

## ***“Our Salty Tears”: The History and Significance of an Interpretation of Dipping in Salt Water at the Seder***

By: ZVI RON

Explaining the custom to dip the vegetable commonly called *karpas* in salt water at the beginning of the Seder, the *Artscroll Youth Haggadah* writes, “Salt water is used instead of fancy dressing to remind us of our salty tears and sweat when we were slaves in Egypt.”<sup>1</sup> This explanation for why salt water is used as the dip for *karpas* is found in many Haggadot, both in Hebrew<sup>2</sup> and in English,<sup>3</sup> and is usually the only explanation offered for

---

<sup>1</sup> Nosson and Yitzchok Zev Scherman, *Artscroll Youth Haggadah* (Brooklyn, NY: Mesorah Publications, 1995), p. 14.

<sup>2</sup> For example, Matityahu Solomon, “This Night Two Times,” *Kol haTorah* vol. 13 (Nissan, 1983), p. 62; Dov Goldberger, *Osim Seder—Hagadda Shel Pesach* (Tel Aviv: Yediot Acharonot, 2004), p. 17; Shneur Zalman Havelin, *Haggadah Shel Pesach – Shoel k’Inyan* (Jerusalem: Wagshal, 2006), p. 29; Meir Yehuda Mandel, *Pinnei Yechezkel* (Ashdod: 2008), p.473; Nachman Wilhelm, *Haggadah Shel Pesach – Ata Bechartanu* (Bnei Brak: 2010), p. 32.

<sup>3</sup> For example, Morris Silverman, *Passover Haggadah with Explanatory Notes and Original Readings* (Hartford, CT: Prayer Book Press, 1959), p. 5; Shlomo Riskin, *The Passover Haggadah* (New York: Ktav Publishing House, 1983), p. 35; Reuven Bulka, *The Haggadah for Pesach* (Jerusalem: Machon Pri Ha’aretz, 1985), p. 22, “we also dip the vegetable in salt water, giving us a taste of the tears shed by our ancestral parents during their agonizing enslavement.” Steven Cohen and Kenneth Brander, eds., *The Yeshiva University Haggada* (New York: Student Organization of Yeshiva, 1985), p. 2. Shoshana Silberman, *A Family Haggadah* (Minneapolis, MN: Kar-Ben Publishing, 1987), p. 17, “The salt water reminds us of the tears our ancestors shed in Egypt.” Chanan Simon and Yosef Fridman, *The Why Haggadah* (New York: Beit Shammai Publications, 1989), p. 17. John Levi, *A Family Haggadah* (Melbourne, Australia: Melbourne Books, 2002), p. 14; Berel Wein, *The Pesach Haggadah: Through the Prism of Experience and History* (New York:

---

Zvi Ron received *semikhab* from the Israeli Rabbanut and his PhD in Jewish Theology from Spertus University. He is an educator living in Neve Daniel, Israel, and the author of *Sefer Katan ve-Gadol* (Rossi Publications, 2006) about the big and small letters in Tanakh, and *Sefer Haikkar Haser* (Mossad Harav Kook, 2017) about the variable spellings of words in Tanakh.

this choice of dip. However, this explanation is generally offered without any attribution. In this article we will trace the development and significance of this interpretation of this Seder night custom.

### What is the Dip?

The Mishna (*Pesachim* 10:3) speaks briefly about the first dip: “He dips the lettuce (*chazeret*) before he reaches the course of food.” Rashi there explains that the Mishna is discussing a case where a person has only a bitter vegetable to use for both the first dip and the *marror* in *charoset* later on.<sup>4</sup> The Talmud speaks of using “other vegetables” for the first dip, but does not specify which vegetables are preferable.<sup>5</sup> A list of appropriate vegetables was first presented by Rav Amram Gaon, and developed from there.<sup>6</sup> The Talmud doesn't explicitly mention what this vegetable is dipped into.

