



*“Words from the Heart
Enter the Heart”*

PESACH > First Days

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Pesach

**Why Maror? Mirror Neurons
and Empathy**



Meaningful Sermons *“Words from the Heart Enter the Heart”*

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ABSTRACT

Passover seems to feed into the stereotype of Jewish suffering – Jews obsessed with their troubles. And frankly many Jews are turned off by the constant reminder of the persecuted and afflicted Jew.

Take the bitter herbs, called *maror* (which literally means “bitter”), which we eat at the Seder to remember the bitterness our ancestors experienced under Egyptian rule.

This custom begs a few obvious questions – *klotz kashyes* – questions so apparent that no one asks them: What purpose is there in us recreating the bitterness of our fathers and mothers in Egypt? It’s one thing to remember and recreate the Exodus, but why do we have to also taste the bitterness? And can we actually experience their true suffering by ... tasting horseradish?! It may sting for a bit and perhaps cause us to lose our breath, but how can anyone compare that momentary experience to the horrible bitterness our ancestors suffered for over 210 years in Egyptian bondage with all that it entailed?! So what is achieved by this exercise?

The powerful and surprising answer lies in the reason why we place the maror at the center of the Seder Plate. The obvious location for *maror* (bitterness) is on the left side, the place of *gevurah* (severity). Why is it situated in the center – the place that symbolizes compassion?

Maror, as unlikely symbol of empathy, evokes us to explore the very nature and importance of empathy.

This sermon examines several provocative scientific perspectives and concludes with the Passover Seder's approach, offering some penetrating questions designed to nudge us toward bonding with our fellows, for truly that is where salvation lies.

In the process we can dispel once and for all the long suffering (no pun intended) stereotype of the tormented Jew.

WHY MAROR? MIRROR NEURONS AND EMPATHY

1. Jewish Suffering (Humor)

Happy Pesach [Passover] everyone!

The suffering Jew is one of our most enduring stereotypes: Jews indulging in their being persecuted. Just ask Woody Allen.

Take this one:

A group of elderly, retired men gather each morning at a café in Tel Aviv. They drink their coffee and sit for hours discussing the world situation. Given the state of the world, their talks are usually depressing. One day, one of the men startles the others by announcing, "You know what? I am an optimist." The others are shocked, but then one of them notices something fishy. "Wait a minute! If you're an optimist, why do you look so worried?" "You think it's easy being an optimist?!"

Or this:

One night, in the city of Chelm, a fire broke out. All the inhabitants rushed to the burning building to extinguish the blaze. When the conflagration had been put out, the rabbi mounted a table and addressed the citizens of Chelm.

"My friends, this fire was a miracle sent from heaven above."

There were murmurs of surprise in the crowd and the rabbi hastened to explain. “Look at it this way,” he said, “If it were not for the bright flames, how would we have been able to see how to put out the fire on such a dark night?”

What is it about Jews and suffering? Everyone knows the classic Jewish line: “They tried to kill us. We survived. Let’s eat...”

Passover especially seems to feed into this Jewish suffering stereotype – Jews obsessed with their troubles.

And this is not just something to laugh about.

[Optional Opening]:

The other day a young man in our community complained to me how he really does not look forward to Passover. “All they talk about is how we were persecuted and enslaved, oppressed and afflicted. And not just then, but always: ‘not just one alone has risen against us to destroy us, but in every generation they rise against us to destroy us.’ How long will Jews be consumed with suffering?! It’s very demoralizing. And frankly, Rabbi, it depresses me to hear about all this pain. I would prefer to be in an upbeat environment. I am actually considering not attending this year’s Seder and instead go partying somewhere.”

His words were painful to hear. Especially knowing that many Jews have similar feelings. Who wants to be constantly reminded about pain and suffering?

As a result, I feel compelled to speak about this topic today, on the first day of Passover, in the hope that we can put to rest this long suffering (no pun intended) stereotype.

2. Bitter Herbs

Take the bitter herbs we eat at the Seder called *maror* (which literally means “bitter”), to remember the bitterness our ancestors experienced under Egyptian rule.

As we recite in the *Haggadah*:

This *maror* that we eat for what reason? Because the Egyptians embittered our fathers' lives in Egypt, as it is said:¹ "They made their lives bitter with hard service, with mortar and with bricks, and with all manner of service in the field; all their service which they made them serve with rigor."

