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

By Ari Z. Zivotofsky

Misconception: Horseradish (chbrain) 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. 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.

What is maror? The Mishnah (Pesachim 2:6; 39a) lists the following five vegetables that may be used as maror: chazeret, ulshin, tamcha, charchasina and maror. 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), is chazeret. The Gemara identifies this as chisah, 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 hindvi, is nearly universally understood to refer to endives. Next is tamcha, which the Gemara calls temachota, 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 chaseret, the first term on the Mishnah’s list. While tamcha, the third item, is often translated in rabbinic literature as horseradish, 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.

Horseradish is first mentioned 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 Hagbot Matimonin (Chametz Unetzah 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...
found in the Mishnah and the benaitot 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 Chaye 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. The Gemara even asserts that it was 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. 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 plant; the 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.

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 climates 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 amount and thereby endanger their health." 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. 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, OC132; 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 rabbinc 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" 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 (vayemarot) 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), 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 (Teshuva Vehanahagos 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 uncovered 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 rabbinc 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

2. On the status of the mitzvah today, see Rava’s statement on Pesachim 120a; Rambam, Chumaza Umattza 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 Shatar Hatzizyon 473:46.

7. Aware of the difference, the Talmud uses the word “maror” 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), HaMaayan 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 kezzayit (olive size). For a fascinating debate regarding the minimum amount of maror one is required to eat, see Shitat Aroyo (100); Chatam Sofer (OC 140); Avei Neizer (OC 383); Sh’el U’mashav (Mahadura Shita’i 10); Shitat Yeshu’ah (end of 475) and Iggerot Moshe (OC 3:66).
14. For discussions regarding boiling or grinding horseradish, see MB 473:36 and Shaar 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 aliya 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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