

What's the Truth about ... Using Horseradish for Maror?

By Ari Z. Zivotofsky

Misconception: Horseradish (*chraim*) is the preferred item to use to fulfill the mitzvah of eating *maror* at the Seder.

Fact: Among Ashkenazim, horseradish is widely used for *maror*. While horseradish often appears as the translation for *tamcha*, one of the vegetables listed in the Mishnah that may be used for *maror*, the translation is probably inaccurate.¹ Although horseradish is now considered acceptable for use at the Seder, according to many *posekim*, lettuce and endives are preferable.

Background: The Torah requires that the *korban Pesach*, both on Pesach (Shemot 12:8) and Pesach Sheni (Bamidbar 9:11), be eaten with matzah and *maror*. These days, in the absence of the Beit Hamikdash, we do not eat the *korban Pesach*, but there is still a rabbinic requirement for both men and women (SA OC 472:14) to eat *maror* on Seder night.²

What is *maror*? The Mishnah (*Pesachim* 2:6; 39a) lists the following five vegetables that may be used as *maror*: *chazeret*, *ulshin*, *tamcha*, *char-chavina* and *maror*.³ Because the Mishnah does not provide the identities of the vegetables, the Gemara provides further detail.

Heading the list, and presumably the preferred item (according to many

authorities, the Mishnah lists these items in order of preference),⁴ is *chazeret*. The Gemara identifies this as *chasah*, the modern Hebrew word for lettuce, and there is little doubt that the Mishnaic *chazeret* is lettuce (*Lactuca sativa*). Lettuce is a winter plant in Israel and thus was, and is, readily available in time for Pesach. Israel's "wild lettuce" (*Lactuca serriola*) neither looks nor tastes like the lettuce sold in American supermarkets. It consists of a central stalk with loose, prickly dark green leaves; it continues to grow wild in Israel. The lettuce is bitter, especially as it ages, and when its stalk is cut, it oozes a considerable amount of white, bitter sap. Early cultivated lettuce had this same sap. It might be worthwhile when visiting Israel to seek out some wild lettuce and sample its bitterness.

The second item, *ulshin*, translated as *hindvei*, is nearly universally understood to refer to endives.⁵ Next is *tamcha*, which the Gemara calls *temachta* and whose specific identity is uncertain.

Throughout Southern and Western Europe and the Mediterranean countries, lettuce, endives and similar vegetables were used for *maror*, and continue to be used today.

For the Jews in Northern and Eastern Europe this was not always an option. As Jews moved further north and east into colder climates, it became increasingly difficult to acquire lettuce

and other leafy vegetables in time for Pesach.

In modern Hebrew, horseradish (*Armoracia rusticana*) is called *chazeret*, the first term on the Mishnah's list. While *tamcha*, the third item, is often translated in rabbinic literature as horseradish,⁶ it is fairly certain that this translation is inaccurate, because it is unlikely that horseradish existed in the Middle East in the Talmudic period. Furthermore, horseradish is sharp rather than bitter.⁷

Horseradish is first mentioned⁸ in rabbinic literature by Rabbi Eliezer ben Natan of Mainz (c.1090-c.1170) and the Rokeach, Rabbi Eliezer of Worms (c.1165-c.1230), both of whom refer to it not as *maror*, but as an ingredient in *charoset*! *Tosafot Yom Tov* (*Pesachim* 2:6) and *Hagahot Maimoniot* (*Chametz Umatzah* 7:13) were among the earliest works to identify *tamcha* as horseradish.

The fact that horseradish may not be found in the Mishnaic list does not necessarily preclude it from being used as *maror*. After all, it is uncertain whether the Mishnaic list is exhaustive; it may simply be illustrative. Indeed, the Gemara cites two *beraitot*, each of which provides different lists of vegetables that can be used for *maror*. Some rabbinic opinions state that only plants that were known as "*maror*" in the Biblical period—as attested by inclusion in a *mishnah* or *beraita*—are acceptable as *maror*. According to those opinions, the lists

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found in the Mishnah and the *beraitot* are indeed exhaustive, and the only herbs acceptable for *maror* are those for which there exists an unbroken tradition (*mesoret*) identifying them as being part of the Mishnaic lists (see *SA Harav* 473:27; *MA OC* 473:15; *Chok Yaakov OC* 473:24 and *Chayei Adam* 130:3). Ironically, many of these authorities who demand a *mesoret* are those who approve of horseradish for *maror* because they identify it with *tamcha*.