But this begs a few obvious questions – *klotz kashyes* – questions so apparent that no one asks them:

What purpose is there in us recreating the bitterness of our fathers and mothers in Egypt? It's one thing to remember and recreate the Exodus, but why do we have to also taste the bitterness?

And can we actually experience their true suffering by ... tasting horseradish?! It may sting for a bit and perhaps cause us to lose our breath, but how can anyone compare that momentary experience to the horrible bitterness our ancestors suffered for over 210 years in Egyptian bondage with all that it entailed?!

So what is achieved by this exercise?

3. Center of the Seder Plate

The answer lies in the reason why we place the *maror* at the center of the Seder Plate.

The first thing we do on Passover night, before the actual Seder begins, is construct the Seder Plate. The Plate consists of three matzahs and six food items – *z'roa* (a roasted shankbone), *beitzah* (an egg), *maror* (bitter herbs), *charoset* (a pasty mixture of fruits, nuts and wine), *karpas* (a vegetable, such as an onion or potato), *chazeret* (bitter herbs and lettuce used in the *korach* sandwich).

¹Exodus 1:14.

There are various customs concerning the arrangement of the Seder Plate. The prevalent one that most communities follow is that of the great 16th century Kabbalist, Rabbi Isaac Luria, better known as the Ari. His arrangement has deep mystical symbolism, as he explained:

Arrange the Plate on the table by taking three matzahs and placing them one on the other: First the Israelite [the lowest matzah], on it the Levite [the second matzah], and on it the Kohen [the third matzah]. These are the three intellectual faculties, *chochma* (wisdom), *bina* (understanding), *daat* (knowledge).

Above all these, on the right, place the *z'roa* (shankbone), corresponding to *chesed* (love/kindness), and opposite it, on the left, place the *beitzah* (egg) which corresponds to *gevurah* (severity/discipline). Beneath them, in the center, place the *maror* (bitter herbs) corresponding to *tiferet* (compassion/beauty).²

The question is why the bitter herbs are placed in correspondence to compassion, rather than on the left in correspondence to severity – as would seem logical?

The answer is because the real purpose of the *maror* is not to experience bitterness, but to experience *empathy* – to feel the pain of another. And that is *tiferet* (compassion), which sits in middle and balances the right and the left.

When we empathize and feel the bitterness of another, then we arouse and awaken empathy for ourselves from Above. *Tiferet* is the center spine – “the middle rod that runs from one end to another”³ – which connects the lowest possible experience of suffering with the highest possible source of empathy.

² He goes on: “Beneath the *z'roa*, on the right, place the charoset corresponding to *netzach*, and opposite it, on the left, below the *beitzah*, place the *karpas* corresponding to *hod*. Under the *maror* place the *chazeret* used for *korach* sandwich corresponding to *yesod*. And the plate itself is *malchut*, which encompasses all the ten *sefirot*” (Siddur of the Arizal).

³ Exodus 26:28.

4. Tiferet as Beauty (Optional)

Incidentally, this also explains the other quality of *tiferet* which is beauty.

What exactly is beauty?

Why do we find certain things appealing to the eye – what we call “beautiful” – and others not so? What is the anatomy of beauty?

Some of you may argue that, frankly, who cares? If something is beautiful it’s just beautiful and that’s it. If it ain’t, it ain’t. And anyway, beauty is just in the eyes of the beholder. So how can a definition of beauty help us? And can beauty be quantified with academic and scientific definitions?

Beauty – *tiferet* – is harmony within diversity. Beauty always consists of the joining of two opposites. Anything beautiful is always multifaceted, but the diverse forces are symmetrically aligned.

As *pretty* as one color may be, it still would not be defined as *beautiful*. For true beauty is always a combination of many colors – as in a painting – whose balance and coordination creates a beautiful mosaic.

Take nature. The beauty of nature lies in the fact that so many different systems work with such astonishing synchronicity. Perhaps no better or closer example of this is our own selves. “From my flesh I behold God.”⁴ The healthy human body is a miraculous piece of architecture. So many different limbs and organs, numerous diverse systems and faculties. Let alone the multitude of cells, hormones, chemicals and DNA. And all combine as one fascinating unit, working as one synchronized whole.

This is *tiferet* – beauty – the harmony within diversity.

Something that strikes us (even subjectively) as beautiful always involves balance and symmetry of several – or very many – different elements, all combined in just the right blend.

No one color, or one musical note, creates beauty, but rather a diverse range of colors or notes *bonding* in harmony. And this bond is what creates beauty. And this bond is also essential for empathy.

