



## Shabbat Hol Hamo'ed Pesach – April 8, 2023

By Pam Adelstein

My name is Pam Adelstein

Here are my four questions.

1. Who knows the blessing for eating charoset that we say at the seder?  
(Exactly! We don't recite one. Have you ever wondered why?)
2. Has anyone – excluding those who heard the Friday night version of this dvar- heard of something called kapa?
3. Do you eat charoset or halek? (Has anyone heard of halek?)
4. What does Shir Hashirim have to do with charoset?

And now – the answers.

The Mishnah Pesachim, states: (Quote) “Eating *haroset* is not a **mitzva** but merely a custom. **Rabbi Eliezer ben Tzadok says:** Actually, it is a **mitzva** to eat *haroset*.”

### Why is there a debate about whether it is a mitzvah to eat charoset?

Charoset is not mentioned in the Torah. It may have been added to the Pesach meal to provide additional food options for the seder. If this is so, then charoset at the seder table is likely minhag, or custom – rather than a mitzvah.

### Why don't we have a bracha for charoset?

Rabbi Eliezer- of the aforementioned Mishnah - said that since eating charoset is a mitzvah, one should say a blessing: ‘vitzivanu al achilat charoset’ - who has commanded us to eat charoset”.

However, the Rambam says: eating charoset on its own is NOT a mitzva because it is eaten with the purpose of neutralizing the kapa- an Egyptian poison in the form of a worm or liquid - found in the maror. We dip charoset into the maror to prevent this kapa from poisoning us.

Some gematria of this peculiar kapa: The Egyptians tried to separate the Jewish people from G-d - or Aleph. **Ale"ph** is an acronym for three areas of our spiritual being that the Egyptians sought to enslave: Our ozen/ear, which if destroyed, we would be unable to hear spiritual words of Torah, our *lev*/heart, which helps us feel, and our *peh*/mouth, without which we could not speak freely. These three body parts, when added together, equal 381, the same gematria as **kap"á**.

Rav Soloveitchik concludes that charoset is a mitzvah but there is no b'racha since the mitzva is not to EAT charoset or to dip maror into it, but to have charoset on the seder table because of its symbolism. (I'm not sure who would bother to make it if it was not to be eaten!)

### **Why do we have charoset on the seder table? What is its symbolism?**

Here are 2 rabbinical explanations:

1. It memorializes the mortar and clay used by Hebrew slaves in Egypt used to make bricks of mud and straw. The word Charoset may be from the word cheres- **חרס**, the Hebrew word for clay. Some scholars believe that a typo resulted in the change from cheres to charoset.
2. It is sharp like the taste of apples, which represent fertility:

A Talmudic legend describes how the Israelite slaves in Egypt rebelled by procreating. Expectant Israelite mothers went to the apple orchards to deliver their babies and were blessed with quiet, painless births.

In another midrash, the Israelite women seduced men who were reluctant to have relations because they dreaded creating children who would later be murdered by Pharaoh. This seduction took place under apple trees and ensured the continuity of the Jewish people. We can see how charoset commemorates the apple trees' role in the Exodus story.

### **What should charoset be made of?**

Jews from Northern Europe used apples because apples grew on the land. They could not easily acquire dates, figs, grapes or pomegranates, the fruits of Israel.

Maimonides described a charoset recipe that included the sweet fruits of Israel, vinegar, and spices.

The Rambam and the Shiblei HaLeKet required brick dust to be mixed into the charoset. This was minhag in parts of the world until recent times.

Recipes also addressed the consistency of charoset. The Jerusalem Talmud gave options: make it thick -like clay OR thin- symbolizing the blood of those who died during the Passover Exodus. One Rabbi proposed a compromise: first you make it thick. Then, during the seder just before eating it, you thin it with vinegar. (Does anyone add vinegar to their charoset?)

Sephardi and Mizrahi Jews do not call it charoset- they call it “halek” - and make halek with date syrup or paste. The precise origin of this word is unknown – it may be related to the name of a type of walnut that was used in the recipe.

Some Persian Jews make charoset with 40 ingredients to represent the 40 years the Israelites spent wandering in the desert following their Exodus from Egypt.

Many ingredients in charoset and halek come from the foods of Shir Hashirim, which we read today: apples, figs, pomegranates, grapes, walnuts, dates, wine, and spices.

For all Jews, charoset is a tangible reminder of the oppressive labor of slavery and the hope for renewal and rebirth of the Jewish people.

Shabbat shalom, chag sameach.