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Maror

‘The use of the plural form marrorim reflects that many items are acceptable for the commandment and not simply a plant called maror. The Talmud (Pesachim 39a) revealed that it must be a vegetable and enumerated their characteristic features -- any bitter herbage that possesses seraft ('white' sap) and has a pale (grayish) green appearance, thereby excluding vegetables that are bright green. In regards to the coloring, Rashi elucidated, It does not have the dark green color of leeks, but is pale (dull/light) green. He translated seraft into Old French as laiton (milky). Similarly, the Korban Ha-Eidah (David Frankel) in his commentary on the Jerusalem Talmud (Pesachim 2:5,18a) noted, If you cut it in a thick place there exudes from it a white liquid like milk; all of these are the signs of maror. Thus candidates for maror are limited to those plants that are a dull/light green in color and possess a white latex sap (or at least their ancestors did in Talmudic times), which severely limits the possibilities.

In addition, all of the possibilities for maror share a similar pattern -- after the winter rains cease in Israel, these plants push upwards from the ground in time for Passover, sporting relatively mild-flavored leaves, which when mature form a hard central stalk as the leaves become tough and bitter. The Talmud (Pesachim 39a) notes, Why are the Egyptians compared to maror? To teach that just as this maror is at the first soft but at its end is hard, so too the Egyptians at the beginning were soft but at the end were hard (harsh). Only the kelach (stalk) and leaves, but not the root, are valid for the maror (Pesachin 39b). When using the stalk, it may be moist or dry, while the leaves must always be moist. The Talmud also noted that the bitter herb cannot be pickled or cooked for use at the Seder, but must be raw.

The Mishnah (Pesachim 2:6) listed five items that, having met those qualifications, could be used use for the bitter herb: "chazeret, ulshin, tamcha, charchavina, and maror. The Gemorah concluded that the five forms of maror were listed in order of preference and that chazeret was the preferable vegetable. The order may also reflect the degree of bitterness, with chazeret being the mildest of the group. As with many Biblical and Talmudic flora, the identities of these five have become less certain over the course of time due to changes in locales, language, diet, and the plants themselves.

There is unanimity that chazeret refers to lettuce, an annual herb native to the eastern Mediterranean region. Egyptian hieroglyphics reveal that lettuce was being consumed at least 4,500 years ago. This vegetable, however, has changed dramatically since that time. Rudimentary lettuce, originally culled wild from the fields, consisted of an elongated central stalk sporting loose prickly, red-tinged light green leaves. The ribs of wild lettuce contained a considerable amount of white latex sap, hence the source of its Latin name, lactuca (milky). It was also rather bitter, particularly when mature, sometimes requiring boiling to be palatable. The plant was finally cultivated around 800 B.C.E., eventually becoming more like modern lettuce. Nevertheless, it remained primarily a seasonal item and, during the fall and winter, a luxury, as reflected in a Talmudic (Avodah Zarah 11a) sign of Rabbi Yehudah HaNasis wealth (died c. 220
It was the Romans who developed the now common head lettuce and also gradually reduced or entirely bred out much of the crimson, latex, and bitterness from most varieties. The Moors brought the vegetable to Spain and were credited with developing the modern form of Romaine, also called Cos in Britain after the Mediterranean island of Cos. Modern Romaine has an upright elongated head; the dark green outer leaves coarse and slightly bitter with heavy midribs, while the small, light-green or yellowish inner ones are crunchy and sweet. Romaine has long been the standard maror in many Sephardic homes, a role it has recently gained among an increasing number of Ashkenazim. Iceberg lettuce, bland and pale, was only introduced in 1894 and lacks any of the traditional attributes of maror. The Tur (Orech Chaim 473) ruled, the best way to fulfill the commandment is with lettuce; if lettuce in not available choose from the others in the list, their order also being the order of preference.