Other statements in the Gemara indicate that any pale green vegetable that oozes a milk-white liquid upon being cut is acceptable. Rashi (Shemot 12:8) writes that any bitter herb is called *maror*.⁹ The Gemara even asserts that were it not for a Scriptural exclusion, non-plants would be acceptable as *maror*. One of the items the Gemara suggests could have been used as *maror* is the gall bladder of the kufya fish, identified by Rabbeinu Chananel as the famous shibuta.¹⁰ Rema (*OC* 473:5) rules that in the absence of an acceptable vegetable, any bitter vegetable should be used, albeit without a *berachah* (*MB* 473:46).

Another concern with fulfilling the mitzvah of *maror* with horseradish is that the root is used. The Mishnah states (*Pesachim* 39a) that one should fulfill the obligation to eat *maror* with either the leaves or the stem of the plant; the *Shulchan Aruch* rules similarly, emphasizing “not the root” (*SA OC* 473:5). The irony, of course, is that in the colder northern climates where the Ashkenazim had migrated, horseradish was available precisely because it is a root—and not a leafy—plant. Some authorities excluded using the small roots of plants for *maror* but permitted using large roots (such as those of horseradish). These rabbis asserted that large roots are merely extensions of the stem.¹¹

Flying in the face of rabbinic opposition, the use of horseradish for *maror* continued to spread among the masses of Eastern European Jewry to the extent that by the eighteenth century it was being used even in places

where leafy vegetables could be obtained. Some authorities, such as Rav Shlomo Ganzfried (1804-1886; *Kitzur Shulchan Aruch* 118:3), bemoaned this situation and advocated using lettuce when possible.

Rav Tzvi Ashkenazi (1660-1718; *Shu”t Chacham Tzvi* 119) provides a wonderful summary of this topic. He explains that horseradish came to be used for *maror* either because lettuce was not available in cold climates¹² or because those dwelling far from Israel lost the ability to identify the correct species of lettuce. He then laments the conundrum that this situation caused. He writes, “Those who are not careful about keeping *mitzvot* do not fulfill their obligation to eat the required amount of *maror* because horseradish is too sharp, while those who try to be meticulous about keeping *mitzvot* eat the requisite amount¹³ and thereby endanger their health.”¹⁴ He goes on to decry the fact that horseradish was even being used in parts of Germany and Amsterdam, where leafy vegetables are available during the spring.

That lettuce was the preferred choice was never forgotten among Eastern European Jewry, and thus customs developed wherein both vegetables were used. For example, some people would use lettuce for *maror* and horseradish for *korach*.¹⁵ It is reported that Rav Yosef Dov Soloveitchik would eat horseradish and then lettuce to fulfill the mitzvah of *maror*.

The ultimate legitimization of horseradish use occurred in 1822 when Rav Moshe Sofer wrote that horseradish may indeed be preferable to lettuce, but for an ancillary reason: It is difficult to clean the lettuce of bugs (*Chatam Sofer, OC*:132; cited in *Mishnah Berurah* 473:42). He wrote that it would be wrong to violate the Biblical prohibition against eating bugs in order to fulfill the rabbinic mitzvah to eat *maror*.

Others preferred horseradish over lettuce for another reason. They argued that there are various types of lettuce, and today we are unsure which type(s) the Mishnah was referring to (Lewy, pp.

301 and 303). Thus, for example, Rabbi Yosef Eliyahu Henkin wrote in *Ezrat Torah Luach* that we can be confident that horseradish is indeed one of the five bitter herbs mentioned in the Mishnah but that there are doubts as to whether the various types of lettuce available today meet the criteria of the “lettuce”¹⁶ referred to in the Mishnah.

Dr. Ari Schaffer of the Volcani Institute for Agricultural Research, in Israel, insightfully points out that using horseradish for *maror* affords a double symbolism: the original meaning of the bitter bondage in Egypt and the additional reminder of our people’s long and distant wandering away from the land of the Bible and Mishnah, the Land of Israel.

Many people use horseradish simply because they are bothered by the lack of a bitter taste in lettuce. After all, the mitzvah of *maror* seems to be based on the fact that the Egyptians embittered (*vayemareru*) the lives of the Israelites (Shemot 1:14). The Gemara (*Pesachim* 39a), also seemingly troubled by the preference for lettuce, explains that the word lettuce (in Hebrew), *chasah*, is similar to *chas*,¹⁷ to take pity, and that it reminds us that God took pity on the Jews in Egypt. The Gemara further explains that lettuce parallels the Egyptian experience. Just as lettuce starts out soft and then hardens as it ages, so too the Egyptian servitude began with soft words and ended harshly. (See *Torah Temimah*, Shemot 1:14, note 19.) The *Yerushalmi* (*Pesachim* 2:5) states this same idea in a slightly different way: *Chazeret* starts out sweet and becomes bitter as it grows. In either case, it is important that while eating the *maror* one remember its associations. Rabban Gamliel’s famous statement (*Pesachim* 10:5; 116b) is read at the Seder so that all understand the significance of the *maror*.

