity, preferring liberty to luxury, avoiding pretense. It is the bread of life, rejecting the cold slavery of winter, affirming the warm vitality of spring.”

– Rabbi Sherwin Wine, *The Humanist Haggadah*

Haroset

“Haroset is a mixture of apples, nuts, cinnamon and wine. Tradition tells us it is a reminder of the bricks and mortar our ancestors made as slaves in Egypt. The sweetness summons us never to forget the sweet taste of freedom. As we call to mind the sweetness in the shadow of bitterness, and pleasure in the shadow of pain, may we become more aware of the experience of opposites during our lifetime. Let us appreciate that life is full only when we experience the full range of human emotion, including its opposite polarities.”

– Rabbi Miriam Jerris, *Passover Haggadah*, Unpublished

Karpas

“Passover heralds the arrival of spring. Ancient Israelites perceived a natural connection between the rebirth of the land and the rebirth of their people. Our seder acknowledges this link with the karpas, a green vegetable... We dip the karpas in salt water, representing the tears that the Israelites shed as slaves in Egypt. In this way we combine a token of spring with the Exodus narrative.”

– Rabbi Jeffrey L. Falick, *A Humanistic Seder*

Orange (Tapooz)

“The orange is on the seder plate to remind us that the Seder is always growing and new symbols can be included in our celebration with evolving messages of their own. And to remind us that all people have a legitimate place in Jewish life, no less than an orange on a seder plate, regardless of gender or sexual identity.”

– Rabbi Peter Schweitzer, *The Liberated Haggadah*