CHAROSET

Let's look at charoset, חרסת — the mixture of fruits, nuts and spices served at the Seder table. While Jews have eaten charoset for many centuries, the origin of both the word and the food is not entirely clear.

A common assumption is that charoset derives from cheres, כדר — clay. This is based on its color and thick consistency. Support for this theory comes from the Talmudic passage which says that the charoset should be like the mortar (made of mud) the Israelites used to make the bricks in Egypt. However, the word cheres does not appear in this passage, and the first connection between cheres and charoset only appears in writings in the medieval period.

A closer look at sources from the Talmudic period show that charoset was not eaten only on Pesach. For example, the Mishna forbids adding flour to charoset on Pesach because the vinegar in the charoset would cause the flour to become leaven. According to the Aruch HaShalem, this indicates an exception to the practice the rest of the year, when flour was added.

Many scholars have determined that the charoset was therefore a sour sauce added to meat throughout the year. Dr. Susan Weingarten, quoting an ancient glossary found in the Cairo Genizah, says that charoset in Greek is called tribou. Tribou, coming from a verb meaning “pound or grind,” was used as a dipping sauce in ancient Greece.

A dipping sauce made of pounded ingredients matches charoset perfectly. And it explains the name charoset as “things that are mixed and squashed.” This aligns with Rashi’s definition of the word charsit as “pulverized pottery” and “crushed tiles.”

It also matches a synonym for charoset found in the Jerusalem Talmud: dukkeh, דקке. According to that passage, dukkeh has that name because it is “pounded.”

At first glance, it might be difficult to accept that charoset, which is so exclusively associated with Pesach today, was not only used throughout the year, but was found throughout the ancient Greek world. But that is a theme of the entire Pesach Seder. A banquet with discussions, called a “symposium,” was common in Ancient Greece too. However, those events were associated with revelry, whereas the Seder was imbued with holiness. In such an atmosphere, even a simple dipping sauce could remind us of the slavery in Egypt and the joy of the Exodus.

PESACH

Pesach, פסח, is certainly connected to the verb pasach. But what does pasach mean?

We find it first in Exodus 12:13, where G-d is describing the upcoming plague of the firstborns:

“…” and the destroyer enter and smite your home.”

And then in 12:23:

“…” and the L-rd will pass over [or on] the door and not let the Destroyer enter and smite your home.”

There are three main explanations of the word pasach — to have compassion, to protect and to skip over.

“To skip over” is favored by Rashi. It is also popular with English speakers, because in the 16th century, William Tyndale coined the term “Passover” to translate Pesach. Other European languages transliterate the word — like the Dutch Pascha or the Spanish Pascua.

“To have compassion” is provided by Onkelos, and a number of Rabbis in the Mechilta.

“To protect” is the explanation found in Targum Yonatan and other Rabbis in the Mechilta. It is supported by Isaiah 31:5:

“Like the birds that fly, even so will the L-rd of Hosts shield Jerusalem, shielding and saving, protecting (מְצָר) and rescuing.”

Exodus 12:13 seems to support “have compassion” or “protect,” whereas verse 23 favors “to skip over.” I suppose we will need to wait for Elyahu to solve this puzzle as well!

For when the L-rd goes through to smite the Egyptians, He will see the blood… and the L-rd will passach over [or on] the door and not let the Destroyer enter and smite your home.”

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1 Pesachim 116a.
2 Pesachim 2:3.
3 Chullin 88a.
4 Bava Kama 69a.
5 Pesachim 10:3 (Leiden manuscript).