Why is there a beitzah – an egg – on the Seder plate? It seems the least clear of all the items. We put it on the plate before the Seder begins, yet unlike the other items, it has no set role in the upcoming ceremony. The maror (either in horseradish and/or lettuce form) is connected to the commandment to remember the suffering in Egypt by eating bitter herbs. The karpas is used as the first dipping of the night and is the basis of one of the four questions. The zeroa’s name clearly reminds us of G-d’s outstretched hand, and its appearance, certainly for those who use a lamb shank, reminds us of the korban Pesach. The zeroa is not eaten at the Seder because it reminds of the sacrifice we cannot bring at this time unfortunately. But what about the egg? Even for those who have the custom to start off the Seder meal with the egg in saltwater, it comes with no accompanying ceremony, blessing or statement.

There are two reasons generally given. One is that it represents the korban chagigah, the sacrifice brought prior to the korban Pesach so that the latter could be eaten on a full stomach. If the Seder plate contains a reminder of the korban Pesach (the zeroa), it is appropriate to have another food to represent the korban chagigah. This explains the presence of another item on the plate but provides no explanation as to why specifically an egg.

The egg as a symbolic food appears in another tradition, as part of the the first food fed to a mourner after the funeral. The custom was originally to use lentils,1 because they were round, symbolizing the cyclical nature of life. Now the custom is eggs. Hence the second reason for the egg on the Seder plate is as a sign of mourning for the Beit HaMikdash, the absence of which precludes bringing both the korban chagigah and the korban Pesach.

Another reason that round, smooth foods are appropriate to serve to a mourner is that they have no “mouth” and thus represent the speechless state of one who has suffered a loss. This provides a striking note to the Seder table. In general, the entire Seder is focused around talking. The main mitzvah of the night is retelling the story of the Exodus from Egypt, something done primarily with words. The Haggadah relates that one who “does extra” in telling the story is to be praised. Many of the actions of the Seder, such as removing the Seder plate, are specifically done to encourage the children to ask questions, once again to use speech. And yet we have one item on the Seder plate that represents silence.

Perhaps this is meant to be a gentle reminder that even at times where speech is the order of the day, we need to be careful in what we say and how we say it. In the context of an extended family meal, this is particularly true. Can the story I am about to relate to enhance the Exodus story make someone uncomfortable? Can asking a question of someone who does not know the answer embarrass them? Am I making a comment that could hurt the feelings of those who worked hard to make the night a reality?

Let us look at the egg for a moment before we begin the Seder, to make sure that what we say on this night is always for the good.

1 Pirkei DeRabbi Eliezer 35.

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