

WHY DOES THE SEDER BEGIN WITH *KARPAS*?

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This article is dedicated to the blessed memory of our fathers,

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The Passover Seder, like every holiday meal, begins with the *kiddush*, the sanctification of the day, followed by *urehatz*, the washing of the hands. Then comes the *karpas* ceremony, the first element that is unique to the Seder-night celebration.

The word *karpas* is a reminder of the sale of Joseph into slavery, an act that led to the descent of the Israelite people into Egypt. The *karpas* itself is, therefore, an appropriate introduction to the events recounted in the Haggadah [narrative] -- the enslavement of the Israelites and their ultimate redemption. The word *karpas* [כרפס] appears in the Bible once, in the phrase חור כרפס ותכלת [*hur karpas u'tekhelet*] (Est. 1:6). In this context it means "a fine linen," using a word borrowed from the Sanskrit or Persian *kirpas*.¹ The Talmud mentions *karpas* only in this use, and equates it with "fine white wool" [*milat levanah*, from the Greek *méllos* -- sheep] (B. Megilah 12a). The Talmud and early sources about the Seder such as the Mishnah (Pesahim 10) and Tosefta (Pesahim 10) do not use the term *karpas* with respect to the Passover Seder.

THE JOSEPH CONNECTION

The Patriarch Jacob gave his son Joseph a כתנת פסים [*ketonet passim* -- a colorful striped garment] that incited the envy of Jacob's other sons. In reaction to their father's favoritism, the brothers removed Joseph's striped garment, threw him into a pit, and sold him to a passing Ishmaelite caravan. They dipped the striped garment into blood, and brought it to Jacob to identify. They knew Jacob

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would recognize the garment, and conclude that his beloved son Joseph had been destroyed by a wild animal (Gen. 37:31-36).

The link between the bondage in Egypt and the episode symbolized by Joseph's striped garment is explicitly stated in the Talmud (Shabbat 10b):

A person should never discriminate among his sons even to the extent of a thread [of a garment] weighing only two *selayim milat*, similar to that which Jacob gave to Joseph but not to the other brothers. This gift made the brothers jealous and caused our forefathers to go down to Egypt.

The Ba'al HaTurim (Jacob ben Asher) and Radak also make the same point.

Rashi, in his commentary on this passage, explains *ketonet passim* as *keli milat karpas*, a term for clothing of fine wool similar to *karpas* in the Book of Esther, and to the striped garment of Tamar in II Samuel 13:18. Thus, Rashi identifies Joseph's striped and dipped garment with the word *karpas*.

A curious tradition acknowledges this link. Rabbi Shlomo Kluger (19th century) in *Yeriot Shlomo*, his commentary on the Haggadah,² quotes in the name of the Maharshal (16th century): "He should take the *afikoman* as it is wrapped in a cloth, put it behind his back, walk four cubits in his house and say, 'Our forefathers walked so.'"³ He goes on to explain that this ceremony was to recall the way the Ishmaelites walked in a caravan when Joseph was sold to them by his brothers. He then suggests that that is how we came to Egypt. Thus, Kluger starts the Haggadah with a reminder of the sale of Joseph. However, he does not cite the *karpas* as that reminder, but instead cites the custom, still practiced by some, of beginning the Seder by walking like desert nomads.

How did *karpas* change from a fine fabric to a vegetable on the Seder plate? The sound of the word is similar to the Persian *karafs*, defined as "a plant of which a salad is made from . . . parsley⁴ . . . [and] celery."⁵ Later references to *karpas* in the Mishnah, Tosefta, and Talmud, derive it from the Greek *karpōs*, meaning "fruit" of the land or of rivers.⁶ Thus, in talmudic usage the word is similar to Greek *karpōs* and Persian or Sanskrit *kirpas*, all three Indo-European languages.⁷

This is a remarkable transmutation of a wool or linen garment into celery or parsley, used in the Seder as a symbolic reminder of Joseph's tunic. It is also an example of the principle that two things related to the same thing can represent each other. *Ketonet passim* in Genesis 37 is equated to *karpas* which in turn is related to celery or parsley, and thus celery or parsley can represent *ketonet passim*.