If lettuce, especially when young, is not overly bitter, why was it the preferred plant for maror? The Jerusalem Talmud (Pesachim 2:5, 18a) explained the symbolism, Just as lettuce is first sweet (when young), then bitter (after going to seed) so was the behavior of the Egyptians to our ancestors. Thus the Chazon Ish insisted on using only mature, bitter heads of lettuce for maror, although most authorities permit younger, less bitter plants. For lettuce is also symbolic of God's mercy (Pesachim 39a), its Hebrew name, chassah, a homophone for the Hebrew meaning protection/compassion, this attribute another root for the term pesach. A merciful result of using lettuce is that it requires the Seder participants to only have a taste of bitterness, not to actually suffer. Perhaps the red tinge on rudimentary lettuce in biblical times, which was generally bred out by the Talmudic period, also provided a visual symbol, a reminder of the blood, while the white sap was reminiscent of mothers milk and compassion.

Ulashin is either endive or chicory or both, since the two close relatives, members of the Asteraceae family, have long been confused with each other. Hindvei, the Talmudic synonym (Pesachim 39a) for ulshin and the more widely understood term for this plant at that time, is obviously a cognate of endive, as is the Arabic word for endive, hindab. Rashi translated it in Old French as crespele (related to curly), also reflecting endive. (Similarly, the English word crisp is derived by way of French from the Latin for curled.) The Talmud assumed plain ulshin to refer to garden (cultivated) endive and ulshin of the field to denote wild endive, the former possibly referring to endive and the latter to chicory. The Mishnah (Kilayim 1:2) noted that ulshin of the field (wild) and garden ulshin are considered as one species in regards to kilayim (sowing separate species).

As late as Talmudic times, endive and chicory looked rather similar to each other. One of the primary differences between the two cousins is that chicory is a perennial (a life cycle lasting more than two
years), while endive is annual or sometimes biennial (a two-year life cycle). The Roman naturalist Pliny the Elder (Natural History, XIX 8:129) noted that chicory was darker and more bitter than endive. Not surprisingly, the ancients preferred the latter to chicory. Similar to lettuce, chicory and endive both are milder when young, in the early spring corresponding to Passover, and grow very bitter with age; chicory more bitter. In Talmudic times, the leaves and stems also contained a milky sap, an attribute found as well in many feral descendants.

Wild chicory (Cichorium intybus), which still grows in parts of Israel, is much like wild lettuce in appearance. The plant has long, narrow, serrated leaves growing close to the ground spreading out into a rosette. After chicory was first cultivated in the 16th century, it developed into larger and less bitter leaves. Modern chicory forms loose heads of bitter, narrow, ragged-edged, light green leaves that are white nearer the heart and milder near the center.

Endive, possibly a hybrid of chicory and Cichorium pumilum, also called dwarf chicory, or possibly a cultivated subspecies of Cichorium pumilum, had already developed into a distinct species in prehistoric times. Endive now consists of two cultivated sub-species - escarole and curly endive. Escarole (Cichorium endivia var. latifolium), also called scarole, broadleaf endive, and Batavian endive, has flat, broad, murky green leaves that form a loose head. It is the least bitter member of the chicory family with a milder flavor and coarser texture than curly endive. Curly endive (Cichorium endivia var. crispum), also called frise (French for curly), sometimes mistakenly called chicory, was first recorded in 1586. It consists of a loose head of rather bitter, narrow, curly, green outer leaves that become yellowish/whitish and slightly milder toward the core. Belgian endive (witloof chicory) is not a separate species of endive, but the same plant as chicory that has been treated differently. Introduced in Brussels in 1850, it was, according to legend, discovered when a Belgian farmer threw some chicory roots into a shed and, in the spring, noticed that the roots had grown yellow-tipped white shoots. Radicchio (red chicory) is another relatively recent form of chicory. Although both are bitter, since neither of them are green, they fail to fulfill that characteristic of maror.

