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The Summarizing Plate

When the Israelites do God's will, they make His left hand as His right hand; but when they do not do His will, they make, if one may say so, His right hand as His left.

The Midrash

The circular Seder plate echoes the enclosing circle of the people grouped around the table, the circle made by the children carrying water, the *shmurah* matzah, and the perfect wine cups and dinner plates. The plate is often referred to as "the table," and stands in metonymical relationship to the Seder table. It sums up and "protects" the ideas presented during the evening.

In addition to the matzah and the wine, it is on the Seder plate that the Seder's quintessential concepts exist in tangible form. Items are raised, dipped, combined, eaten, or pointed out. The plate itself is customarily removed from the table during the recitation of *HaLachma Anya* and the raising of the matzahs. If, as in some communities, the matzahs are on the same tray, the egg and bone are removed during the reading. Together the matzah and the plate are reminiscent of what Turner has termed the "sacra" at a liminal rite: familiar items of the culture presented in unfamiliar ways to provoke interest and make neophytes question and reflect upon society's truths (1970:102). The bread of ordinary days takes an unfamiliar form at the Seder, and its mysterious quality is emphasized by hiding it under a cloth throughout the ceremony. The Code of Jewish Law decrees that even when it is raised, the matzah should be uncovered only slightly.¹ The *afikoman*

1. It is customary to cover bread before the benediction at a festival meal, but to uncover it thereafter.

"disappears" through most of the ritual, and the plate "disappears" during the *HaLachma Anya*. These movements make ordinary eggs, bones, lettuce, and apples extraordinary, and focus attention on the messages they carry. The plate is returned just before the Four Questions are asked by the child. As "child" is a symbolic category, so the questions themselves are indicative of the questioning of all the evening's special items and proceedings.

Like the sacra of a rite of transition, the plate is "the heart of the liminal matter" (Turner 1970:102). The bounded circle of the Seder plate provides the most extreme, inclusive focusing of the ideas implicit in the culture and contemplated at the ritual. "Children," new and old, "are alternately forced and encouraged to think about their society" (Turner 1970:105) by having the constructs of the society laid before them. These constructs are suggested by materials common to daily life but gathered or prepared just for the Seder, and arranged on the plate in a manner consistent with the structuring of ideas and relationships throughout the year.

In the Haggadah there are precise instructions for the placement and movement of persons and items. All must recline to the left to drink the wine but sit upright when eating the matzah and bitter herbs. The items are put on the Seder plate in a specific manner; the bone and egg are neither raised nor lowered, but the bitter herbs may be both raised and lowered. Rather than isolated instructions for an evening's ceremony, such directional imperatives are consistent with actions throughout the year. It matters that one reclines to the left not only because such movement frees the more frequently used hand, but because the general symbolism carried by concepts such as "left" and "right" supports the more specific meanings of the Seder.

"Right" implies "good," "positive," "dominant," "sacred." It is God's "right hand" that is powerful:

Your right hand, O Lord, glorious in power,
Your right hand, O Lord, shatters the foe! [Exodus 15:6]

The right hand is clever:

If I forget thee, O Jerusalem,
Let my right hand forget her cunning. [Psalm 137:5-6]

The right hand is tender:

In dealing with a child and a woman, the left hand should repel and the right hand should caress. [Code of Jewish Law, vol. 4, 165:7]

When they are being consecrated to God as priests, Aaron and his sons are touched with the blood of sacrifice on the right side of the body.

In daily life, things to be honored are placed on the right. The *Kiddush* cup of festival wine is raised in the right hand, the *mezuzah* is hung on the right side of the doorway, and Elijah sits at the right of the *sandek*, the man who holds the child at the *brit*. Circular movements within the synagogue, including processions with the Torah, enclose the congregation from right to left. During Hannukah, candles are put into the candelabrum, or *hannukiah*, from right to left, and are lit from left to right.² In this way, the candles on the right are the last to be extinguished.

The Code of Jewish Law decrees that when dressing one must "give precedence to the right hand or foot over the left; but when removing shoes and other articles of apparel the left hand comes first" (vol. 1, 3:4). The right hand is cleansed first in ritual washing, and the right hand places the black *tefillin* on the head and left arm.

"Left" stands in opposition to "right" to connote evil and sadness. A mourner tears his clothes (or, today, wears a black button) on the left for parents, on the right for other close kin. The evil inclination is said by the Hasidim to reside in the left side of the heart, and to whisper in the left ear; the good *yetzer* is in the right ventricle of the heart and whispers in the right ear.³ Folklore has many practices consistent with the good-evil representations of right and left: to thwart the evil eye, one looks down the left side of his nose, itching of the left eye indicates tears, of the right, joy; and salt thrown over the left shoulder of the bride and groom protects them against demons.