THE KARPAS AT THE SEDER

We do not know when the dipping and the eating of the *karpas* was introduced as the opening ceremony of the Seder. One common form of this ceremony is to dip the *karpas* -- a non-bitter vegetable such as parsley or celery -- into salt-water, vinegar, wine, or *haroset*, recite a blessing, and eat it. Is the primary emphasis the eating of the vegetable or fulfilling the requirement to dip twice during the course of the Seder? In either case, it succeeds in stimulating the children to ask questions.⁸

There is an element of confusion with regard to the vegetables that the Mishnah mentions for use at the Seder. If the main reason is to fulfill the requirement to eat *maror*, why in the Talmud is *maror* the second required vegetable, while the first one is not even identified? The next Mishnah asks why we dip at the Seder twice, and all other nights once, but provides no answer.⁹ If there are two dippings, one expects two reasons.

Zeitlin¹⁰ concludes that the dipping of the vegetables on the first night of the Passover festival symbolizes dipping into blood: first, the blood of circumcision; second, the blood of the paschal lamb. This explanation relates to the period after the Second Temple,¹¹ when there was no longer a paschal lamb and there was need for a symbolic reminder of it. However, it appears that when the *karpas* was widely introduced in the post-talmudic period, one dipping retained its ancient symbolic meaning but the other acquired a new meaning. It was no longer a symbol of the paschal lamb, but of the blood into which Joseph's garment was dipped.

There is no evidence of this vegetable ceremony being called *karpas* until the 11th century, around or shortly after the time of Rashi. He was the first known source to suggest the connection between the *karpas* and Joseph's garment. The Seder mnemonic order (*kadesh, urhatz, karpas*, etc.) in *Mahzor Vit-*

ry is specifically attributed to Rashi.¹² However, the ceremony conceivably dates from an earlier time, and Rashi may only have recorded an old tradition with which he was familiar.

Support for an earlier date for the *karpas* ceremony comes from Amram Gaon (9th century) who refers to *karpas* as a specific vegetable eaten at the Seder.¹³ His inclusion of *karpesa* (the Aramaic form) among these vegetables is the oldest record of a tradition relating to *karpas* at the Seder. Amram was the primary source¹⁴ for *Sefer haMinhag* of Avraham ben Natan Ha'yarkhi (12th-13th century), who transformed the list of several vegetables to "he takes a vegetable like *karpas*, or any other vegetable," thus indicating a known tradition.

The liquid into which the *karpas* was dipped varied in different places and times. Mordechai ben Hillel HaCohen (13th century)¹⁵ suggested that it should be vinegar¹⁶ or wine. The Rambam held that the *karpas* should be dipped into *haroset*¹⁷ mixed with red vinegar to make it red.¹⁸ Yemenite Jews dip the *karpas* into *haroset* made of raisin-wine or wine-vinegar.¹⁹ The Jerusalem Talmud mentions an opinion that *haroset* for dipping commemorates blood.²⁰ *Haroset* today is still made with red wine,²¹ and many Persian Jews dip the *karpas* into red-wine vinegar.²²

Prior to the twelfth century, red wine was traditionally used during the Seder. During the same century, European Jews were accused of using the blood of Christian children in their Seder rituals (i.e., the blood libel), and therefore out of fear of such accusations they began to use white wine instead. Therefore, the red-wine tradition persisted only among non-European Jews.²³ Thus a long and varied tradition has the *karpas* dipped into a blood-substitute, as a reminder of the sale of Joseph into slavery and of the enslavement of the Israelites.

Manoah of Narbonne (13th-14th century) more explicitly points out the connection between the *karpas* and Joseph's striped garment: "And we have the custom of *karpas* [placed on the Seder plate] as a reminder of the striped garment which Jacob our forefather made for Joseph, and which was the indirect cause for our fathers to go down into Egypt."²⁴ Some of his text is word-for-word from Talmud Shabbat (10b), cited by Rashi. Hayyim Yosef David Azulai

(18th-19th century)²⁵ and others cite Manoah as the first to give this interpretation of the *karpas*. Joseph Hayyim ben Elijah Al-Hakam (19th-20th century) in his book *Ben Ish Hai*²⁶ also connects the *karpas* with Joseph's garment.