Rav Amram Gaon writes that the vegetable at the beginning of the Seder is dipped into *charoset*, just as the *marror* is later on.<sup>7</sup> This opinion is followed by Rabbenu Channanel,<sup>8</sup> Rashi,<sup>9</sup> Rambam,<sup>10</sup> Ritva,<sup>11</sup> Rabbenu

---

Shaar Press, 2004), p. 42, “The salt water represents the tears shed by the Jewish people.” Matthew Berkowitz, *The Lovell Haggadah* (Jerusalem: The Schechter Institute of Jewish Studies, 2008), p. 39. Sarah Rochel Hewitt, ed., *Beginners Passover Haggadah* (New York: National Jewish Outreach Program, 2010), p. 57, “the salt water is meant to remind us of the tears of the Jewish slaves.” It is the only explanation brought in the Haggadot published by the Central Conference of American Rabbis, representing the Reform movement, see Alan Yoffie, *Sharing the Journey: The Haggadah for the Contemporary Family* (New York, New York: CCAR Press, 2012), p. 24; Howard Berman, *The New Union Haggadah – Revised Edition* (New York, New York: CCAR Press, 2014), p. 24. The explanation does not appear in the earlier editions of CCAR Haggadot, from 1923 and 1974.

<sup>4</sup> TB *Pesachim* 114a, *metabel*.

<sup>5</sup> JT *Pesachim* 10:3 reports that Rav would use *tered* (beet leaves) as the first vegetable, but there is no mention that this specific vegetable is preferable for any reason. See Yosef Tabory, *The Passover Ritual Throughout the Generations* (Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuchad Publishing House, 2002), pp. 256-257.

<sup>6</sup> See Heinrich Guggenheimer, *The Scholar's Haggadah* (Northvale, New Jersey: Jason Aronson, 1998), pp. 228-229.

<sup>7</sup> Daniel Goldschmidt, ed., *Seder Rav Amram Gaon* (Jerusalem: Mossad Harav Kook, 2004), p. 112.

<sup>8</sup> TB *Pesachim* 114a, *beviyu*.

<sup>9</sup> TB *Pesachim* 114a, *metabel*.

<sup>10</sup> *Hilchot Chametz u'Matza* 8:2.

<sup>11</sup> Yehuda Leibovitz, ed., *Ritva—Hilchot Seder haHaggadah* (Jerusalem: Mossad Harav Kook, 1983), p. 9.

Nissim and many early Rishonim.<sup>12</sup> Since the Talmud never stated what to dip this vegetable in, it was understood that it is the same dip as used for *marror*, the *charoset*.<sup>13</sup> This seems to be the more ancient custom.<sup>14</sup>

On the other hand, Rashbam explains that the vegetable was not dipped in *charoset*, as the *charoset* is brought out only later for the *marror*.<sup>15</sup> This is also the opinion of Rokeach, Rosh, Rabbenu Yona and other Rishonim.<sup>16</sup> What then should the vegetable be dipped into? Tosafot write that Rabbenu Tam would dip “either into vinegar or salt water.”<sup>17</sup> In practice, it seems that the French sages used vinegar.<sup>18</sup> While Tosafot explain why not to use *charoset*, since it functions specifically to offset the bitterness of the *marror*, no explanation is given as to why vinegar or salt water in particular should be used instead. R. Yosef Karo, in his *Beit Yosef*, writes that since there is a difference of opinion whether *charoset* should be used for the first dip, it is best to follow the approach of Rabbenu Tam, since all agree that vinegar and salt water are acceptable.<sup>19</sup> This is the opinion presented in the *Shulchan Aruch*.<sup>20</sup>

### Symbolic Explanations

Why use specifically salt water or vinegar? No explanation is brought in Tosafot, other Rishonim and early Acharonim. Even in the modern era,

---

<sup>12</sup> Yehuda Leibovitz, ed., *Ritva—Hilchot Seder haHaggadah* (Jerusalem: Mossad Harav Kook, 1983), p. 9, note 41. See also *Hegbot Meimoniot, Hilchot Chametz u'Matzah* 8:3.

<sup>13</sup> See also Bach to *Tur Orach Chayyim* 473, *umah shekatav*.

<sup>14</sup> See Yosef Tabory, *The Passover Ritual Throughout the Generations* (Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuchad Publishing House, 2002), p. 259.

<sup>15</sup> TB *Pesachim* 114a, *metabel*.

<sup>16</sup> Yehuda Leibovitz, ed., *Ritva—Hilchot Seder haHaggadah* (Jerusalem: Mossad Harav Kook, 1983), p. 9, note 41. See also *Hegbot Meimoniot, Hilchot Chametz u'Matzah* 8:3, where he discusses whether Rabbenu Tam meant that one does not have to dip in *charoset*, or that one should not dip in *charoset*.

<sup>17</sup> TB *Pesachim* 114a, *metabel*.

