

All About Bitter Herbs

We all know that Maror, the bitter herb, is an integral part of the Passover Seder. The Board of Jewish Education of Greater New York's World Over Magazine offers some insight into the use of Maror during the Seder. When the Rabbis of the Mishnah were asked just what the bitter herb was, their answer was a list of 5 vegetables: hazeret, olshin, tamcha, harhavina, and maror.

The problem is that these Rabbis lived in Eretz Israel over 2000 years ago. Today we are not positive that we know what these 5 are, or whether they can be found in all the countries to which Jews have wandered since then.

We really do not know, for example, what tamcha is, though some translators of the Mishnah call it horseradish. Hazeret is thought to have been some sort of lettuce, and there are many who use romaine lettuce on the Seder plate. In modern Hebrew, maror is used to

Syrian Jews Face Perilous Future

BY RABBI MARC H. TANENBAUM

According to a memorandum prepared by Dr. George E. Gruen, Director of Middle East

refer to horseradish, which is probably the most common American and European choice for the Seder plate. The taste of horseradish is not really bitter, however; rather it is sharp, so let's examine some of the other choices listed in the Mishnah.

Olesh is chicory. The green leaves of the chicory plant peak through the wet earth around Hanukah. By Passover, a stalk develops, and it sprouts leaves that are too bitter to eat.

The children of Israel had no time that first Passover for cooked vegetables; only fresh-picked salad. These plants may have been growing wild outside their doors. The bitterness of the plants reminds us of the bitterness of slavery.

There is another reason the Rabbis looked to these 5 vegetables. In the beginning of their growth the 5 are soft and even sweet enough to eat fresh. Later they become hard and bitter. So, too, were the Egyptians. When Jacob came down to Egypt with his family, the Egyptians were kind to them. But many years later, the Egyptians hardened. They oppressed the children of Israel. So, said the Rabbis, "See this bitter herb whose beginning is sweet and whose end is bitter - thus were the Egyptians." (Mishnah, Pesahim 2,6).

Hundreds of years later, while in Eastern Europe or North Africa (or later in the Americas), Jews had to find a Maror. Some of these 5 vegetables were unknown; others were not grown outside of Israel. So new bitter herbs were used.

We all dip our Maror in haroset, the sweet paste that reminds us of the mortar the children of Israel were forced to make in Egypt.

Affairs for the American Jewish Committee, Syria's 5,000 Jews face a future that becomes more precarious day by day. They are uniquely discriminated against by a strict ban on Jewish emigration. Seven Jewish men are currently in prison for allegedly having attempted to leave and other Jewish men and women have been killed or severely wounded in earlier escape attempts. Jews are also subjected to special decrees, restricting their right to sell or inherit property.

As Syria continues to be racked by civil strife, Jews suffer from the adverse effect of governmental action to root out the fanatical Moslem Brotherhood, which has murdered top officials and sought to assassinate President Hafez al - Assad last summer. To counter the Brotherhood, Assad has unleashed his Defense Brigades and the Mukhabarat (secret police) who commit acts in violation of fundamental human rights, including searches without warrant, torture, detention without trial, and summary executions.

The patent absurdity of searching Jewish homes for Moslem Brotherhood literature or adherents should be obvious.

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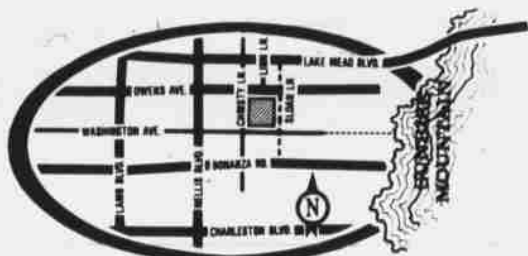
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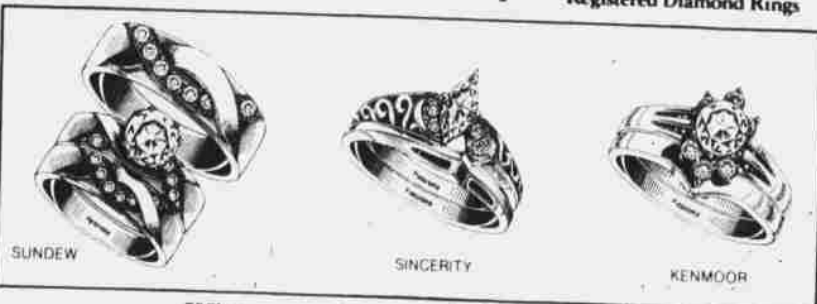
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