Left is associated with north, also a negative direction. This connection can be seen in the orientation of the marriage ceremony. At a wedding, whether before the Torah in the synagogue or under the stars in the synagogue courtyard, the couple faces east, the bride to the right and south, the groom to the left and north. Similarly, at the Seder, when the plate is placed before the leader on the table, the top is toward the east, the right side, with the bone and *haroset*, is toward the south, and the left side, with the egg and greens, is toward the north.

In Leviticus, the power of the left is countered by placing the protective sign of the priestly covenant, salt, on the north side of the altar. According to the folklore of the Middle Ages, demons approach

2. Hannukah commemorates the victory of the Jews over the ancient Syrians. Candles are lit each night for eight days, an additional one each night. This practice is said to recall the small amount of oil found in the Temple, apparently only enough for one day, which burned for eight.

3. Schneur Zalman of Liadi (1972:99).

from the north. The bridegroom standing on the left would fight the jealous demons by throwing the emptied wine glass against the north wall. Lauterbach thinks that this is the origin of the modern custom of breaking a glass at a wedding, a custom that has been given new meaning (1970:19). Today the breaking of the glass is commonly explained as a reminder that the Temple is still in a state of destruction, like the glass, and that even at the happy time of a wedding, the community's joy remains incomplete. However, after the groom steps on the glass at the end of the ceremony, the wedding guests all cry out, "Mazel tov!" or "Good luck!"

The "mixed nature" of the female as potential for both good and evil is shown through the symbolism of "right" and "left." The woman indicates her natural association with the sacred by standing to the right of the groom at the wedding, and the socially honored state of marriage is recognized by placing the ring on the right hand. Yet in the Zohar the female is consistently associated with darkness, north, and "left" in opposition to the male's "right." This "left" nature of the female, whether the woman or the idealized Community of Israel in relation with God, can be explained through the concept of subordination, which is also part of the web of meanings expressed through the simple direction "left."

"Left" and "right" as metaphoric ways of conveying negative and positive characteristics are not tied to a physical base. In insisting that the left hand be used to clean oneself after the toilet, the Code of Jewish Law uses "left" to connote impurity, but when it remarks, "A left-handed person should clean himself with the right hand, which is like everyone else's left hand" (vol. 1, 4:5), "left" suggests "subordination." If one's left hand is strong, it is "right": "A fully left-handed man . . . must put on *tefillah* ["prayer," that is, the phylactery] on the right hand which is equivalent to everyone's left" (vol. 1, 10:12). Therefore, a left-handed person making *Kiddush* holds the wine cup in the left hand. During penitential prayers (*Tahanun*) worshipers place their heads on their left arms and silently confess their sins. This rite is considered a "falling on the face," or ritual prostration, and echoes the prostration of the pious during Yom Kippur prayers. In this practice the meanings of "left" and "down," as subordination, deference, or impurity, meet and contrast with the positive messages carried by "right" and "up." Moses ascended a mountain to receive the Torah, and one still "ascends" to read the Torah, go to Jerusalem, and emigrate to Israel (*aliyah*, "ascending"). The Torah is raised before being returned to the Ark with the eternal light shining above it, one rises to greet Elijah, and

in ritual purification the body is lowered to remove impurity and raised into a pure state. Conversely, one "goes down" (*yiridah*) when leaving Jerusalem or Israel, and at a funeral the mourner sits on low benches and the body might be placed on the floor before being buried.

The meanings of "up" and "down," "right" and "left" come together at the *bimah*, the platform on which the Torah is read. It is valid to approach the Torah from either right or left, for one is thought to be so eager to reach the Torah that direction is not important. However, it can be seen that there is no right or left in the Torah itself, for in winding the scroll left continuously becomes right.⁴ This synthesis through the Law, which makes right or left irrelevant, extends to the area around the Torah. The raised platform stands as a symbol, in exile, of the Temple.

When, therefore, the Haggadah instructs the participants to raise the wine glasses, or raise the "bread of affliction," it is doing more than merely enabling the items to be displayed to the group (which has in any case seen them many times already). It is making a statement about the ideas being activated by the material forms. Similarly, the location of the items on the Seder plate is indicative of the concepts they carry.

The plate falls easily into a "nature/culture" dichotomy. The upper symbols, which represent "culture," are transformed animal or vegetable forms; the lower items are in their natural state. The bitter herbs in the center participate in and mediate all poles.

MATZAHS

Although Rabbi Luria's arrangement places the matzahs at the top center of the plate, more frequently they are on a plate of their own. Still, in the traditional arrangement the top center remains the position of the matzahs. This placement combines "left" and "right," affliction and election, but is more positive than negative because it is at the top, "up." The position supports the meanings of the matzah as the most perfected expression of Jewish society, the "bread of affliction" that is honored, raised, because affliction through election is part of the divine plan.