<sup>18</sup> Joseph Tabory, *The JPS Commentary on the Haggadah* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2008), p. 24.

<sup>19</sup> *Beit Yosef* on *Tur*, O.H. 472:6.

<sup>20</sup> In *Shulchan Aruch*, O.H. 472:6 only vinegar is mentioned explicitly, but the same would apply to salt water. Both salt water and vinegar are added in parenthesis in *Shulchan Aruch*, O.H. 472:4. Regarding parenthetical addition to the *Shulchan Aruch*, see Daniel Sperber, *Minhagei Yisrael* vol. 1 (Jerusalem: Mossad Harav Kook, 1989), p. 179, note 6.

many Haggadot explain only the symbolism of the karpas vegetable itself and not the dip.<sup>21</sup>

The earliest explanation commonly quoted was offered by R. Aharon Teomim (1630–1690), based on kabbalistic concepts that water represents Chesed and salt represents Din.<sup>22</sup> This is the only explanation given in the main text of the classic work on Jewish customs, *Otzar Ta'amei ha-Minbagim*.<sup>23</sup> However, it should be noted that this should not necessarily be considered an explanation for the custom; it is more properly understood as the kabbalistic meaning behind a ritual. These kinds of kabbalistic meanings were given to mitzvot, rituals and customs in general, even ones that were understood to have simple explanations, to provide an additional layer of mystical significance.<sup>24</sup>

R. Yosef Chaim, the Ben Ish Chai (1835–1909), explained that both vinegar and salt water are “strong” substances and so represent the difficult servitude that the Israelites endured.<sup>25</sup> A similar explanation is found in R. Tavalá Bandi’s Haggada published in 1898, where it is explained that the Egyptians “embittered our lives with slavery like vinegar and salt water.”<sup>26</sup>

Other explanations centered on the idea that salt water symbolizes a body of water. The first Belzer Rebbe, R. Sholom Rokeach (1781–1855), explains that the salt water recalls the water the Israelites used to immerse themselves in after being circumcised prior to offering the Pesach sacrifice. He writes that the Jews all immersed themselves in the Nile River,

---

<sup>21</sup> See for example, Yosef Kenapo, *Haggada Shel Pesach – Zevach Pesach* (Levorno: 1875), p. 98a.

<sup>22</sup> Aharon Teomim, *Mateh Aharon* (Frankfurt am Main: 1710), p. 10.

<sup>23</sup> Abraham Sperling, *Otzar Ta'amei haMinbagim u'Mekorei haDimim* (Lemberg: 1928), p. 229, siman 522.

<sup>24</sup> Just as R. Yosef Karo explained dipping the vegetable into vinegar as a kabbalistic action against the *sitra achra*, Yechiel Bar-Lev, ed., *Maggid Meisbarim* (Petach Tikvah: 1990), p. 218, parshat Tzav. On kabbalistic meaning given to mitzvot and rituals, see chapter 6 of Lawrence Fine, *Physician of the Soul, Healer of the Cosmos: Isaac Luria and His Kabbalistic Fellowship* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2003).

<sup>25</sup> Yosef Chaim, *Otzrot Chaim- Yamim u'Zemanim—Moadim 1* (Jerusalem: Ahavat Shalom, 1996), p. 247; Yosef Chaim, *Sefer Ben Ish Chai haMesbulav* (Bnei Brak: Machon Harav Matzliach, 2005), p. 40, siman 9.

<sup>26</sup> Tavalá Bandi, *Haggada Shel Pesach* (Slavatsky: Frankfurt am Main, 1898), p. 7. A similar idea is found in the contemporary work, Yitzchak Tawil, *Mekadesh Yisrael v'haZemanim* (Jerusalem: 2005), p. 199. See also the symbolism offered in Shlomo Gross, ed., *Divrei Torah al Haggadot shel Pesach* (Ramat Beit Shemesh: Or Yechezkel, 2008), p. 13, based on the idea that these substances “have an aspect of bitterness.”

giving it the turbid appearance of briny water.<sup>27</sup> This explanation is brought in notes of *Otzar Ta'amei ha-Minbagim*.<sup>28</sup> According to R. Yosef Chaim Sonnenfeld (1848–1932) the salt water reminds us of the miracle of crossing the Yam Suf.<sup>29</sup>