Both endive and chicory were common in ancient Egypt and most certainly could have been used for the first Seder. The Talmud (Pesachim 39a) acknowledged both wild ulshin and garden (cultivated) ulshin as acceptable for maror. The Italian scholar Ovadiah Bertinoro (1450-1516) asserted in his commentary on the Misnah that ulshin is endive and most subsequent authorities agreed, although the terms endive and chicory were frequently employed interchangeably. Pointedly, Pinchas Kehati in his contemporary edition of the Mishnah, translated ulshin as tzeekoreem (endive in modern Hebrew), which he specified as endive in French, and not olesh (modern Hebrew for chicory). Considering the kinship and confusion of chicory, endive, and escarole, it is hardly surprising that each is used as maror in various Sephardic and Mizrachi (Oriental) households.
In line with the Talmudic depiction of maror, all of the early rabbinic authorities considered tamcha, similar to the other four kinds of maror, to be some sort of leafy dull-green herb. Rambam (Commentary to Mishnah Pesachim) viewed it as garden endive. Pointedly, Rashi (Pesachim 39a) translated it as marrubie in Old French, which is horehound (Marrubium vulgare). Similarly, the Arukh (Saadiah Ibn Danan; second half of 15th century) identified tamcha as horehound. The Jerusalem Talmud (Pesachim 2:5,18a) translated it as gingidin. This could refer to Daucus gingidium, a member of the Apiaceae family and close relative of the carrot that looks something like chervil and grows near the Mediterranean coast. However, this plant lacks some of the essential characteristics of maror. Thus one of the predominant commentators on the Jerusalem Talmud, David Frankel (Korban ha-Eidah) of Berlin explained that gingidin is marrubie. Hence the leading candidate for tamcha is horehound, also called white horehound and, in Arabic, hashishat al kalib, a plant whose primary usage today is in cough medicine and liqueurs. Its Latin designation (Marrubium vulgare) is a cognate of the ancient Hebrew name for the plant, marrob. In modern Hebrew, horehound is called Marrubion mtzoi; the latter word meaning common. Its English name, a misspelling of hoarhound, derived from the hoary (grayish) color of its foliage. This member of the Lamiaceae family, reaching about 2 feet in height, has bitter, crinkled, wooly, grayish-green leaves. Pointedly, horehound also contains a latex sap.

This identification of tamcha generally comes as a surprise to the many contemporary Ashkenazim who currently mistranslate it as horseradish. Indeed, horseradish root seems a most unlikely candidate for a bitter herb, being neither bitter nor an herb. The fleshy horseradish root, a member of the mustard family, is pungent and fiery, not bitter, a completely different taste. Even the horseradish leaves possess a sharp, somewhat mustard-like taste and not a bitterness. The requirement for maror is only leaves or stalks, but, for culinary purposes, horseradish is a root. Although the top of the root may stick above the ground, that does not make it a stalk. Horseradish also lacks the other characteristics prescribed by the Talmud -- latex sap and dull green foliage; horseradish leaves are dark green. Moreover, the consumption of an amount of raw unprocessed horseradish, whether whole or ground, equaling a kazayit (olive) would generally prove dangerous if not impossible.

Indeed, horseradish (Armoracia rusticana), a native of southern Russia, was unknown in Israel in Talmudic times and was only adopted for use as maror when Jews found themselves in colder climes of northern Europe and bereft of early spring greens and the advanced agronomy of the Mediterranean. Pointedly, horseradish was not mentioned in Ashkenazic sources until they began moving into eastern Germany. No early Ashkenazic authority referred to horseradish as maror or identified it with tamchah. Interestingly, the earliest verification of horseradish in a rabbinic source, Rabbi Eliezer ben Nathan of Mainz (c. 1090-1170), refers to its use as an ingredient in charoset and not for maror. The first written record to permit using horseradish for morar, but only when the preferable lettuce was unavailable, was by Israel ben Joel Susslin of Erfurt (14th century). Subsequently, as Jews moved further north and greens became impractical, horseradish became a norm. The practice developed among Germans to use whole
pieces of horseradish, while Eastern Europeans generally insisted on grating it. Nonetheless, many Ashkenazic authorities, such as Joel Sirkes (1561-1640) of Poland in (Bayit Chadash/Bach, Orec Chaim 483) continued to prohibit horseradish for the maror. To further complicate matters, horseradish is called chazeret in modern Hebrew. Today with plenty of fresh greens at their disposal, many Ashkenazim have reverted to using the Talmudic chazeret, although some combine romaine lettuce with horseradish to maintain the tradition.