⁴ Job 19:26.

5. True Transcendence

Another powerful element of empathy is that it allows us to experience true transcendence – by bonding with the pain of another we go out of our own limited selves and perspectives.

And especially of human selfishness.

Here is an example of how non-empathetic some people can be:

One afternoon, a wealthy lawyer was riding in the back of his limousine when he saw two pathetic-looking men by the side of the road, eating grass. He ordered his driver to stop and got out to investigate. He asked the men, "Why are you eating grass?"

"We don't have no money for food," the first man replied.

"Then you must come with me to my house," insisted the lawyer.

"But, sir, I got a wife and three kids here," said the man.

"Bring them along!" replied the lawyer.

The second man exclaimed, "I got a wife and six kids!"

"Bring them as well!", the lawyer proclaimed as he headed back to his limo.

They all climbed into the car, and once underway, one of the men expresses, "Sir, you are too kind. Thank you for taking all of us with you."

The lawyer replied, "I'm most happy to do it. You'll love my place. The grass is almost a foot tall."

Even the greatest intelligence has limits. Indeed, everything about us is limited. But we break those bonds when we empathize.

We forget ourselves in the joys and sorrows of another, so much so that we actually feel that the joy or sorrow experienced by another is our own joy and sorrow.

And that act has far reaching consequences, both spiritually (because it stimulates a response in kind from Above) and physically (as science has recently discovered).

6. Mirror Neurons

Of late, science has begun appreciating the power and benefits of empathy.

Neuroscientists have coined the term “mirror neurons” to describe a phenomenon of feeling another person’s feelings as if they were you own. As the *Scientific American* reports:⁵

When a friend hits her thumb with a hammer, you don’t have to put much effort into imagining how this feels. You know it immediately. You will probably tense up. Your “Ouch!” may arise even quicker than your friend’s, and chances are that you will feel a little pain yourself. Of course, you will then thoughtfully offer consolation and bandages, but your initial reaction seems just about automatic. Why?

Neuroscience now offers you an answer: A recent line of research has demonstrated that seeing other people being touched activates primary sensory areas of your brain, much like experiencing the same touch yourself would do. What these findings suggest is beautiful in its simplicity – that you literally “feel with” others.

This important discovery was made two decades ago by Giacomo Rizzolatti and his co-workers at the University of Parma, who were studying motor neuron properties in monkeys ... [and found that] the monkey’s brain was directly mirroring the actions it observed.

This “neural resonance,” which was later also demonstrated in humans, suggested the existence of a special type of “mirror” neurons that help us understand other people’s actions [and even feel them as our own].

The benefits of empathy are also now being increasingly documented.

Psychologists have found that empathy is one of the most important aspects of creating harmonious relationships, reducing stress, and enhancing emotional awareness.

⁵ <http://www.scientificamerican.com/article.cfm?id=how-you-feel-what-another-body-feels>

Feeling empathy for others and for oneself brings a sense of peace, connection, and perspective. Conversely, when there is an absence of empathy in a particular relationship or situation, or how one relates to himself, one often experiences stress, disconnection and negativity.

7. We are All Connected (Optional)

What is becoming rapidly clear is that we are all connected. The only thing that really separates us is our skin – which defines our bodies as distinct from others.⁶ But our brains are totally synched, or can be if we let them.

This brings new light upon an old and very famous experiment – known as the “Hundredth Monkey” – that astounded science. It was reported in *Lifetide* by the biologist Lyall Watson,⁷ as follows:

In the 1950s, scientists were studying the behavior of monkeys on an archipelago of uninhabited islands off the coast of Japan. They knew that “normally young monkeys learn feeding habits from their mothers, who teach them by example what to eat and how to deal with it,” and they decided to introduce an experiment to see how long learned behavior takes. They dumped a monkey delicacy onto the islands – raw sweet potatoes – which they covered in sand and grit.

“An eighteen-month-old female, a sort of monkey genius called Imo, solved the problem by carrying the potatoes down to a stream and washing them before eating. In monkey terms this was a cultural revolution comparable almost to the invention of the wheel. (It involved abstraction, the identification of concept, and deliberate manipulation of several parameters in the environment.)

⁶ See also the last two minutes of this lecture: http://www.ted.com/talks/vs_ramachandran_the_neurons_that_shaped_civilization.html

⁷ Adapted from *Lifetide* by Lyall Watson, pp. 147-148

And, reversing the normal trend, it was the juvenile Imo who taught the trick to her mother. She also taught it to her playmates and they in turn spread the news to their mothers. Slowly, step by step, the new culture spread through the colony, with each new conversion taking place in full view of the observers, who kept a constant watch right through all the daylight hours.