R. Isaac Baer Levinsohn (1788–1860), a leader in the Russian Haskalah movement, in his book *Yalkut Ribal* explains that we use salt water specifically because salt was forbidden to Egyptian priests, and by eating it we show that we are free of Egypt and reject its ways.<sup>30</sup> This explanation has gained a certain amount of popularity by being the explanation given in *Minbagei Yesburun*, another classic work explaining customs.<sup>31</sup>

Other, more homiletical, explanations were offered. That the salt water represents Torah,<sup>32</sup> that it represents the idea that Torah must be studied in humility,<sup>33</sup> that dipping a vegetable in salt water hints to the idea

<sup>27</sup> Yisrael Klopoltz, ed., *Maharash (Imrei Kodesh)* (Tel Aviv: 1965), p. 91.

<sup>28</sup> Abraham Sperling, *Otzar Ta'amei ha-Minbagim u'Mekorei ha-Dimim* (Lemberg: 1928), p. 229, siman 522, note 32. It is also the explanation quoted in Chaim Yehuda Segal Deitch, *Haggadah Shel Pesach – Kol Yehuda* (Satmar: 1937), p. 29.

<sup>29</sup> Yosef Chaim Sonnenfeld, *Chochmat Chaim* (Jerusalem: 2002), p. 177. This is the explanation brought in *Haggadah Shel Pesach – Shoel k'Inyan* (Jerusalem: Machon Derech Eliezer, 2006), p. 29. A version of this explanation which also involves gematria can be found in Yechezkel Rothchild, *Yemei ha-Chag vol. 2* (2009), p. 91.

<sup>30</sup> Isaac Baer Levinsohn, *Yalkut Ribal* (Warsaw: 1878), p. 79. See there on page 78 his remarkable explanation for having a piece of meat and a bowl of salt water on the table, that it is a remnant of an ancient custom during festive meals where riddles were asked, where meat would be given as a reward to whoever answered questions correctly, and salt water drunk as a penalty for those who answered incorrectly. On Levinsohn, see Israel Zinberg, *A History of Jewish Literature: The Haskalah Movement in Russia* (Cincinnati, Ohio: Hebrew Union College Press, 1978), chapter 2. Salt was listed by Plutarch as a food considered impure by Egyptian priests (as well as pork, onions and beans), see Peter Garnsey, *Food and Society in Classical Antiquity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), p. 90; for differing opinions as to whether this is historically accurate, see Emily Teeter, *Religion and Ritual in Ancient Egypt* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), pp. 33-34.

<sup>31</sup> Avraham Hershovitz, *Sefer Minbagei Yesburun* (Warsaw: 1899), p. 67, siman 119. Later works no longer attribute this idea to Levinsohn. See, for example, David Efraim Greenboim, *Haggadah v'Aggadat* (Modiin Illit: 2004), p. 82.

<sup>32</sup> Aryeh Leib Shapira, ed., *Haggadah Shel Pesach - Olelot Efraim* (Zhitomir: 1863), p. 14. This commentary was written by R. Shlomo Ephraim Luntschitz (1550–1619), author of *Kli Yakar*. Note that here the salt water is actually considered sweet, as opposed to the other explanations where it was termed strong or sharp. See also Yissachar Avraham, *Haggadah Shel Pesach – Mateh Yissachar* (Pietrikov: 1913), p. 15, where the water represents the “covenant of Torah.”

<sup>33</sup> David Rabinowitz, *Haggadah shel Pesach – Livnat Sapir* (Brooklyn, New York:

that we must financially support Torah scholars,<sup>34</sup> that it represents the small amount of the evil inclination necessary for the world to function properly,<sup>35</sup> or that we should be satisfied with minimal physical pleasures.<sup>36</sup>

None of these works give the salty-tears explanation so popular today.

### Salty Tears

The explanation that salt water represents salty tears is found in the teachings of R. Shmuel Zvi Dancyger (1860–1923), the third Rebbe in the Aleksander dynasty. He explains that the salt water represents the tears that a true penitent sheds, and recalls the repentance process of the Israelites who were raising themselves up from the 49<sup>th</sup> level of impurity.<sup>37</sup> The idea of tears of sorrow shed during slavery does not appear in his symbolic explanation.

The idea that the salt water represents the tears shed by the Israelites during their oppressive slavery is first found in the *Ishei Yisrael Haggadah*, first published in Warsaw in 1938. This Haggadah contains two running commentaries by Modzitz Rebbeim, *Divrei Yisrael* by R. Yisrael Taub, and *Yisa Bracha* by his son R. Shaul Yedidya Elazar Taub (1886–1947).