The Gemara seems to require that lettuce have some bitterness. Therefore, the Gemara states that dried stalks are acceptable for *maror* but dried leaves that lack a bitter taste are not. However the Beit Yosef (on Tur *OC* 473) rules

that even if the lettuce is sweet, it is the preferred *maror*. The Chazon Ish (*OC* 124, p. 39), who personally used ground horseradish (Korman, note 11), rules that when using lettuce one should use mature heads that have a bitter taste. Rav Menashe Klein¹⁸ disagrees and says that the practice among Jews is not to distinguish between sweet and bitter, and all types of lettuce are acceptable. Similarly, the *Shulchan Aruch Harav* (473:27); the *Aruch Hashulchan* (473:15) and Rav Moshe Feinstein (*Kol Dodi* 15:19) all state that lettuce—even if it is sweet—is preferable to horseradish.

Rav Moshe Sternbuch (*Teshuvot Vehanhagot* 2, p. 238) rhetorically asks where it is stated that horseradish must be eaten when “it is so bitter that one will almost throw up.” He suggests that after grinding the horseradish, one should leave it uncovered¹⁹ for several hours so that it loses most of its bitterness and becomes edible. Of course, he cautions, it should not be left uncovered so long that it totally loses its sharpness.

Another way to assuage the guilt of the lettuce eater is to re-examine the reason behind the commandment to eat *maror*. Nowhere does the Torah directly link *maror* with the bitter experience in Egypt. In fact, if this were the reason for eating *maror*, then the Biblical obligation to eat *maror* would have remained even when we could no longer bring the *korban Pesach*. Indeed, the Ohr Hachaim (on Exodus 12:8; also see Ibn Ezra’s comments on the verse) suggests that the Biblical obligation to eat *maror* is because it served as a condiment to be eaten along with the roasted sacrificial meat. In his weekly e-mail *parashah* sheet, Rabbi Andrew Schein, of Modi’in, has suggested that this rationale is the basis for the fulfillment of *maror* with lettuce, as the lettuce makes the meal complete: matzah, meat and vegetables. With this approach there is no need for lettuce to be particularly bitter. Furthermore, Rabbi Schein has suggested that Rabban Gamliel’s statement linking *maror* with the bitter experience may be a rationale for the

rabbinic enactment of *maror*, but this “new” reason did not invalidate the use of the Biblically acceptable vegetables (lettuce or endives) even if the Biblical obligation of *maror* was no longer applicable.

In summary, there are sufficient grounds for doubting horseradish’s inclusion in the Mishnaic list. Furthermore, even if we were to concede that *tamcha* refers to horseradish, it is still listed after lettuce in the presumed order of preference. Moreover, horseradish is sharp not bitter, and its root—rather than its leaves—are eaten. Despite all this, family customs should not quickly be abandoned, and horseradish has a long-standing place at the Seder. There may even be reasons to prefer horseradish to lettuce (e.g., difficulty of cleaning lettuce of bugs), but given a choice that does not tamper with a family tradition, it would seem that on Seder night horseradish may be the choice condiment to go with gefilte fish but not to fulfill the mitzvah of *maror*.²⁰

Notes

1. For more details on this topic, see Arthur (Ari) Schaffer, “The History of Horseradish as the Bitter Herb of Passover,” *Gesher* 8 (1981): 217-237; Yehuda Feliks, “The Identification of Two Categories of Bitter Herb—*Hazeret* and *Tamkhal*” (Hebrew), *BDD* 1 (summer 1995): 71-90; Avraham Korman, “*Maror*: *Chasab* or *Chrain*,” *HaMa’ayan* (Nisan 5754): 43-51; Yosef Shores, “On Eating *Chrain* on the Seder Night,” *HaMa’ayan* (Tammuz 5754): 64; Josef Lewy, *Minhag Yisrael Torah* 2 (5753), 300-304 and Rabbi Matis Blum, *Torah Lodaas* (New York, 1991), 187-190.

2. On the status of the mitzvah today, see Rava’s statement on *Pesachim* 120a; Rambam, *Chametz Umatzah* 7:12; *MB* 473:33. See *SA Harav OC* 475:15, which states that the eating of *maror* today is *zecher leMikdash*.