BONE

The roasted bone, with its meat, occupies the most favored position on the plate, the upper right. The bone is hard, white, whole, and durable. Like the egg, the bone is neither raised nor lowered through-

4. Hebrew is read from right to left.

out the ritual. Although the bone is described as a "shankbone," in practice any bone with meat is acceptable. Because poultry is the most common main course at the meal in America, the bone is often a chicken or turkey bone. In the Middle East, it may be a lamb bone. The Haggadah describes the bone as the symbol of the ancient Paschal sacrifice and the sacrifices to come when the Temple is restored. The



Figure 3.
The Seder plate.

ancient sacrifice was a first-born male lamb or goat, but all first-born males, animals or human, were consecrated to God. Today, first-born males are still redeemed from service at the *Pidyon HaBen*, and the entire people of Israel is still called the first-born of God. The one idea of consecration carried by the bone subsumes the ideas of animal, male Jew, and nation of Israel.

The name of the bone, "forearm" (*zero'a*), is compatible with the upper right placement of the bone and the metaphoric identity of the Paschal sacrifice with the nation of Israel. The usual explanation of the name is that it refers to God's forearm, which brought the Israelites from Egypt. However, when joined to the concept of a consecrated first-born, a "light unto all nations," Israel is the sacred and powerful "forearm" of God on earth. It is the meat on the bone that marks the symbol as specifically male, since to be present at the table males and meat undergo parallel cultural transformations. At the same time, the "male" bone includes the female, as "mankind" includes both men and women. "Woman" is created from "man" in Genesis, and in Judaism is still part of man. Each is dependent on the other for fulfilling the obligations of the culture and cannot stand alone.

The bone, then, summarizes the ideas of Jewish culture dedicated to God, through males. Its upper right, very "positive" placement expresses the strength and sacred honor of the relationship, as does its white color. As everlasting "culture" it is a cold, cooked, durable form, a message also carried by the matzah and the egg.

Although both the bone and the matzah express the relation of a consecrated culture to its god, it is the matzah that is the touchstone of the holiday and the *afikoman* that is said to take the place of the Paschal sacrifice. The matzah is commemorative but also representative of the current state of exile; the bone is commemorative and promissory of the ideal state of the Temple.

This shift of symbols is consistent with the transfer of the celebration of the Exodus from among the throngs in the Temple courtyard to the intimacy and enclosure of the home.⁵ The central symbol of the Passover celebration, the sacrifice cooked outside over an open fire, has been replaced by a food baked inside a doubly enclosed space, an oven either in the home or in a communal bakery. The key Passover food has been changed from an event of the evening, a sacrificial meal, to a form

5. Josephus estimates that there were three million Jews gathered in Jerusalem in 65 C.E. for the last Passover before the Temple was destroyed (*Encyclopedia Judaica Jerusalem*, 13:163).

whose production brings the community together and focuses its collective mind for weeks before the festival. Matzah is also used to extend the community: the absolute need of each Jew to have matzah for the holidays has resulted in annual collections of money to buy matzah for the needy and mailings of matzah where none can be baked, to men in the armed services, for example, or to the Soviet Union today.

In addition to losing its place as the central symbol, meat cooked like the sacrifice in direct contact with fire—barbecued or broiled—has been prohibited as a main dish for the festival meal. “Baked” meats, meats cooked in an oven, or in a receptacle, are permitted, and oven-roasted lamb, fowl, or beef is a common main course. While the change dismisses the possibility of a virtual re-enactment of the ancient sacrifice, it also makes a statement about the relationship of the community to God. The meat of sacrifice is in an unmediated state of direct contact with fire. Therefore, sacrifice is a vehicle of communication between mankind and God, because consuming fire suggests an immediate relationship with the Divine. This is the sense of the burning of the *hallah* portion of the bread. The substitution of meat warmed slowly and indirectly through a receptacle is compatible with the distant-but-present relationship, as in the desert, between God and man in *galut*.⁶

The shift from food and symbol transformed by immediate contact with fire to one more distant from the source of heat and light parallels Lévi-Strauss’s distinction between exo-cuisine and endo-cuisine, food cooked outside the house over a fire, and that prepared inside the home. Such inside forms are termed “boiled,” but “boiled” here denotes the state of containment inside a receptacle, possibly but not necessarily immersion in a liquid. In this sense, food prepared in an oven is “boiled,” endo-cuisine. Exo-cuisine is food generally shared with guests; endo-cuisine is family food: beef stew and not barbecued beef. The Paschal sacrifice was specifically a form of exo-cuisine: “Do not eat

6. The English custom of having fish as the main meal (Roth 1959:44) avoids any semblance of re-enactment of the sacrifice, but it is consistent with the transitional spring setting of the Seder. Jewish legend connects fish with purity because of their home in the water and because the ever open eyes of the fish are said to be reminiscent of the watchfulness of God. Whatever the reason, the *Tashlikh* ceremony of purification is ideally observed at a stream with fish in it, and among Sephardic Jews, many of whom settled in England, fish is often the main dish on Rosh Hashana. The centerpiece on the table at the Moroccan ceremony of Mimouna, which concludes the Passover week, is a whole fish. It cannot be determined here, by these few examples, whether associations such as these have influenced the English practice, but serving fish agrees with the meanings that cluster at the Seder.

any of it raw, or cooked in any way with water, but roasted—head, legs, and entrails—over the fire” (Exodus 12:9). Matzah and the meats of the meal are inside, “boiled” forms, prepared within a cultural receptacle, within a culturally defined, bounded home, according to strict rules. Although the Paschal sacrifice, like the matzah of the Seder, was eaten in family groups, the change of symbolic form of the central food of the Passover ritual perhaps reflects not only physical problems in continuing the sacrifice among nonpastoral populations, but even more the changed social circumstances of the celebrants.

