



## Reclaiming the Hidden Power in *Charoset*

*Passover is an opportunity to reflect on the injustices that continue to affect our world today, and the power of individuals and communities to assert their rights to be free. During Passover this year, we encourage you to raise awareness about the We Believe campaign by incorporating this text study and activity into your holiday preparations or Seder.*

### Text Study

Do you know why we have *charoset* on our Seder plate?

The popular explanation for the symbolism of *charoset* is to remind us of the mortar the Israelites used to build the Egyptian pyramids.

However, mortar is only half the story. According to the Talmud, the *charoset* is also meant to remind us of the apple tree.

Pesachim 116a	פסחים דף קטז.
<p>What is the nature of the commandment [of <i>charoset</i>]? Rabbi Levi says, "It is a commemoration of the apple tree." Rabbi Yochanan says, "It is a commemoration of the clay [used to build bricks for the pyramids]." Abaye said, "Therefore, one must make [the <i>charoset</i>] tart and one must make it thick. Make it tart since it is a commemoration of the apple tree, and make it thick since it is a commemoration of the clay.</p>	<p>מאי מצוה? רבי לוי אומר: זכר לתפוח. ורבי יוחנן אומר: זכר לטיט, אמר אביי: הלכך צריך לקהוייה, וצריך לסמוכיה. לקהוייה - זכר לתפוח, וצריך לסמוכיה - זכר לטיט.</p>

The story of the apple tree is based on a verse from the Song of Songs.

Song of Songs 8:5	שיר השירים ח:ה
<p>... Under the apple tree I roused you; there your mother conceived you, there she who was in labor gave you birth.</p>	<p>... תחת התפוח עוררתיך שמה חבלתך אמך שמה חבלה ילדתך:</p>

The medieval commentator, Rashi, explaining a verse from Exodus, references this line in the Song of Songs when he tells the surprising story of righteous Israelite women who lured their husbands to the fields and seduced them under the apple trees. The Israelite women knew that their husbands, exhausted and dejected by slavery, would not have the strength to procreate. So the women found a way to lure their husbands out of their exhaustion and despair to ensure the future of the Jewish people.

<p>Rashi's commentary to Exodus 38:8, <i>from the mirrors of the women</i></p>	<p><b>רשי, שמות לח:ח, במראת הצובאת</b></p>
<p>. . . When their husbands would be exhausted because of the racking labor imposed upon them by the Egyptians, [the women] would go and bring them food and drink, and feed them. Then they would take the mirrors, and each one would view herself with her husband in the mirror, and entice him with words, saying, 'I am handsomer than you.' By these means, they would bring their husbands to desire, and would have relations with them, and conceive and give birth there," as it says, "Under the apple tree I roused you" (Song of Songs 8:5).</p> <p>[Translation adapted from Artscroll Sapirstein edition of the Book of Exodus]</p>	<p>. . . כשהיו בעליהם יגעים בעבודת פרך, היו הולכות ומוליכות להם מאכל ומשתה ומאכילות אותם ונוטלות המראות, וכל אחת רואה עצמה עם בעלה במראה ומשדלתו בדברים, לומר אני נאה ממך, ומתוך כך מביאות לבעליהן לידי תאוה ונזקקות להם, ומתעברות ויולדות שם, שנאמר תחת התפוח עוררתיך (שיר השירים ח:ה).</p>

Later in the Exodus story, the Israelites worked collaboratively to build the *Mishkan*, the portable sanctuary where they worshipped God in the desert. Each person was invited to contribute materials and the Israelite women offered these very mirrors.

<p>Rashi's commentary to Exodus 38:8, <i>from the mirrors of the women</i></p>	<p><b>רשי, שמות לח:ח, במראת הצובאת</b></p>
<p>The Israelite women had mirrors in their hands that they used to look in when they adorned themselves and even these they brought to donate to the <i>Mishkan</i>. And Moses was disgusted by the mirrors because they were used for vain purposes. The Holy Blessed One said to Moses, "Accept them, because these are the dearest to Me of all, for by means of them, the women established many legions of offspring in Egypt."</p>	<p>בנות ישראל היו בידן מראות, שרואות בהן כשהן מתקשטות, ואף אותן לא עכבו מלהביא לנדבת המשכן, והיה מואס משה בהן, מפני שעשויים ליצר הרע, אמר לו הקב"ה קבל, כי אלו חביבין עלי מן הכל, שעל ידיהם העמידו הנשים צבאות רבות במצרים.</p>

## Questions for Discussion

1. How do the Israelite women exercise their power? What do you think of this use of power?
2. Why do you think Moses did not want to accept the mirrors from the women? Why was he compelled to change his mind?
3. Why do you think the connection of *charoset* to mortar instead of apples has become the dominant narrative at the Seder table?
4. The Israelite women used the power available to them to fight the injustices of slavery and secure the future of the Jewish people. In impossible circumstances, they safeguarded their dignity, their pleasure and their humanity under the apple trees. What other examples can you think of where women harnessed their power to fight injustice?
5. When you look in the mirror, what power do you see in yourself to fight against injustice?

The Israelite women believed they had the right to live free from violence, fear and slavery. They enticed their husbands to surmount exhaustion and defeat and to embrace a hopeful vision for the future. Today, women, girls and LGBT people around the world continue to assert their right to be free. To support these efforts, American Jewish World Service has launched *We Believe*, a campaign to end violence against women and girls, stop hate crimes against LGBT people, and empower girls to end child marriage worldwide. During Passover this year, use your power to enable women, girls and LGBT people to live with safety, dignity and prosperity for the future.

## Activity

This Passover, invite your friends to get involved in the *We Believe* campaign by throwing a *charoset*-making party. Encourage your friends to bring their favorite recipes to cook together. During the party,

- ✓ tell the untold story behind *charoset* about the power of women to overcome the injustices of slavery.
- ✓ talk about how women, girls and LGBT people today are working to overcome violence in their communities. For stories of individuals taking incredible strides to promote their rights, visit <http://webelieve.ajws.org/#storieshope>.
- ✓ bring a mirror to the kitchen and invite your guests to identify their own power to fight for the rights of women, girls and LGBT people around the world.
- ✓ share information about the *We Believe* campaign, and encourage your guests to take action.
  - Distribute the *We Believe* petition calling on Congress to pass the International Violence Against Women Act and collect signatures from your guests. You can print the petition by visiting <http://webelieve.ajws.org/docs/WeBelieveVAWAPetition.pdf>. Send the signed petitions to your AJWS staff contact.
  - Ask your guests to write hand-written letters urging their Members of Congress to co-sponsor the International Violence Against Women Act. A hand-written letter is one of the most effective ways for you and your guests to influence your Members of Congress. Check

out a sample letter at <http://webelieve.ajws.org/docs/SampleLettertoCongress.pdf> which you can print to share with your guests as an example. Collect the letters and mail them to your AJWS staff contact to track and send to congressional offices.

For more information and resources to support *We Believe*, visit <http://webelieve.ajws.org/>.

### **Additional resources for Shavuot**

In Jewish mystical tradition, the seven weeks between Passover and the holiday of Shavuot are a time to prepare ourselves to celebrate receiving the Torah on Mount Sinai and entering into a sacred covenant. Keep an eye out for resources to take action on the *We Believe* campaign during Shavuot in early June. We will have options for hosting a Shavuot-themed gathering or leading a *We Believe* workshop at a local Shavuot event. Together we can strengthen the sacred covenant we share in doing this holy work to protect the rights and dignity of women, girls, and LGBT people around the world.