Why do we eat karpas? And why do we call this vegetable – be it potato, parsley or celery – by this unusual name?

Our Sages teach that we eat this vegetable simply to pique the curiosity of our children. It is unusual for us to eat a lone vegetable at this stage of the meal, and this shifts our children into a question-asking mode. Nevertheless, while this may be effective, there must be a reason why we use this specific custom to generate questions from our children, so let’s explore the deeper meaning behind karpas.

The vegetable could represent the lushness of Egypt. The Torah describes this land, which received its sustenance from the Nile, as a “garden of G-d.” The Jews became comfortable there and enjoyed all that Egypt had to offer. In fact, when they were in the desert the Jews longed for the vegetables they had eaten in Egypt.

We take that vegetable, symbolizing materialism, and dip it into salt water, which symbolizes tears. This could suggest that the very comforts indicating all was well for the Jews in Egypt actually served as the catalyst for the tears that flowed during the harsh persecution and slavery. Our comforts in Egypt enabled us to become successful and to be influenced negatively by Egyptian culture. Those successes led to Pharaoh’s fears about the power of the Jews, and those negative influences led to spiritual decline. The combination of our spiritual failures and the king’s fears led to our servitude. Hence, the symbolism of the vegetable and the saltwater.

Perhaps we call the vegetable karpas to conjure up an image from the one time the word appears in Tanach – at Achashveirosh’s feast at the beginning of Megillat Esther (1:6). That feast was the height of physical indulgence, and the Jewish participation in it demonstrated the material comfort and spiritual disconnection the Jews felt during their exile – with the continuation of the story being the king’s decree to annihilate them.

There is another explanation of the word karpas that works beautifully with our approach. The Maharil teaches that the word karpas spelled backward is the letter samech followed by the word perach. The samech alludes to its numerical value of 60, which represents the 600,000 Jews who were enslaved in Egypt. Perach can mean one of two things. It literally means “hard work,” thereby representing the Jews’ slave labor. The word can also be divided into two words, peh and rach, which means “soft mouth.” This alludes to Pharaoh’s approach of first speaking to the Jews kindly and softly, and only gradually shifting them into slave mode. This connects to the process of the Jews feeling comfortable in Egypt and being talked into doing whatever the king kindly asked them to do, which then led to the suffering of slavery.

Modern exile consists of many luxuries for the Jewish people. We live with a general abundance of material wealth and with greater security and success than ever before. The message of the karpas has never been more relevant and critical for us. We must recognize that all this comfort and success outside of Israel will eventually end in tears. It might not happen in the very near future, but history has taught us that no matter how unrealistic it may seem at the moment, that dreaded time of persecution in exile will come.

Of course, the hope should be that this recognition leads many to explore aliyah. But we must also focus on those who plan to remain in the Diaspora and the importance of internalizing the spiritual dangers of where those material blessings and comfort within a host culture can lead. Perhaps this focus on spiritual growth and focusing on avoiding a spiritual decline will protect us from experiencing painful persecution in our times.

The karpas provides us with the perfect opportunity to discuss these issues at our Seder table and convey these important messages to our children.

1 See Rashi and Rashbam to Pesachim 114a and Shulchan Aruch Orach Chaim 473.
3 See Bamidbar 11:5.

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