

Tasting the Bitterness Without Becoming It: A Passover Haggadah Supplement

“Ruthlessly they made life bitter for them with harsh labor at mortar and bricks and with all sorts of tasks in the field.” — Exodus 1:14

The Invitation of *Maror*

Maror, the bitter herb, is the most honest moment of the seder.

We taste bitterness because freedom that refuses to remember suffering is fragile. Because justice that does not feel pain is theoretical. Because memory without responsibility is incomplete.

This year, many of us approach *Maror* already steeped in bitterness: grief that feels unrelenting, fear that feels justified, anger that feels righteous, and exhaustion that makes it tempting to harden our hearts just to get through the day. The Seder does not ask us to deny these feelings, but it does ask something harder: **To taste bitterness, without letting it define who we become.**

The Torah teaches that our ancestors’ lives were made bitter not only by forced labor, but also by dehumanization — the stripping of agency, dignity, and belonging. And even after the Exodus, bitterness lingered in fear, complaint, and uncertainty. Freedom did not erase pain; it demanded new ways to live with it.

Today, we still taste bitterness when:

- Jews and countless other communities are targeted based on who they are;
- Immigrant families are torn apart by unjust policies;
- Communities face dehumanization, erasure, or violence;
- Poverty is treated as personal failure rather than structural injustice;
- LGBTQ+ people are told their dignity is negotiable;
- Democratic norms and values and the rule of law are threatened on a daily basis;
- Elected representatives exploit our fear and act against the interests of our communities, friends, and neighbors.

Maror reminds us that suffering can either narrow our vision or widen it. It can teach us to recognize only our own pain —or it can sharpen our capacity to notice the pain of others and the fact that our safety and our rights are interconnected. **The difference is not the bitterness itself, but what we choose to do with it.**

Eating the *Maror*

As we prepare to eat the *Maror*, we say the blessing “*al achilat maror*” — literally, “on eating the *Maror*.” We bless not the bitterness, but the courage to confront it. May this sharpness keep us honest, and may this discomfort keep us awake, as we acknowledge:

- The bitterness of lives lost, and lives forever changed;
- The bitterness of relationships strained or broken;
- The bitterness of feeling unseen, unsafe, or unheard;
- The bitterness of the erosion of trust across communities and of democratic norms and values

Rather than competing over whose bitterness is greatest, we instead let the sharpness linger just long enough to remind us that **indifference is not an option**. *Maror* urges us to consider what happens when bitterness becomes identity, when pain becomes permission for cruelty, isolation, silence, or despair, and how easily the very edge that sharpens our sense of justice can begin to distort it.

A COMMUNAL READING

We refuse the lie that bitterness must lead to hatred.

We reject the idea that suffering excuses dehumanization.

We resist narratives that tell us we must choose between our safety or our values.

We remember that our story begins in pain — but it does not end there.

Our ancestors were not freed because they forgot their suffering — but because they learned to imagine a world beyond it.

Discussion Prompts

Choose one — or allow silence if words feel insufficient.

- Where are you carrying bitterness this year — personally or communally?
- Where do you feel bitterness shaping how you engage with people who disagree with you?
- When has bitterness strengthened your moral clarity? When has it tempted you to withdraw?
- What support do you need to keep your heart open?

***Maror* and Charoset: Holding Pain and Possibility**

We soften the *Maror* with *Charoset* — a sweet mixture that not only recalls the mortar of enslavement but also tastes of possibility. We do this not to deny bitterness, but to balance it. The charoset reminds us that **even in moments of profound pain, we are still responsible for building something better.**

So, too, are we responsible today. The work of democracy and pluralism is unfinished, imperfect, and demanding. It requires us to build alongside people we did not choose, in moments that do not feel sweet. It requires us to reject false choices and binaries, and to lean into hard conversations — and stay at the table even when there are challenges.

And still, we build.

Because we recognize that there is no true Jewish safety without real inclusive, pluralistic democracy — and that there is no truly inclusive, pluralistic democracy without real Jewish safety.

Because justice is not born from purity or isolation, but from relationship, repair, and shared responsibility. Justice, like liberation, is not born from forgetting—but from remembering wisely.

A Closing Meditation

As the taste of Maror fades, may its lesson remain:

May we resist the urge to let bitterness calcify into certainty.

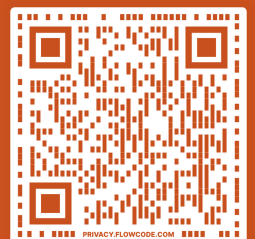
May we refuse to allow pain to become an excuse for abandoning relationship.

May we tell the truth about suffering without surrendering compassion.

And may this bitterness, tasted together, recommit us to the work that freedom demands: to stay engaged, to stay accountable, and to keep widening the circle of who belongs — until no one's daily bread tastes like Maror at all.

TAKE ACTION

The Jewish Council for Public Affairs mobilizes Jewish Americans and our allies to show up for the policies we need to advance our safety and our democracy. By bringing together national and local Jewish organizations — including Jewish Community Relations Councils and other local Jewish communities across the country — alongside our allies and partners, we're working to protect and advance our democracy and counter hate and bigotry at a moment when this work is dire.



SCAN TO JOIN US