3. In the Talmud, the order is somewhat different. Also, the last item mentioned—*maror*—refers to a specific

vegetable, and is not a generic term.

4. See *SA OC* 473:5 and *Aruch Hashulchan OC* 473:13. This seems to be based on Rashi’s understanding of Ravina’s question to Rav Acha b’rei deRava as to why he was looking for “*maror*” (the fifth item on the list), when *chazeret* was listed first and was available. Confronted with this question, Rav Acha b’rei deRava stopped looking (*Pesachim* 39a).

5. Endives (*Cichorium endiva*) and chicory (*Cichorium intybus*) are closely related and acceptable for *maror*, but not often used. Belgian endive is the same species as chicory and is used for *maror* by some people.

6. See e.g., *MB* 473:42 and *Sha’ar Hatziyun* 473:46.

7. Aware of the difference, the Talmud uses the word “*mar*” for bitter and “*charif*” for sharp.

8. See Schaffer, note 26, for the origin of the name horseradish.

9. The Nachlat Yaakov, quoted in *Leket Bahir*, says that Rashi is explicitly ruling that one need not only use the five listed, but could use any bitter herb to fulfill the mitzvah.

10. See Zohar Amar and Ari Zivotofsky, “Identification of the Shibuta Fish” (Hebrew), *HaMa’ayan* 45, no. 3 (Nisan 5765): 41-46.

11. The *Magen Avraham* (473:12; cited in *MB* 473:36 and *AH OC* 473:14). In addition, it seems that in some places, when people first began using horseradish, they used the leaves.

12. The *Aruch Hashulchan* (*OC* 473:13), writing in nineteenth-century Lithuania, says explicitly: “In our country we use horseradish because lettuce is not available before Pesach, except in the courtyards of the princes.”

13. According to the *Shulchan Aruch* (*OC* 475:1), the required amount is a *kezayit* (olive size). For a fascinating debate regarding the minimum amount of *maror* one is required to eat, see *Sha’agot Aryeh* (100); Chatam Sofer (*OC* 140); Avnei Neizer (*OC* 383); Sho’el Umashiv (*Mahadurah Shtiti’a* 10); *Sha’arei Teshuvah* (end of 475) and *Iggerot Moshe* (*OC* 3:66).

14. For discussions regarding boiling or grinding horseradish, see *MB* 473:36 and *Sh'ar Hatziyun* 473:46. See Korman, p. 47; Blum, p. 188 and Lewy, pp. 303-304 for other sources.


15. See Schaffer, note 74.

16. The lettuce referred to is probably more similar to romaine lettuce than the popular iceberg lettuce. Nonetheless, it is reported that Rav Aharon Kotler used iceberg lettuce for *maror* (Rabbi Shimon D. Eider, *Halachos of Pesach* 2 [New Jersey, 1985], p. 234, note 23).

17. According to Targum Onkelos and others, the meaning of Pesach is to have mercy. See Ari Zivotofsky, "What's the Truth about ... the Meaning of 'Pesach'?", *Jewish Action* (spring 2004): 58-59.

18. *Mishneh Halachoth* 6, no. 92, pp. 99-100. See also vol. 7, no. 68, pp. 107-110 for his rationale. See also Lewy, pp. 301-302.

19. This would have been anathema to all of my grandparents, as it was for the Gra (see *MB* 473:36). Rav Sternbuch's ruling is similar to that of Rav Moshe Feinstein (*Kol Dodi* 15:14).

20. All the proofs in the world often do not succeed in changing a long-standing practice. It seems that the Netziv was unable to persuade his son Rav Chaim Berlin (5592-5672), who had made *aliyah* and thus had access to leafy vegetables, to use lettuce instead of horseradish. (See his fascinating letter in Korman, note 10.) 

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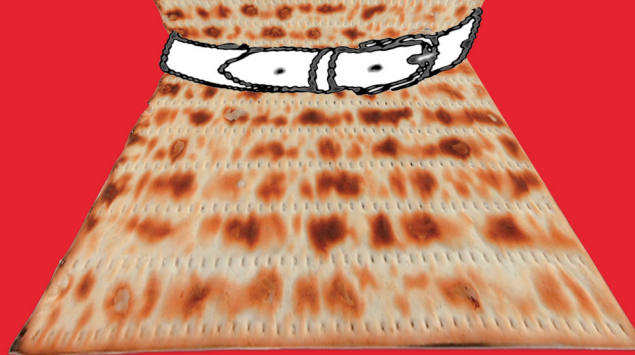
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