The Passover meal has always been a proclamation of the distinction between “insiders” and “outsiders.” What has changed through time is the degree to which the concept of “insider” could be extended to include the society immediately surrounding the family group. The sacrifice in Egypt is the first public declaration by the slaves of their distinctive identity through their relationship to God, and this solidifies the group prior to the Exodus. It is a statement through which the members might recognize each other and openly acknowledge their unity. In Israel also, the public sacrifice at the Temple centered on family units, but the distinction between family and immediate society was not as great as it was later to become in the diaspora. Then the public celebration declared national unity, both within the society and in relation to God, and reinforced the distinctiveness of the nation of Israel as opposed to the surrounding populations, a distinction repeatedly commanded by God in the Torah.

In the diaspora, the extended society was no longer an extension of the family. Even where Jews lived in relatively circumscribed communities, the loss of their land and national state, the sense of difference from the surrounding populations, and the perception of isolation from other Jewish settlements and from God, all contributed to the transformation of “nation” into the more narrowed and specialized concept of “community” as an extended kinship relation. The ritual was moved into the home, behind closed doors, reflecting both the tightened definition of family and community and the security considerations of the times. The opening of the door toward the end of the Seder still signals the relationship of isolated family groups with the whole community and with God, but that relationship is lifted from one of immediate, physical proximity, as at the Temple, to the more abstract and encompassing relationship across time and space, expressed through the figure of Elijah, the eternal communicator between the society and God, and between separated populations. The boiled forms of the Seder—the

matzah, the baked meat, and the baked egg—reinforce this tightened definition of community.

The matzah, then, as carrier of the message of the diaspora, is featured at the Seder much more prominently than the bone. The bone is given a place of honor and pointed out, but it is removed from the table when the matzah is raised. Leaving the bone on the table would reinforce the matzah's message of priestliness and hope. Removing the bone allows the message of affliction to be heard more clearly.

EGG

The other "culture" symbol is the roasted (baked) egg on the upper left of the plate. Although a necessary component of the Seder plate, the egg is not explained in the Haggadah narrative as are the bone, herbs, and matzah. It is commonly understood to represent the additional sacrifices brought to the Temple on the festivals of Passover, Shavuot, and Sukkot. These sacrifices were not, in any case, eggs.

The egg, like the *kittel*, supports the transitional symbolism of the Seder. In its immediate association as the only food necessary at a funeral, the egg points to death and mourning. Another common explanation for the egg—that it is a token of grief for the fallen Temple—acknowledges this association. Still, the whiteness of the egg and the *kittel* suggests the sacred and hence the presence of the eternal in animal forms and in man's nature, hope as well as despair. The egg is "new life," made cultural and lasting through cooking, and consecrated through browning or singeing—obvious contact with fire. Its endless oval shape is used to convey the idea of life everlasting. Once these ideas are established, an actual egg is unimportant to the ceremony. A white, boiled potato on the upper left carries the same meaning. The death-to-life contradiction in the egg is carried in its negative (left) and positive (upper) placement, and is compatible with the winter-to-spring season of Passover and the Seder's concern with the passage from Egypt to Jerusalem.

The "positive side" of the egg is expressed in folklore, which says that anyone lucky enough to secure the egg from the plate after the two Seders will be assured of good fortune, and any wish he expresses will be fulfilled. At the Seder in the eastern European tradition, the entire community is given the possibility of good fortune through the additional plate of eggs. Although these eggs recall the many eggs at a funeral meal, at the Seder they become instruments of hope. Each individual dips an egg into salt water before the meal begins.

This "purificatory bath" reinforces the positive connotations of the egg.

In formally stressing the positive pole of the egg's meanings, the Seder acknowledges the power of the negative; its optimistic message is carried in a manner reminiscent of a funeral. The eggs counteract the danger to the community much as the mnemonic words negate the meanings of the Ten Plagues. The introduction of this extra measure of active hope, the "good luck charm," is itself a recognition of distress.

Nature's symbols occupy the lower half of the Seder plate.

GREENS

The greens, on the lower left, have the least favored position. They are raw, unelaborated, dry, tasty, and colorful. The lettuce, parsley, or celery (or any other fresh green) represents vegetation, nature that grows and decays each year. Raw onions and potatoes, which are sometimes substituted for the lettuce or parsley, are both vegetables that produce green shoots.

