Of all the symbols on Seder Night, perhaps charoset is the most difficult to understand. On Seder Night, we see something quite unusual, in that we are commanded to cite the reasons for the mitzvah as part of the mitzvah itself. One who does not explain why he is eating “Pesach, Matzah and Maror” has not fulfilled his obligation. Not only that, but Halacha also determines the official explanation for each of these mitzvot on Seder Night. One cannot suggest one’s own reason, but must state the ‘official’ reason. This is a very special halacha, because in general Halacha does not involve itself with the reasons the mitzvot were given, but only the actions we have to perform. Moreover, even when dealing with reasons, there is a broad spectrum of possibilities, and Jewish philosophers throughout the ages have offered many explanations for every mitzvot, while here there is one formal ruling of the reason for these mitzvot.

Against this backdrop, charoset stands out. We do not know the source or the reason. It doesn’t explicitly appear in the Torah and it’s not clear why we are obliged to eat it, or even if we are obliged to eat it, according to the Torah. In the Mishna (Pesachim 10:3), there is a Tannaic debate on this question, in which the basic position is “charoset is not mandatory.” However, “Rabbi Elazar son of Rabbi Zadok says it is mandatory.” The very fact there is a debate on whether there is a Torah obligation to eat charoset just adds to the mystery.

Based on this debate, there are two types of explanation. According to the first opinion in the Mishna, charoset is perceived as part of the gastronomic directives to soften the sharpness of the maror; however, according to Rabbi Elazar, the charoset is not just an accessory to eating the maror but expresses something in itself, only that the Mishna did not tell us what this something is.

The Gemara and the Midrash offer two explanations: one deals with the texture of the charoset, reminding us of the mud our forefathers were forced to use in their slavery in Egypt. The second deals with the ingredients of the charoset, particularly the apple, claiming it reminds us of the apple trees under which the women comforted their husbands after a rough and tough day at work, and where they gave birth to their babies.

Of course, the fact that charoset does not carry an ‘official’ explanation opens the door for much exegesis, creativity, and personal interpretation. So, when we examine the range of theories, we find a widespread theme dealing with the charoset’s special sweetness, and with the contrast between the bitterness of the maror and the sweetness of the charoset. In fact, the juxtaposition of sweetness and bitterness already appears in the Seven Species. The last two species are “olive oil and honey.”

Chazal refer to the olive as an expression of something bitter, for example, “The dove said before the Holy One Blessed be He: Master of the Universe, let my food be bitter as an olive but given into Your hand, and let it not be sweet as honey but dependent on flesh and blood” (Eruvin 18b). In contrast, the Biblical “honey” refers to the date, which symbolizes sweetness.

Therefore, one of the ways to characterize our bond with our history, and with the G-d who manages that history, is the dialectic transition between bitterness and sweetness. This is not simply stating that sometimes we had good times and sometimes bad, because we eat both on Seder Night, and both are connected to the same event – the Exodus from Egypt. The bitterness and the sweetness – according to our weltanschauung – occur at one and the same time. The period itself was terrible, and so we eat maror. But it also engendered things we couldn’t have engendered without Egypt and its challenges, and so we also give thanks for that, by dipping the maror in charoset.

And this is a very fundamental mindset we teach ourselves on Seder Night: even during the most bitter times, a certain sweetness is created, sweetness that could not have been created without the challenges. Even at a time when G-d hides His face from us, so to speak, “Though I walk through the valley of darkness, I fear no evil, for You are with me.”

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