WHY WAS THE ORIGIN OF THE *KARPAS* CEREMONY KEPT SECRET OR SUPPRESSED ?

What the brothers did to Joseph was a direct violation of everything for which Judaism stands. Kidnapping is prohibited in the Torah: *He who stole a person from his brothers, the sons of Israel, and sold him -- that thief shall be executed* (Deut. 24:7). The crime committed by the forefathers of Israel was therefore problematic for the sages, and there are many attempts in talmudic and midrashic literature to deal with it.²⁷ From one perspective, it would have been inappropriate to begin the Seder, on the joyous holiday of freedom, with a reminder that the story started with a kidnapping that led to a descent into enslavement. If the children heard this story told explicitly, they might ask four very different questions. It was natural not to emphasize this part of the story, and to focus instead on the redemption from Egypt in order to accomplish one of the primary objectives of the Seder, the education of the children. Therefore, the origin of our sojourn in Egypt is represented symbolically by the dipping of *karpas*.

NOTES

1. F. Streinglass, *Persian-English Dictionary* (Beirut: 1892) p. 1021; Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, ed. E. Leumann and C. Cappeller (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1899) pp. 275-76.
2. Jacob Emden, *Siddur Beit Yacov* (Lemberg: 1914) p. 231.
3. "veyotzi ha'afikoman kemo shehu karuch bemapah ve'yeshalshel leahorav ve'yelech ba'bayit dalet amot ve'yomer 'Kach hayu avoteinu holchim . . .'"
4. Streinglass, p. 1023
5. S. Haim, *New Persian Dictionary* (Teheran: Baruchim, 1968) p. 627.
6. "vehakarpas shebaneharot" (Mishnah Shvi'it 9:1).
7. The list of Indo-European roots in the *American Heritage Dictionary* (1969) p. 1522, explains *kerp-* (var. *karp-*) as a common root meaning "to gather, pluck, harvest." None of the etymological dictionaries that we have consulted suggests any etymological connection between the Greek *karpos* (fruit) and the Greek *karpasos* (flax/linen or cotton). The Septuagint translates the *karpas* of Esther 1:6 as *karpasinos* (adj. of *karpasos*). It translates *ketonet passim* of II Samuel 13:18 as *karpotos* (a tunic reaching to the waist). See also, Y. Kutscher, *Milim V'toldoteihem* (Jerusalem: 1961) p. 99.

We wish to thank Thomas F. McDaniel for his help with the linguistics of *karpas*.