R. Shaul Yedidya Elazar Taub became leader of the Modzitz Chassidim in 1920.<sup>38</sup> He escaped from Vilna using a Japanese visa issued by Consul Sugihara in Kovno.<sup>39</sup> His introduction to the New York republication of this Haggadah is dated 23 Shevat, 5707 (February 23, 1947), when he was living in Brooklyn.<sup>40</sup> He passed away a few months later, soon after fulfilling his dream to settle in Israel, on 16 Kislev, 5708 (November 29, 1947), the day the UN passed its partition plan for Israel. He

---

1949), p. 32.

<sup>34</sup> David Tevele Schiff, *Lashon Zahav* (London: Mechon Rav Chesed Trust, 1997), pp. 362-363, first published in 1822.

<sup>35</sup> Yonatan Binyamin Cohen, *Haggada Shel Pesach – Nefesh Yonatan* (Sighet: 1925), p. 3b.

<sup>36</sup> Elazar haCohen, *Haggadah Zichron Niflaot* (Warsaw: 1880), p. 18.

<sup>37</sup> Uriel Chaim Zamlong, *Eser Lijlaot* (Piotrkow: 1932), p. 57, *siman* 131; Reuven Landau, *haOtzar miSippurei Tzadikim* (Warsaw: 1937), p. 94, *siman* 20.

<sup>38</sup> Mordechai Staiman, *“His Name is Aaron” and other Amazing Chassidic Stories and Songs* (Brooklyn: Otzar Sifrei Lubavitch, 2002), p. 209.

<sup>39</sup> Esther Farbstein, *Hidden in Thunder: Perspectives on Faith, Halacha and Leadership During the Holocaust* (Jerusalem: Mossad Harav Kook, 2007), p. 101, note 116.

<sup>40</sup> Shaul Yedidya Elazar Taub, *Haggadah Shel Pesach – Ishei Yisrael* (Brooklyn, New York: Vaad Agudat Chasidei Modzitz, 1947), p. alef (before the numbering begins).

was the last person to be buried on the Mount of Olives until after the Six Day War, when a monument was finally put on his grave.<sup>41</sup>

In the *Ishei Yisrael Haggadah*, R. Shaul Taub offers two explanations as to why salt water is used as the dip. The first is based on the idea in TB *Brachot* 40a that at the conclusion of every meal salt should be eaten and water drunk to ensure that no harm will come to the participants. Since the Seder night is a time of protection from all harm, and since nothing must be eaten after the Afikoman anyway, salt and water are placed on the table at the very beginning of the meal to show how the eating on this night is different from the usual way meals are eaten. He then gives a second explanation, that the same way the *charoset* that we dip *marror* into reminds us of the building materials that the Israelite slaves used, similarly the salt water used for the *karpas* reminds us of the tears shed by the Israelites during their slavery.<sup>42</sup>

This explanation would be repeated with slight variations, and without attribution, in many discussions of the symbolism of the Pesach Seder.<sup>43</sup> Before the publication of the *Ishei Yisrael Haggadah*, this explanation does not appear in Haggadot. English-language Haggadot directed to a general audience that today bring this explanation as a matter of course did not offer any particular symbolic explanation for the salt water before the New York republication of the *Ishei Yisrael Haggadah* in 1947.<sup>44</sup> It seems that the explanation gained widespread popularity only after being brought, without attribution, in the 1959 *Passover Haggadah* by Morris Silverman: “The salt water into which the *karpas* is dipped to make it palatable has been interpreted as salty tears, to remind us of the tears shed by the oppressed Israelites.”<sup>45</sup> Silverman was a prominent Conservative rabbi responsible for the movement's *Sabbath and Festival Prayerbook*, whose

---

<sup>41</sup> See David Mendelbaum, *Giborei Hachayil* (Bnei Brak: 2009), p. 163.

<sup>42</sup> Shaul Yedidya Elazar Taub, *Haggadah Shel Pesach – Ishei Yisrael* (Warsaw: 1938), pp. 6-7. כן י"ל הטבילה במי מלח לזכר איך היו טבולים בדמעות, אשר שפכו מצרת השעבוד.

<sup>43</sup> See notes 2 and 3 above.