The only other use of vegetation in Jewish ritual is at the fall festival of Sukkot, where the association is with the temporary dwellings of the wilderness and the *Hoshana* prayers for salvation. When related to the greens of Sukkot, the greens of Passover are suggestive of transitional periods of nature and specifically of the spring season of nature's re-awakening. The greens, like the egg, thus support the themes of the Seder.

Vegetation is accorded its recognition and dispensed with early in the Seder by its "purification" through immersion in the bath of salt water. It is the least important element in the story of the evening, as its negative placement suggests. Those symbols still on the plate all have more importance to the story than the greens.

HAROSET

The *haroset* ("clay") on the lower right is usually a finely chopped mixture of apples, nuts, raisins, cinnamon, and wine. It is reddish brown, tasty, sweet, and moist. Ingredients vary widely according to locale, but *haroset* always contains fruits, spices, and with rare exceptions, a fermented liquid. The *haroset* is neither raised nor lowered, and it is not explained in the Haggadah, although it is commonly understood to represent the mortar used by the Israelites in Egypt. The bitter herbs are dipped in it, or it is eaten with the herbs between the Levi matzah. The fourteenth-century legal compilation, the *Tur*, specifically con-

nects *haroset* with spring because of the fruit and nuts (*Tur*, chap. 473, Abudarham), and apples and other fruits are associated with the observance of the fall New Year celebration of Rosh Hashana. Apples dipped in honey begin the meal at Rosh Hashana, new fruits of the season may be blessed and eaten, and foods containing apples and other fruits are often served.

The *haroset*, placed on the right like the woman at the wedding, is a female symbol. Its ingredients—culturally defined but inherently unstable materials of fruit and fermenting liquid—share the female's compromised status between "nature" and "culture." Its main ingredients suggest "life": fruit and nuts indicate new life, but with the decaying wine, the impermanence of life also. Wine also contributes the idea of joy. This idea of the joy of transitory life is carried in the custom of giving nuts to children on Passover.

Throughout biblical literature, women are allied with life-bearing fruit, starting with Eve, whose name in Hebrew means "life." Psalm 128:3 compares a woman to a "fruitful vine," and the lines in the Song of Songs: "Under the apple-tree I awakened thee; / There thy mother was in travail with thee; / There was she in travail and brought thee forth" (8:5), are said to refer to a legend that when Pharaoh decreed death to all Hebrew children, the women gave birth in the apple orchards and the children were raised by angels (Roth 1959:ix). As with the egg, the woman's association with life and death is supported by the *haroset's* positive (right) and negative (lower) placement.

The moistness of the *haroset* also suggests the female, through her associations with blood and the waters of ritual immersion. The normally pasty *haroset* is made even more liquid when it is thinned with wine to ensure that it does not adhere to the bitter herbs. And wine's role as a medium of social and divine connection is enhanced by the addition of spices, which are used in Jewish ritual to express the sweet smell of the sacred. At *Havdalah* at the end of each Sabbath a spice box is passed around for everyone to smell while the candle burns. This practice, said to "extend the sweetness of the Sabbath into the week-days to come," is reminiscent of the burning of incense at the Temple altar, and the sweet-smelling flowers at the Seder. In ancient times, spices were put into the water with which the dead were washed and into the coffin.

That aspect of the woman's relationship with nature which circumvents the control of the male and the Law is also expressed through the association of the female with fruit. It is Eve, the female, who takes the

first bite of the fruit of the tree of knowledge and induces Adam to eat it. The fruit, often referred to as the "apple," is the direct embodiment of God's knowledge: it confers immediate awareness of good and evil. This ability to discriminate between good and evil removes the male and female of Eden from the state of mindless bliss and causes their exile. In banishing them from Eden, God also separates them from immortality, from the possibility of eating from the tree of life (Genesis 3:6, 22).

In contrast to the female's undisciplined initiation of communication with God through the sensual fruit of knowledge, God initiates the communication through the rationalized, opaque word of the Torah and places the Law in the hands of Moses and the males. The Torah provides the Jews with a means of finding their way back to Eden, the state of bliss and unity, Jerusalem. The events of Sinai are therefore an inversion of the process of Eden, and a commentary on the character of the woman; she is shown as associated with nature in its suprahuman aspects and also as in need of social control through the agency of the male.

The woman's pathway to the divine is through amorphous, sensual means—fire, water—and her closest associations are with those only partially constrained by culture—the young; thus the separate items of the *haroset* are blended into a nondefinitive form. The Hebrew meaning of *haroset*, "clay," such as a potter might use, is, like the female, a concept implying potentiality, the creation of new form. Jewish thought has applied the term both to the woman herself—as in the section of the Talmud quoted above that describes a woman as a *golem* (an unformed substance, a piece of clay) to be molded by her maker, her husband—and to the community as a whole—as in Isaiah 45:9, "We are the clay, and Thou our potter." It is significant that both "creator" and "potter" may be expressed in Hebrew by the same word, *yotser*. And, as we have seen, the community has been characterized as female in its relationship with God.

