



Seder Plate

Passover is a holiday full of ritual symbols that retell the Exodus story. Many of these symbols are displayed on the Seder plate, which is the centerpiece of the Seder table. A Seder is a service held at home that concludes with a dinner. It is always observed on the first night of Passover, and in some homes on the second night as well.

The Symbols of the Seder Plate

There are seven symbols that can be placed on the Seder plate but not all of them are required. They are:

Vegetable (Karpas) – This part of the Seder plate dates back to a first and second century tradition in Jerusalem that involved beginning a formal meal by dipping vegetables in salt water before eating them. Hence, at the beginning of the Seder a vegetable – usually lettuce, cucumber, radish or parsley – is dipped in salt water and eaten. It is sometimes said that the salt water represents the tears our ancestors shed during their years of enslavement.

Shank bone (Zeroa) / Roasted Beet – The roasted shank bone of a lamb reminds us of the tenth plague in Egypt, when all firstborn Egyptians were killed. The Israelites marked the doorposts of their homes with the blood of a lamb as a signal that death should pass over them, as it is written in Exodus 12:12: "On that same night I will pass through Egypt and strike down every firstborn - both men and animals - and I will bring judgment on all the gods of Egypt... The blood will be a sign... on the houses where you are; and when I see the blood, I will pass over you. No destructive plague will touch you when I strike Egypt." The shank bone is sometimes called the Paschal lamb, with "paschal" meaning "He [God] skipped over" the houses of Israel.

The shank bone also reminds us of the sacrificial lamb that was killed and eaten during the days when the Temple stood. In modern times, some Jews will use a poultry neck instead. Vegetarians will often replace the shank bone with a roasted beet, which has the colour of blood and is shaped like a bone, but is not derived from an animal.

Hard Boiled Egg (Baytzah) – There are two interpretations of the symbolism of the hardboiled egg. One is that it is an ancient fertility symbol. The other is that it is a symbol of mourning for the loss of the two Temples, the first of which was destroyed by the Babylonians in 586 B.C.E. and the second of which was destroyed by the Romans in 70 C.E. Hard boiled eggs were traditionally the food of mourners and hence they were an appropriate symbol for the loss of these sacred sites.

Charoset – Haroset is a mixture that is often made of apples, nuts, wine and spices in the Ashkenazi tradition. It represents the mortar the Israelites were forced to use while they built structures for their Egyptian taskmasters.

Bitter Herbs (Maror) – Because the Israelites were slaves in Egypt we eat bitter herbs to remind us of the harshness of servitude. Horseradish – either the root or a prepared paste – is most often used. A small amount of maror is usually eaten with an equal portion of charoset. It can also be made into a "Hillel Sandwich," where maror and charoset are sandwiched between two pieces of matzah.

Bitter Vegetable (Hazeret) – This piece of the Seder plate also symbolises the bitterness of slavery. Romaine lettuce is usually used, which doesn't seem very bitter but the plant has bitter tasting roots. When hazeret is not represented on the Seder plate some Jews will put a small bowl of salt water in its place.

Orange - Also optional. The orange is a recent addition to the Seder plate and not one that is used in every Jewish home. It was introduced by Susannah Heschel, a Jewish feminist and scholar, as a symbol that represents including women and homosexuals in Jewish tradition – both groups that have often been marginalised.

