

BERKSHIRE JEWISH VOICES

Traveling with Jewish Taste

Mortar Bored? Try a New Haroset This Passover

By Carol Goodman Kaufman



One spring evening several years ago, Joel and I hosted a party at our home. I had a wonderful time cooking up a storm, diving into my favorite hors d'oeuvres recipes. Among the different items I served that night was one particular spread. Guests made a point of raving about it to me.

What was this ambrosia? Sephardic haroset. Left over from our Passover Seder. The sticky, sweet paste symbolizes the clay and mortar with which our ancestors worked while enslaved in Egypt was a hit on the cocktail party circuit. Our MOT friends were amused. Our gentile ones came away with some new, arcane knowledge of their Jewish neighbors. I had to laugh.

Having grown up with apple, walnut, cinnamon, and sweet wine haroset, the standard Ashkenazi recipe was all I knew. That is, until I lived in Israel, where I was exposed

to the dazzling diversity of nationalities being absorbed into the Promised Land. I was bored with the same old same old. I wanted more to my mortar!

First of all, why haroset? The idea of haroset as a symbolic food first appears in the Babylonian Talmud, compiled in the 3rd to 5th century (*Pesachim* 114a). It is based on this line in Exodus 1:13-14: "The Egyptians enslaved the children of Israel with back-breaking labor, and they embittered their lives with hard labor, with clay and with bricks and with all kinds of labor in the fields – all their work that they worked with them with back-breaking labor."

There are as many recipes for the mortar as there are communities in the Diaspora, and they range from thick pastes, commemorating the clay, to runny syrups that evoke the blood of the plague and the Israelite doorposts. But, before I get to discussing those, I want to address an issue I have always had with the stuff. If haroset is indeed supposed to remind us of the bricks we made while slaves, why is it so sweet and delicious? It turns out that, in fact, there is quite a bit of discussion among the rabbis about what constitutes a proper haroset.

The dominant rabbinic opinion is that the paste is meant to remind us of the clay and mortar used by the Israelites when we were slaves in Egypt. The other position maintains that the haroset is meant to remind the modern Jewish people of the apple trees in Egypt.

Huh? Apple trees? According to these rabbis, the Israelite women quietly (and painlessly, no less!) gave birth beneath apple trees so that the Egyptians would never know that a baby boy was born that they could then murder.

At any rate, the rabbis talked about having something acidic in the mix (not Hasidic; that would just be weird). The acid serves to balance the bitterness of slavery with the optimism of redemption. Thus the addition of apples, which in ancient times were quite tart, and could explain our Ashkenazi recipe.

However (isn't there always a however?), one modern rabbi, Howard Jachter, not satisfied with the apple decision, found in his research on a totally different topic, discussion by the Tosafists that identifies the *tapuah*, or apple, as in fact etrog, or citron. The lemon-like fruit would indeed be a sour addition to the mixture. But this finding brings up yet another question: hav-

ing been harvested for Sukkot, wouldn't citron have spoiled by Passover?

The origins of the some ingredients commonly used in haroset are believed to be found in *Shir HaShirim* (Song of Songs): apples, figs, pomegranates, grapes, walnuts, dates, wine, saffron, and cinnamon. In fact, although we do see some of these items in various recipes from around the Diaspora, others also appear. Egyptian Jews use dates, raisins, walnuts, cinnamon, and sweet wine. Both Greek and Turkish Jews combine apples, dates, chopped almonds, and wine. In Italy, chestnuts are part of the mix, while some Spanish and Portuguese communities add coconut. Brazilians use a completely different mixture of avocado, banana, orange, and Granny Smith apples.

In the end, it probably all comes down to ingredients that are locally available. Which apparently now includes dairy products. Just three years ago, Ben & Jerry's introduced haroset flavored ice cream in Israel – kosher for Passover, of course. If you're doing a dairy Seder, I guess you'd be good to go.

The most unusual recipe for haroset has to be one mentioned by the 13th century Italian Rabbi Zedekiah ben Avraham HaRofeh, who writes about adding finely crushed potsherds into the mix. The rationale

behind this truly bizarre recipe is etymological. Remember, the word haroset comes from *heres*, or clay. Supposedly, this recipe is meant to reinforce the idea of the clay from which the bricks were made. Lest you think this custom was unique to Italy and in that time only, Greek Rabbi Joseph David from Salonika writes in the 17th century that Jewish communities in Salonika also put a little ground potsherd or crushed stone into their *haroset*, apparently following both Rashi and his grandson, the Rashbam.

At one point in the Passover story, you will recall that the Egyptian taskmasters stopped supplying the Israelite slaves with clay, so they had to use straw. So, a traditional Yemenite recipe calls for whole herbs and spices meant to simulate the straw. While difficult to chew, that recipe bit would be a bit easier on the tummy than those requiring ground-up clay pots.

Not surprisingly, the word haroset is not a universal term. Some Jews of the Middle East instead use the term "halegh." Jews of Persian descent have an impressive tradition of including forty different ingredients in their halegh, meant to symbolize the 40 years of wandering in the desert.

No matter which recipe – or several – you use at your Seder, I wish you all a happy and healthy Passover.

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Egyptian Haroset: No Potsherds Needed

Makes about 4 cups

As long as we're celebrating our liberation from slavery in Egypt, why not try an Egyptian recipe for haroset? Super easy to make, and delicious to boot. You can use any leftover as a spread on matzah – or even as hors d'oeuvres!

Ingredients:

- 1 pound dark raisins
- 8 oz. pitted dates – Medjool are best
- Water
- ¼ cup sugar
- ¼ cup chopped almonds

Directions:

- Combine raisins and dates in a bowl.
- Add enough water to cover. Cover with plastic wrap. Let stand overnight.
- Drain.
- Place mixture in food processor with sugar.
- Process until mixture is well chopped.
- Turn into bowl.
- Sprinkle chopped almonds over all.
- Serve.



Carol Goodman Kaufman is a psychologist and author with a passion for travel and food. She is currently at work on a food history/cookbook, tracing the paths that some of our favorite foods have taken from their origins to appear on dinner plates and in cultural rites and artifacts around the world. She invites readers to read her blog at carolgoodmankaufman.com and to follow her on Twitter @goodmankaufman.