As a consequence of cultural definitions, woman is potential for good and evil, the bearer of life and reminder of death, a temptress, a catalyst, who can affect man's destiny and so needs supervision and control. Because she can make her husband good or bad and cause the Shekinah to enter or depart from the home, her husband must guide her in order to ensure a positive result. Both woman and clay are molded by outside forces, but neither the Law that controls her nor the potter's creation of form changes their imprecise nature, a nature

supported by the mixed, positive and negative, placement of the *haroset*.

The four symbols so far discussed thus form a series of categorical oppositions on the plate. If we allow that "up" is positive and "down" is negative, we find that culture, as represented by animal forms, is favored over nature (figure 4). This recalls Genesis 1:29-30, where God gives man dominion over everything on earth, animal and vegetable. Both items in the "culture" half of the plate are durable forms; those in the "nature" section demonstrate impermanence.

Consecrated mankind occupies the upper right, the best position, and vegetation the worst. This is not to deny the importance of vegetation in the scheme of things; vegetation would not have been accorded a position on the plate at all if it were not valued. The placement reinforces the order of importance, and underscores the enduring quality of Jewish culture as opposed to the transitory aspect of the natural world.

Another opposition can be seen on the other diagonal (figure 5). Here it is the contrast of life and death, joy and sadness, eternal and temporal life. The baked egg is life in death, the eternal preserved. The white, oval egg can suggest eternity despite the egg's deadened form.

The *haroset* represents death in life—mortality—the fermenting, rotting, decaying process even present in life-bearing forms: the eternal cycle as represented in woman.

If we look again at the plate and accept right as favored over left,

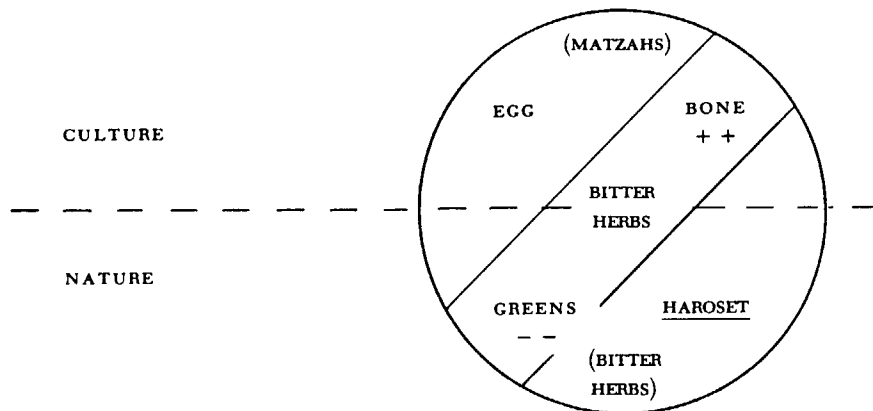


Figure 4.
The Seder plate: the social world and the natural world.

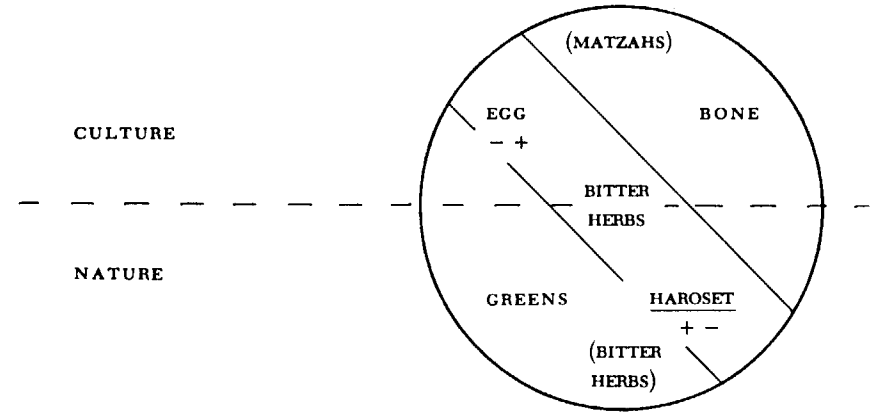


Figure 5.
The Seder plate: life and death.

we see that human life is preferred over nonhuman life (figure 6). As representative of the first-born, dedicated to God, the bone with its meat is "male" and the fruit and wine of the *haroset*, "female." They are placed on the right and are thus dominant over animal life as represented by the egg and vegetation as seen in the greens. While both man and woman are on the right side, however, man has the dominant position, the upper quadrant. This accords with the perception of roles as related in Genesis and in Jewish life.