<sup>44</sup> For example, Mordechai Kaplan's *New Haggadah* (New York: Behrman's Publishing House, 1941), whose goal was to present “compelling content of present day idealism and aspiration” (p. vii), explains that the *karpas* itself comes to symbolize “the coming of Spring, and suggest the perpetual renewal of life” (p. xi), but gives no explanation for the salt water. Compare with Lawrence Hoffman and David Arnou, eds., *My People's Passover Haggadah* (Woodstock, Vermont: Jewish Lights Publishing, 2008), which has a similar goal, and presents both the spring symbolism of *karpas* and the tears symbolism of the salt water, p. 143.

<sup>45</sup> Morris Silverman, *Passover Haggadah with Explanatory Notes and Original Readings* (Hartford, CT: Prayer Book Press, 1959), p. 5.

“name had become synonymous with Conservative Judaism’s liturgy.”<sup>46</sup> It may be significant that Silverman augmented the traditional text “with an extensive section on the Holocaust, the birth of the State of Israel, and numerous comments about America,”<sup>47</sup> so this explanation may have been chosen as one that would be particularly meaningful for American Jews in a modern setting.

Today “salt water, in which we dip the vegetable, is typically associated with the tears of the slaving Israelites before their liberation.”<sup>48</sup> It is such a well-known interpretation that it is sometimes retrofitted into earlier commentaries. For example, the contemporary *Mystical Haggadah*, in a section “adapted from” the Haggadah of R. Isaiah Horowitz, the Shela (c.1565–1630), states that the dipping in salt water is a reminder of “the tears of our suffering in bondage,”<sup>49</sup> whereas in the actual *Haggadat haShelah* there is no mention of salt water or tears. There the discussion is only about vinegar, explained as representing the hardship of slavery in general,<sup>50</sup> a symbolism that would later be applied to salt water as well, as we saw above.

The reason that today “the prevalent custom is to use salt water”<sup>51</sup> rather than vinegar is at least partially due to the fact that salt water now carries a powerful and simply stated symbolism, whereas nothing equivalent was provided for vinegar.

---

<sup>46</sup> Lawrence Hoffman and David Arnow, editors, *My People's Passover Haggadah: Traditional Texts, Modern Commentaries, volume 1* (Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights Publishing, 2008), p. 83.

<sup>47</sup> Joel Gereboff, “One Nation, with Liberty and Haggadahs for All,” in Jack Kugelmass, editor, *Key Texts in American Jewish Culture* (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2003), p. 284.

<sup>48</sup> Lawrence Hoffman and David Arnow, eds., *My People's Passover Haggadah* (Woodstock, Vermont: Jewish Lights Publishing, 2008), p. 143. It even appears in non-religious Haggadot, for example, Edwin Mishkin, *A Haggadah for the Non-Observant* (2012), p.17, “The salt water is often connected to the tears the Jewish people cried in Egypt.”

<sup>49</sup> Eliyahu Klein, *A Mystical Haggadah* (Berkeley, California: North Atlantic Books, 2008), p. 44.

<sup>50</sup> R. Isaiah Horowitz, *Haggadat haShelah haShalem* (Jerusalem: Ahavat Shalom, 2001), p. 54. Joseph Elias, *The Passover Haggadah* (Brooklyn, New York: Mesorah Publications, 1977) p. 63, more correctly states that according to the Shelah it is “to remind us of the bitterness of the bondage,” although he brings this symbolism to explain salt water, not vinegar as in the actual Shelah.

<sup>51</sup> Yosef Zvi Rimon, *Haggadah miMekorah* (Jerusalem: Mosad Harav Kook, 2002), p. 115.



### Why Use Salt Water and Vinegar?

These symbolic explanations are relatively modern, most dating from the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries.<sup>52</sup> Even in modern times many works on Jewish customs do not provide any explanation for choosing salt water as the dip.<sup>53</sup> Why are no explanations found in the Rishonim and early Acharonim?

