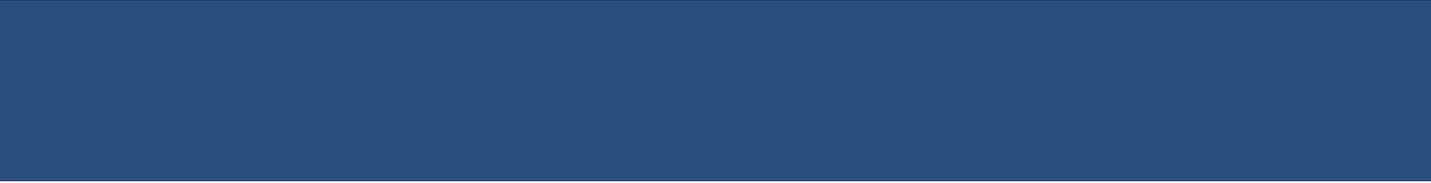


**“Understanding something as having multiple meanings is one of the deepest expressions of freedom.”**

**— Rabbi Elie Kaunfer**



The designers of the Seder— from the author of the Torah to the ancient rabbis— knew that food would have to be an integral part of an evening devoted to memory. And everyone who has been to a Seder is familiar with these foods: maror, charoset, the roasted bone, the roasted egg, karpas, and matzah. These foods are far from customary. Indeed, most appear on our tables only on Seder night. As everything in the Haggadah is designed to teach us something or guide us somewhere, we are led to ask: Why these foods? What can we learn from them specifically? We can begin with the egg. The twelfth-century Spanish authority Ibn Ezra said that the egg is a rebuke to the slave masters of Egypt. Egypt prohibited the consumption of eggs and meat together, and so we symbolically defy them by doing so.

The 19th Century Polish Rabbi Yaakov Leiner wrote that the egg looks like a final product— but its essence (the animal within) has not even presented itself yet. This, he said, symbolizes the Exodus from Egypt.

Our liberation might seem like a glorious end, but it is just the beginning. According to the sixteenth-century Polish rabbi Moses Isserles, the egg symbolizes mourning. Indeed, the egg is the staple food at Seudat Havra'ah, the Meal of Condolence— the first a family has following a loss. The egg, because of its circular shape, serves to remind that life always goes on. Why would we incorporate mourning at a Pesach celebration? For the same reason that a groom breaks a glass under the chuppah (wedding canopy) at his wedding, and that we don't sit shiva (formally mourn) on Shabbat or during holidays. We ritually experience sadness at times of joy, and joy at times of sadness to remind ourselves that neither should ever constitute the entirety of one's expectations.

The 20th Century Polish Rabbi Meir Shapiro, known as the Lubliner Rav, said that the egg exemplifies the learning from Exodus 1:12: "The more [the Jews] were oppressed, the more they multiplied and spread." Just as Jews respond to even existential challenges by getting stronger, the egg becomes harder the longer it is boiled.

So which commentator is right? All of them. There is no suggestion that any of the aforementioned rabbis ever said that any alternative belief is wrong. Instead, this mutual regard is a manifestation of the Jewish conviction that "there are seventy facets to Torah."

There can, and often are, multiple correct interpretations of the same thing— each of which summons a different truth. It is deeply instructive that Pesach should be the moment when we consider the fact that multiple interpretations of the same thing can be right. Rabbi Elie Kaunfer of Mechon Hadar writes, "Understanding something as having multiple meanings is one of the deepest expressions of freedom."

The ability to recognize multiple truths, demonstrated by the egg and the charoset on the Seder plate, does more than enable us to derive the deepest guidance from the Haggadah and the Torah. It just might provide the basis for good citizenship, especially in an easily divided society.