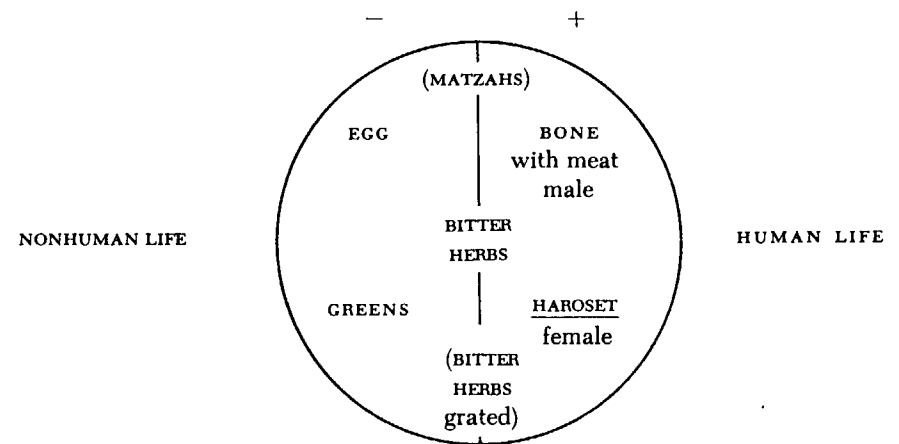


Figure 6.
The Seder plate: human and nonhuman life.

THE BITTER HERBS

In a very graphic and sensual way, the bitter herbs present a message that bitterness is part of even the most joyous of experiences. This central position, which combines right, left, up, and down, places the herbs in between all the facets of Jewish culture as expressed in the symbols of the plate—the culture, the natural world, eternal and temporal life—and makes bitterness a part of each quadrant. In addition, on plates having a second dish of herbs at the bottom, the negative component is underscored.

The placement and movement of the bitter herbs make further statements. During the narration, three symbols must be discussed because they are crucial to the meanings of the evening: “Rabban Gamaliel said: ‘Whoever does not mention the meanings of the three symbols, the Paschal lamb, the unleavened bread, and the bitter herbs, has not fulfilled his obligation.’” The readings that accompany the explanation of each symbol relate explicitly to the historical time in Egypt. The bone may not be raised while being discussed, but the matzah and the bitter herbs may be raised or pointed out. When raised, the “honoring” of the herbs represents the same contradiction met in the raising, or honoring, of the matzah.

By itself, this honoring of bitterness is incomprehensible given the culture’s rejection of suffering as a positive value, but in relation to other acts of the evening, this act takes on meaning. The first of the three symbols to be explained is the bone, which is not raised. The symbol of past and future is important to the meaning system, but it is honored only by being considered first, and through its placement on the plate. The bitter herbs are raised just after the matzah is raised and explained, and the matzah’s message of “divine affliction” through enduring culture has been repeatedly conveyed. The bitter herbs follow as a similar statement of an afflicted state, but this time the message is carried in a natural form and suggests the impermanence of such affliction, a meaning compatible with the understanding of the transitory nature of the *galut* state of earthly exile in light of the promise of redemption. Taken together, the three key symbols underscore the concepts of the enduring nature of the relationship with God through the white bone of the past and future, the white matzah of enduring culture, and the natural herbs of the temporary, present bitterness.

The words that state that the bitter herbs are eaten (later) “because the Egyptians embittered the lives of our fathers in Egypt . . .” are followed immediately by the phrase that “in each generation, every

Jew must regard himself as though he, personally, were brought out of Egypt.” The mythical framework immediately imposes itself on the historical focus, and the bitterness of Egypt is connected immediately with the present. Although the state of Egypt is itself behind the Jew, the experience of Egypt and the experience of the desert—both as a state of transition and as a state, as at Sinai, of divine communication—are to be part of the Jew’s experience at the Seder.

The centrality of bitterness and its part in daily life are made personal through the mandatory eating of the bitter herbs. It is important that the herbs be fresh and very pungent, and the rule for their consumption is generally obeyed with a bit of trepidation.

The directions for eating the herbs reinforce the visual message of their participation in all facets of life. They are eaten first in combination with the sweet, natural *haroset*, and later with the matzah that represents the people as a whole, the Israel matzah. Specific directions for each consumption add to the meaning of the act.

Although the Haggadah recommends that participants recline “like free men” throughout the ritual, it insists on it only when they are drinking the wine, eating the matzah after the benediction and the *afikoman*, and eating the matzah and bitter herbs together. Reclining to the left mutes the negative message of the left and emphasizes the right, and so underscores the relation of wine and joy, the positive state of the upper, *kohen* and Levi matzahs, and the relation of the *afikoman* to the focus on redemption of the concluding section of the Haggadah. The celebrant *must not* recline when eating the bitter herbs dipped in *haroset*, an order unique in the Seder. In addition, the *haroset* must not be allowed to mask the bitterness of the herbs, and so must be shaken off. The bitterness of the herbs is therefore heightened in two ways: first, by the mandatory presence of the left hand, and then by contrast with its opposite. The sweet *haroset* is one of the favorite foods of the evening. To dip the bitter herbs in the *haroset* and then discard them is to tease, and thus to refocus attention on the herbs. Through dipping, the bitter herbs, associated earlier in the Seder with the transition from Egypt and the desert, are brought into contact with another representation of impermanence and temporality, this time in sweet form. The bitter and the sweet aspects of earthly existence meet, but the sweet is even more temporary than the bitter, as it is shaken off. There is nothing to hide the bitterness when it is consumed this time, in contrast to the second ceremonial eating that follows. Even if one were to ignore the rule to shake the *haroset* from the bitter herbs and so taste the