8. Pesakhim 114b. Haim Benish, *Haggadah shel Pesach: Iyunei Haggadah* (Bnei Brak: 1989) pp. 50-57.
9. Abarbanel: Zevach Pesach, A commentary to the Haggadah, seventh gate (Bnei Brak, 1962), p. 6.
10. Solomon Zeitlin, "The Liturgy of the First Night of Passover," *Jewish Quarterly Review* 38 (1948) pp. 435-460.
11. Some think that the feast of the paschal lamb continued to about 120 CE. See Solomon Zeitlin, *The Rise and Fall of the Judean State* (Phila.: 1978) Vol. III, p. 233.
12. If it was Rashi who introduced the *karpas* ceremony into the Seder, it might be considered the final act of "codification" of the *Haggadah shel Pessah*. See Israel Yuval, "*Haposhkim al shtei haseifim: ha'haggadah shel pesach v'ha' paskhah ha'notzrit*," *Tarbiz* 65 (1996) pp. 5-25, in which he contends that strong polemical elements are interspersed in the Haggadah. One can certainly see the *karpas* ceremony in that light. Rashi is pushing for the historical Jewish element in the story, that of Joseph coming to Egypt because he was sold out of Eretz Yisrael, and that of Israel, in turn, being freed from slavery and going back to Eretz Yisrael. On the issue of Rashi and the polemics on Eretz Yisrael, see Harvey Sicherman and Gilad J. Gevaryahu, *Rashi and the First Crusade: Commentary, Liturgy, Legend* (forthcoming in *Judaism*). Genesis 37:3 *ketonet passim* is translated by Symmachus (2nd century CE) also as *karpas*; however, it is less likely that Rashi would have known this translation. See, *The Old Testament in Greek: On Genesis*, ed. Brook and McLean (Cambridge University Press, 1906) p. 105.
- For *Makhzor Vitry*, see Hurowitz ed. (Nuremberg: 1923) p. 263; and Yosef Tabory, *Pesach Dorot* (1996) p. 263, n. 46.
13. *Siddur Rav Amram Gaon*, ed. D. Goldschmidt (Jerusalem: Mosad HaRav Kook, 1971) p. 112.
14. Itshak Raphael, Introduction to *Sefer haMinhagim* (Jerusalem: Mosad HaRav Kook, 1994) p. 30.
15. In the commentary to Pesakhim, section called "*Seder shel Pesach*", the Beit Yosef quotes him in the *Tur Orah Hayyim*, Hilchot Pesach 473. The end of the sentence reads: ומצאתי שיש עושין אותו במי מלח, which suggests R. Karo was surprised to find a new custom of dipping the *karpas* into salt water. Conversely, this remark could suggest the rarity of the salt-water custom. Coming from a Sephardic background, R. Karo was familiar with the dipping of the *karpas* into red substances, while Rabeinu Tam, from Ashkenaz, is reported to have dipped the *karpas* into vinegar or salt water, and actually ruled against dipping it in *haroset*. Tosefot, s.v. M'tabel, Pesakhim 114a.
16. We assume that initially all vinegar used for the Seder was red-wine vinegar because it was more popular. The use of vinegar as a dipping agent has a long tradition (Ruth 2:14).
17. יד חזקה, *Hilchot khametz u'matzah*, 8:2
18. יד חזקה, *Hilchot khametz u'matzah*, 7:12
19. Joseph Kafih, *Halichot Teyman* (Jerusalem: 1987) p.21
20. Pesachim 10:3: זכר לדם (in remembrance of the blood). Red wine routinely represented blood in Jewish tradition; see, Deuteronomy 32:14, Genesis 49:11, Targum to Job 2:11.
21. להטיל בו תפוחים ויין: Beit Yosef, Orah Hayim 473:5; נהגין לשים בחרוסת יין אדום the "*Remah*," Orah Hayim 473:5; Karpas dipped in wine was a known staple food during the talmudic era; and *karpesa betiliya* is mentioned for its medicinal value in Avodah Zara 28a.
22. We wish to thank Ephraim Dardashti for pointing out the Persian custom to us.

מצוה לחזור; Taz to Orah Hayim 472:11; נמנעו [יהודים] מליקח יין אדום מפני עלילות שקרים בעו"ה. 23. Orah Hayim 472:11; See a detailed discussion on the "Blood libel" *Encyclopaedia Judaica* (Jerusalem: 1971) Vol. IV, p. 1120.

ואנו נוהגין בכרפס זכר לכתנות הפסים שעשה יעקב אבינו ליוסף אשר בסבתה נתגלגל הדבר וירדו אבותינו למצרים

24. Mishneh Torah, Maimonides, Rabbeinu Manoah to "*Hilhot khametz u'matzah*, 8:2 ED. Frankel (Jerusalem: 1975) p. 343. This commentary is also called *Sefer HaMenukhah*.

25. Simhat HaRegel on the word *karpas*, ed. Eshkol (Jerusalem: 1990) p. 25.

26. *Parshat Tzav*, first year (Jerusalem: 1994) p. 148.

27. For example: the following Midrash appears in the Jerusalem Talmud (Peah 1:16): Joseph told his father Jacob bad things about his brothers in the following categories: (1) eating live flesh; (2) treating the brothers born of the concubines as slaves; (3) having illicit relations with the daughters of the land. Joseph was therefore punished in each of these areas: (1) blood of an animal was used for dipping his striped tunic; (2) he himself became a slave; (3) the wife of Potiphar tempted him. In effect, the Midrash suggests that it was Joseph himself who was at fault, and that the sale was a Divine decree for the brothers to act upon. See other legends in James L. Kugel, *In Potiphar's House* (New York: Harper Collins, 1990) pp. 79-84.

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