The Importance of Haroset for Maimonides

Imagine a formal dinner in an upscale restaurant. The table will include the customary condiments: salt, pepper, and perhaps some olive oil. Now imagine Maimonides' table for the Pesah Seder. On his table, there is ONE element that literally replaces "all" other condiments and dressings that night: Haroset, the exclusive dip meant to accompany all the symbolic foods that we consume on the Seder night.

Let us examine how and when the Haroset is consumed at the Pesah Seder according to Maimonides:

KARPAS WITH HAROSET

After inaugurating the Pesah Seder with the Kiddush, the first thing we eat is a piece of Karpas, or celery. In ancient times, it was common for a festive dinner to begin with an aperitif (celery or other fresh vegetables) before serving the main dish in order to stimulate the appetite. Now, the general custom in the Seder is to dip the *karpas* in vinegar (or water with salt) to remind us of the bitter tears that we shed in our Egyptian captivity. According to Maimonides, however, the *karpas* should be dipped in the Haroset! Anyways, remember that for Maimonides' Haroset recipe included a significant amount of vinegar, which gave his Haroset an acidic flavor.

MATSA WITH HAROSET

The second time Haroset is used, as per Maimonides, is when we recite the blessing for the Matsa (Motsi-Matsa). We dip the Matsa in the Haroset instead of using salt as we usually do when we say haMotsi for bread. This gesture reminds me of a beautiful custom that is practiced in some families during Rosh haShana: to express our wishes for a good and sweet year, when saying haMotsi, the bread is dipped in honey or sugar

instead of salt. However, while dipping the bread in honey or sugar in Rosh haShana is a popular tradition or folklore, the dipping of the Matsa in the Haroset, for Maimonides, is a formal, practically an “halakhic”, requirement.

MAROR WITH (A LITTLE BIT OF) HAROSET

Nowadays, the Haroset is used firstly to dip the Maror, the bitter herb. In this case, the rabbis indicate that the amount of the Haroset should be minimal, so that the flavor of the Haroset does not deprive us of experiencing the bitter taste of the Maror. Some rabbis wrote that after dipping the Maror in the Haroset, the Haroset must be removed from the Maror so that only a superficial layer remains on it. Maimonides clarifies that in this case, when spreading the Maror with Haroset, we are fulfilling a rabbinic precept, although we do not say a specific blessing for it. According to some opinions, this is because of the rulings of *iqar* and *tafel*, which determine that we say blessings on the main food -in this case, the Maror (*‘al akhilat maror*) as opposed to its accessories– in this case, the Haroset.

MATSA AND MAROR WITH HAROSET

Finally the Haroset is also added to the Korekh, the sandwich of Matsa and Maror that reminds us of the *qorban pesah*, the lamb that was consumed during the Seder of Pesah with Matsa and Maror in the times of the Bet haMiqdash. As in the case of the Maror, the use of the Haroset in the Korekh is also practiced by all the Jewish communities. As we already explained, the Haroset is not mentioned in the Tora, and is rather a ritual food related to the Pesah Seder which was established by the rabbis. The Haroset carries a tremendous meaning in its taste, its texture and its looks, and it conveys a very tangible representation of the slavery we want to remember in the Seder.

TEXTS WHERE MAIMONIDES MENTIONS HAROSET

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