“Then something extraordinary took place ... In the autumn of that year an unspecified number of monkeys were washing their sweet potatoes in the sea ... Let us say, for argument’s sake, that the number was ninety-nine and that at eleven o’clock on a Tuesday morning, one further convert was added to the fold in the usual way. But the addition of the hundredth monkey apparently carried the number across some sort of threshold, pushing it through a kind of *critical mass*, because by that evening almost everyone in the colony was doing it. Not only that, but the habit jumped natural barriers and appeared spontaneously ... in colonies on other islands and on the mainland...”

This idea of a critical mass – that when a certain number of individuals learn something, or are persuaded of something, then the idea spreads like lightning through the neighboring population – has been used to explain fads, social consciousness movements, and many other phenomena.

But the bottom line is this: We are all connected. Our brains are connected. And when a certain number of us – the critical mass – forges a bond, it affects us all. It affects nothing less than the whole universe.

8. Long Before Science

Long before modern science discovered any of this, the Torah commanded us to eat *maror* on Passover night to develop our empathy for others and our connection with all of God’s creation.

Eating the bitter herbs is not about us feeling the bitterness of bondage, for what would be the point? Can we compare the discomfort of eating bitter herbs to the trauma of slavery and genocide? Of course we can’t.

Eating the bitter herbs is all about the empathy that it elicits – the compassion that we must feel for each other, and the compassion we want God to feel for us.

Even in our present time of blessed prosperity, we live with many constraints – and we are distant from God. So we must cry out, and that cry will evoke channels of empathy from Above.

This, my friends, is the answer to the young man I mentioned earlier and to all those that see Passover and Judaism in general as oppressive: This holiday is all about celebrating life and its possibilities. It's not about suffering and affliction, but the exact contrary: How to feel for others. How to love and how to empathize.

We are all behooved to teach this life affirming message to our children and families, to friends and strangers. To convey in personal terms the soulful relevance and beautiful lessons of Passover and all its traditions; how this holiday can enhance our lives and our relationships.

9. The Path to Change

Empathy shows us the path to change. Imagine what life would be like, how much better the world would be, if we all ate a bit of *maror* and connected with the feelings of others everywhere?

As we sit at the Seder table and consume not just the wine and matzahs but the bitter herbs, let us resolve to put ourselves into the shoes of our children, of our friends, even of those we may disagree with – so that we may feel as they do, think as they do, and therefore understand, bond and respond.

Nelson Mandela valued the power of understanding others, including his enemies. Richard Shell and Mario Moussa, in *The Art of the Woo*, relate how Mandela wanted to persuade his jailers to improve treatment for all of the inmates in Robbins Island prison,

where they were held captive. A major part of his strategy was to get inside the minds of his captors. To that end, he taught himself to speak and comprehend Afrikaans, and learned the history, culture and values of the Afrikaners. In order to best communicate what he wanted, he needed to truly know where his adversaries were coming from. Or as Mandela put it: "You must understand the mind of the opposing commander ... you can't understand him unless you understand his literature and his language." This empathetic comprehension of those who were guarding him and his fellow inmates led to better conditions in an otherwise oppressive jail.

10. Win-Win

Feeling empathy is always win-win. Understanding your *enemies* helps you strategize better, anticipate their moves, neutralize their position. Understanding your *friends* helps you communicate better, forge closer bonds, join hands to make the world a better place.

So right here and now ask yourself:

- How emphatic am I to others? To myself?
- Does my compassion come with "strings attached," i.e. my own personal gain?
- When was the last time that I shed tears for another's predicament?
- Do I realize that empathy equals sensitivity – the very essence of being alive – feeling and experiencing the heartbeat of all life? That when I have no compassion to strangers, it will also impact the kindness I show to myself and to my loved ones?

Says the *Haggadah*:

In every generation a person is obligated to regard himself as if he had come out of Egypt, as it is said: "You shall tell your child on that day, it is because of this that the Lord did for me when I left Egypt. The Holy One, blessed be He, redeemed not only our fathers from Egypt, but He redeemed also us with them, as it is written:⁸ 'It was us that He brought out from there, so that He might bring us to give us the land that He promised to our fathers.'"

Amen.

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⁸Deuteronomy 6:23.