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OUR FAITH IN THE PLANET

The Seder Plate as Earth Plate For Pesach 5784

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This year the first Seder Night coincides with Earth Day, April 22nd, the date dedicated 'to honouring and celebrating our remarkable planet' (<https://www.earthday.org/earth-day-2024/>) Established in 1970, Earth Day is marked by over a billion people across the globe.

But the relationship between the Seder and Earth Day is much more than coincidental. Pesach, described in the Torah as Chag Ha'Aviv, 'the festival of spring', is one of Judaism's key 'earth dates', together with Shavuot, 'the festival of reaping', and Succot, 'the harvest festival', all of them as much as three millennia old.

The Seder plate is Judaism's earth plate, placing all the earth's fullness on the table.

Matzah represents the produce of arable fields: wheat, barley, oats, spelt, rye, are the only possible ingredients, except water. Matzah represents 'the staff of life' in its most basic form, the food not just all humans, but all mammals, countless birds and innumerable insects need to survive and thrive. The matzah on the Seder plate calls us to respect, protect and bless God for the integrity of the soil.

Karpas, greens, are any herb or vegetable for which we can thank God with the blessing 'who creates the fruit of the ground.' Parsley, mustard seedlings and cress all serve well. Next year, we might grow our own. We dip these herbs in salt water in memory of how our ancestors wept in their enslavement. Maybe we can take these tears as representing all the world's dispossessed. These green leaves 'sewn in tears' command us to work for an earth where everyone can 'reap in joy.'

Maror is the soil's bitter yield. The Talmud requires us not merely to swallow, but to chew, it. We must struggle with our own peoples', and other nations' histories of slavery. In the bitterness we taste the unpalatable flavour of dispossession. Climate change erodes the ancestral livelihoods of millions. The maror leaves us asking what must be done, from

individual effort upwards and governmental commitment downwards, to mitigate such terrible losses and support life-saving adaptations.

Charoset, the sweet paste, has are a hundred recipes online, and more. One Talmudic opinion suggests it represents the mortar in the monuments our ancestors in Egypt were forced to build, and that the red wine seeping through it symbolises the blood they shed in their toil. But I prefer to see charoset differently. I follow the commentary which describes the charoset as made from fruits and spices lauded in the Hebrew Bible's greatest love poem, The Song of Songs: figs, dates, apples, nuts, cinnamon, and wine. Charoset, then, is 'the food of love' the Jewish way. It expresses our devotion, not only to our people and our faith, but to the earth itself and all of nature, its gardens, orchards, wild places and wild creatures.

The Haggadah contains the Ten Plagues, which vividly describe what happens when we treat each other and our land with exploitative contempt, so that its water, soil and the very air breed poison and death.

But it also includes Birkat Hamazon, our thanksgiving for the blessings of earth's plenty to God 'who feeds all', whose hands, we pray, will be 'open to satisfy all life.'

Today, much of that choice, between blessings and curses, plagues and plenty, lies not just in God's but also in humanity's hands. What future are we creating? Individually, communally, nationally and internationally, we must do everything we can to choose life.

For, finally, Pesach is 'the festival of our freedom' and, if the earth can't thrive, freedom cannot either.