An important insight is gained from the *Leket Yosher*. This book was compiled by R. Yosef ben Moshe (1423–c.1490), and records the customs and rulings of his teacher, R. Israel Isserlein (1390–1460). He writes, “There is no mitzvah to use salt water rather than vinegar, and the opposite seems to be true, for we in our time and in our land are not accustomed all year long to dip into salt water, and most of our dipping is in vinegar, it is better to dip in vinegar... And if you should say that we should make a big change in order to arouse the children's astonishment, we should only make the changes that the sages mentioned, and the sages only mentioned dipping, and the simple understanding is that they meant the regular dip.”<sup>54</sup> Using vinegar as a dip for food is already found in Ruth 2:14, further demonstrating that the reason vinegar was chosen as the dip is specifically because it was a normal dip, not because it was particularly sharp or possessed some other quality.<sup>55</sup>

The *karpas* is dipped into something that was considered normative to dip vegetables into. The child who asks about the dipping in the Four Questions asks only why we dip multiple times, not why we are dipping into such an unusual liquid. We can now understand why no explanation

---

<sup>52</sup> The explanation often quoted in the name of Maharal, that the salt water symbolizes the kabbalistic concept Yesod, is found in the Maharal Haggadah (*Divrei Negiddim*), which is actually a forgery by R. Yehuda Rosenberg (1859–1935) first published in 1905. See Yitzchak Lieberman, *Sefer Chag haMatzot* (Bnei Brak: 2003), p. 393, note 34; Shlomo Fisher, “Do Not Let Wickedness Dwell in Our Tents” (On Forgeries in Books and Books Containing Deceptive Ideas), *Tzfunot*, Nissan 5749, vol. 3, p. 69. This is the same forger responsible for many fanciful tales about the Maharal; see Leiman, S.Z., “The Adventure of The Maharal of Prague in London: R. Yudel Rosenberg and The Golem of Prague,” *Tradition*, 36:1, 2002.

<sup>53</sup> For example, J.D. Eisenstein, *Otzar Dinim u'Minbagim* (New York: 1917); Shmuel Gelbart, *Otzar Ta'amei haMinbagim* (Petach Tikvah: Mifal Rashi, 1996); Gavriel Zinner, *Nitei Gavriel – Pesach vol. 2* (Jerusalem: Shemesh, 1997).

<sup>54</sup> Yaakov Friedman, ed., *Leket Yosher – Orach Chayyim* (Berlin: 1903), p. 89.

<sup>55</sup> Meir Nathanson, “The Law Regarding Preparing Salt Water for Seder Night, Particularly When It Falls on Shabbat,” *Tzohar* vol. 2 (1998), p. 80 (Hebrew). Dipping into salt water or vinegar is called “a wholesome Orientalism” in Aaron Green, *The Revised Haggadah* (London: George Routledge & Sons, 1929), p. 19.

was offered as to why specifically salt water or vinegar is used as the dip. No explanation was needed because the reason was obvious; those were the normative salad dressings at the time. As R. David Feinstein writes, “In those days it was quite normal to eat a vegetable dipped in salt water before the main course.”<sup>56</sup>

In Greek times, when mixed greens were eaten they were seasoned with vinegar, salt, oil and herbs. The Romans called this dish *herba salata* (“salted greens”), which is the origin of the modern English word “salad.”<sup>57</sup> The salt was sometimes administered to the salad in the form of brine, salty water, so that it would stick.<sup>58</sup> These dressings remained the standard throughout medieval times; only later in history would more complex salads and salad dressings be developed. Most of the dressings popular today, such as Thousand Island, Ranch and Caesar dressing, date from the 1900s.<sup>59</sup> While the *Artscroll Youth Haggadah* writes that “Salt water is used instead of fancy dressing to remind us of our salty tears and sweat when we were slaves in Egypt,”<sup>60</sup> the fact is that the opposite is true, and salt water and vinegar were chosen precisely because they were very normative dressings in earlier times.

In the time of the Rishonim and early Acharonim, when salt water was still recognized as a standard vegetable dip, there was no need to provide a symbolic meaning for the dips. As time passed and salt water was no longer obviously recognized as a simple and standard salad dressing, symbolic explanations began to be offered for this particular choice of dip.

---

<sup>56</sup> David Feinstein, *The Kol Dodi Haggadah* (Brooklyn, New York: Mesorah Publications, 1990), p. 39. This simple explanation is recorded in the early English-language Haggadah, William Rosenau, *Home Service for Passover Eve* (New York: Bloch Publishing Company, 1905), p. 8, “The salt water or vinegar, into which the parsley is dipped, is provided to lend palatability to the parsley.”

<sup>57</sup> Amy Brown, *Understanding Food: Principles and Preparation* (Stamford, CT: Cengage Learning, 2015), p. 338; James L. Morgan, *Culinary Creation* (New York: Butterworth-Heinemann, 2006), p. 185.