There is an opinion in the Talmud (Pesachim 39a) that charchavina is the creeping vine that grows around palm trees. Rashi translated it as the unknown vedille in Old French. Rambam (Commentary to Mishnah Pesachim) identified it as a species of bitter grass. Alfasi (1013-1103) and the Italian commentator Ovadiah Bertinoro (1450-1516), in his remarks on the Mishnah, used the Arabic term al-kartzina, which is eryngium. In this vein, Pinchas Kehati in his modern edition of the Mishnah translated charchavina as eryngium. However, to further complicate the situation, this could refer to either of two members of the Umbelliferae family: field eryngo or sea eryngo. Field eryngo (Eryngium creticum), called erygion in Greek and charchavina machilah in modern Hebrew, is a perennial herb thistle that grows up to 3 feet (90 cm) in the dry soils of fields and rocky places around the Mediterranean. The plant bears bitter, toothed, heart-shaped gray-green leaves that, when young, are soft and edible. As the plant ages, the leaves turn dry, hard, blue, and spiny. The smaller sea eryngo (Eryngium maritimum) is also called sea-holly and, in modern Hebrew, charchavina chofeet. As its name indicates, this perennial grows near the maritime areas along the Mediterranean and Atlantic. Sea eryngo, which reaches a height of about 2 feet (60 cm), has spiny evergreen leaves, shaped like holly, which, when young, are generally boiled, but can be eaten raw. Shakespeare (The Merry Wives of Windsor) mentions eryngoes, referring to its candied roots. Both of these plants bear a large thistle atop erect stems, which, along with their spiny leaves, gave rise to the name charchavina, a compound of charcahr (to bore/sting) and beenah (to pierce/split).

Ironically, of the various possibilities for fulfilling the commandment of bitter herbs, the identification of the one called maror created the most disagreement and, as the last in the sequence, was the least preferable of the five. The Jerusalem Talmud (Pesachim 2:5,18a) explained that it is a bitter vegetable, silvery (over the green), and possessing seraf (white sap). The Arukh (Saadiah Ibn Danan; second half of 15th century) and Rambam viewed it as a wild lettuce, although some versions of the latter read a type of coriander. Similarly, Ovadiah Bertinoro identified it as a type of kosbar (cilantro/fresh coriander). (I am not sure if there is a connection, but the seed of the coriander is used to describe the manna.) Rashi asserted that maror was amerfoil, possibly burdock (Arctium), a broad-leaved weed, or wormwood (Absinthium), a European perennial herb with extremely bitter gray-green leaves, once used to treat indigestion and worm infestation.

Some authorities claim maror is sowthistle (Sonchus oleraceus), pointedly called murar in Arabic. The English names of this annual herb from the Asteraceae family -- hare's thistle, hare's lettuce, and
Pesach Recipes retold by Gil Marks of Blessed Memory

sowthistle -- are a reference to it being a favorite food of rabbits and pigs. The plant, which can reach up to two feet in height, bears grayish-green spiny leaves with a bitter flavor and notably the stems secrete a milky sap. Interestingly, sowthistle resembles wild lettuce (Lactuca serriola) in appearance. Although deemed to be an invasive weed in America, in the ancient world it was considered to possess numerous medicinal properties and, as the Roman naturalist Pliny the Elder related, it was also used as a food. Indeed in parts of Asia and Europe, young sowthistle leaves, considered wholesome and strengthening, are still added to salads. However, the identity of the Talmudic maror having been lost, is, therefore, no longer considered appropriate for the ritual and the application of its benediction.'

The founding editor of Kosher Gourmet magazine, Gil Marks is also a rabbi, playwright and culinary historian. He is the author of several cookbooks, including "The World of Jewish Cooking," "The World of Jewish Desserts" and "The World of Jewish Entertaining." His newest title, "Olive and Honey: A Treasury of Vegetarian Recipes From Jewish Communities Around the World," is a 2005 James Beard Foundation award winner and a 2006 IACP Cookbook Award finalist. Our beloved Gil passed away 12/14.

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