haroset as fully as the herbs, the unusual, mandatory presence of the left hand would introduce the negative message.

When the celebrant eats the herbs with the Israel matzah, he reclines to the left. In placing the herbs between two pieces of the matzah, to make the "Hillel sandwich," the bitterness is "contained" by culture in the form of man's most perfected creation. As the positive right hand raises the matzah, it reinforces the concept of the joy of culture despite its measure of bitterness. The two consecutive eatings of the herbs, therefore, highlight the positive value of culture as an enduring good despite the temporary sensation of bitterness that is experienced.

Where there are two portions of bitter herbs, the whole pieces in the center are eaten with the *haroset*, the grated ones at the bottom of the plate with the matzah. Like the situation of the matzah, this lower position combines right and left, but is weighted instead toward the negative. Eating the lower portion of bitter herbs with the matzah would result in a balance between positive and negative if it were not for the mandatory presence of the right hand.

The bitter herbs are eaten after the benedictions that precede the meal, and therefore introduce the present social communion with a double taste of bitterness. With the eggs eaten before the meal, the bitter herbs temper but do not overwhelm the conviviality that comes from the wine, the good food, and the company.

The measures that qualify the joy of the evening through a heightened awareness of the negative aspects of the transitional period—the double portion of bitter herbs, the additional plate of eggs, the *kittel*, and the requirement that the *haroset* be shaken off the bitter herbs—seem to reflect the social climate of the Middle Ages in eastern Europe when these practices were introduced. This was a time of peasant uprisings and other threats to physical and social existence, when ritual forms hardened to ensure compliance with the Law and so hasten the coming of the messiah.

Today, relatively few Seders in America are conducted with a *kittel*, and the frequent omission of eggs at a funeral meal has deprived the plate of eggs of much of its meaning. Many Seder plates indicate the placement of the bitter herbs in the center only; the second, lower position that reinforces the concept of bitterness is eliminated. The very common circular arrangement of the symbols on modern plates locates the bone, egg, *haroset*, and greens in the same place as the traditional arrangement, but the bitter herbs, perhaps for aesthetic

reasons, are moved to center left and right, or center top and bottom (figures 7). Whatever the reason for the change in their position, the bitter herbs still combine all poles, right and left, up and down, and so bitterness is still conceptually central. In both cases, as in the older arrangement, that which is not whole is in the negative position, and that which is "completed" is positive. This point should not be overemphasized, since both forms of herbs carry the same message. Still, it is consistent that a culture that strives for completion should, in all these cases, place the whole object, where there is a choice, in the positive position.

The celebrants who are using this balanced plate are likely also to ignore the rule to shake the *haroset* off the herbs and, like many Sephardis, eat a full serving of *haroset* and so somewhat mask the bitterness. Changes such as these accommodate the ritual to present experience and so keep the ancient format alive. How the meanings of the past find their home in the present is the subject of the next chapter.

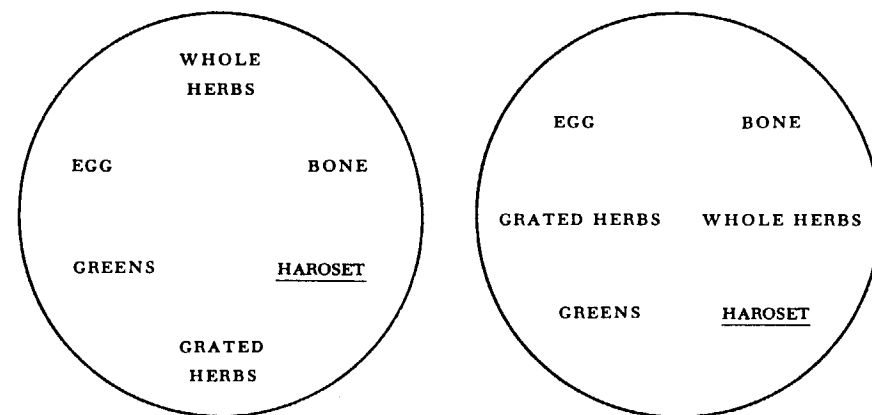


Figure 7.
Modern arrangements of the symbols on the Seder plate.

The Passover Seder:

Afikoman
in Exile

RUTH GRUBER FREDMAN



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