<sup>58</sup> Kate Burridge, *Weeds in the Garden of Words* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), p. 61.

<sup>59</sup> Andrew Smith, ed., *The Oxford Companion to American Food and Drink* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 514.

<sup>60</sup> Nosson and Yitzchok Zev Scherman, *Artscroll Youth Haggadah* (Brooklyn, NY: Mesorah Publications, 1995), p. 14.

## Creating Jewish Customs

Based on this, it would seem that today people should be dipping the *karpas* into a normative contemporary salad dressing,<sup>61</sup> rather than the now unusual salt water. The fact that this is not done is a testament to the conservative nature and perseverance of the practices of the Jewish people. The changing salad-dressing trends of the contemporary world have had little impact in the face of people doing what their parents and grandparents did. Due to this phenomenon, over time the Jewish people have become the contemporary bearers of what was once a widespread culinary custom, to season vegetables with salt water.

There are other examples of this phenomenon at work. In a previous article I noted that covering mirrors as a sign of mourning was once a well-known cross-cultural practice, although by now in many places only Jewish people have held on to this custom, transforming it into something associated specifically with Jewish mourning rituals.<sup>62</sup> Similarly, the baldachin, a canopy used to honor royalty in medieval times, was also used by Jews to honor the bride and groom on their wedding day. As the world shifted to other ways of demonstrating VIP treatment while Jewish people continued using this canopy at weddings, this kind of *chuppa* became considered a classic sign of a Jewish wedding.<sup>63</sup> Both of these practices were given symbolic meaning in popular Jewish literature, the covering of mirrors to show that physicality and vanity must be put aside during mourning,<sup>64</sup> and the *chuppa* as a symbol of the home of the newly married couple.<sup>65</sup> However, this symbolism was added only once the custom was no longer a well-known practice of the outside world as well, and became something that was not obviously recognized and understood in its original context. The same process has taken place with salt water.

Is dipping a vegetable in salt water a Jewish custom? Is covering mirrors? Is getting married under a *chuppa*? There are many things that Jewish people do that the outside society does as well, for example wearing belts or drinking coffee. These cannot be considered Jewish customs. There are certain things that are associated with Jews specifically, such as eating

---

<sup>61</sup> As long as it is composed of substances that would require washing when used as a dip. See Moshe Katz, *Vayaged Moshe* (Jerusalem: 1973), pg. 35.

<sup>62</sup> Zvi Ron, “Covering Mirrors in the Shivah Home,” *Hakirah* 13 (Spring 2012), pp. 271–283.

<sup>63</sup> See Daniel Sperber, *Minbagei Yisrael* vol. 8 (Jerusalem: Mossad Harav Kook, 1989), pp. 51–60. See also, Eliyahu Bechor, *Sefer haTishbi* (Basel: 1601), p. 34.

<sup>64</sup> See for example, Maurice Lamm, *The Jewish Way in Death and Mourning* (New York: Jonathan David Publishers, 1969), p. 103.

<sup>65</sup> See for example, Hyim Shafner, *The Everything Jewish Wedding Book* (Avon, Massachusetts: Adams, 2009), pp. 84–85.

bagels and cream cheese or deli sandwiches, at least in the United States. As Jewish people do not give these practices any symbolic meaning, for our purposes it seems that they cannot be considered Jewish customs. However, what of a case where a practice was once cross-cultural, shared by Jews and non-Jews alike, and over time was dropped by the majority of the outside world and retained primarily by Jews? And what if, with the passage of time, Jews no longer recalled the original context of these practices, and gave them a new, symbolic meaning, one that carries a Jewish message? It would seem that the practice would now be transformed into a Jewish custom. On the other hand, when a common practice fades from general usage, and also fails to acquire a Jewish meaning, it is dropped from Jewish practice as well. Such was the case of the now forgotten custom of not slaughtering geese at certain times of the year.<sup>66</sup>

As culinary, sartorial and societal trends change in the world, Jewish people who cling to what was previously common are in essence laying the foundation for what in generations to come may be transformed into Jewish customs. Dipping *karpas* in salt water is one expression of this idea.



---

<sup>66</sup> See Zvi Ron, “The Ashkenazi Custom Not to Slaughter Geese in Tevet and Shevat,” *Hakirah* 17 (Summer 2014), pp. 179–190.