

THE DIPPING POINT: KARPAS AND THE HALAKHIC FLOW OF THE SEDER

R. Jason Rogoff

WHY DO WE BEGIN the Seder by dipping a small piece of a vegetable—*karpas*—and eating it?

Like so many elements of the Seder, *karpas* carries both a historical story and an experiential purpose. Historically, it reflects a dining custom of the ancient world that our Rabbis inherited and reshaped as an expression of freedom. Experientially, it is meant to catch our attention, spark questions, and draw children—and adults—into the unfolding drama of the night. In tracing how our tradition has understood this small bite of veggies, we can see how *halakhah* and ritual adapt across time, balancing fidelity to the past with the lived experience of the present.

What is *karpas*?

In the times of the Mishnah, formal banquets began with a series of appetizers. The Mishnah (Pesahim 10:3) describes *hazeret* (lettuce) as one of the items dipped at the beginning of the Seder as part of the appetizer courses, presumably because it was commonly used as such. The practice of beginning the Seder with appetizers continued into the post-talmudic period. Early Haggadot (10th-11th century) indicate that the Babylonian custom was to eat fruits and vegetables, while Eretz Yisraeli Sedarim added rice, eggs, and meat. One of the earliest Eretz Yisraeli Haggadot includes special *berakhot* that were recited over the various appetizers that were eaten before the main course of *matzah*.¹

As eating practices evolved, the Mishnah's description of lettuce as the standard vegetable for the first dipping at the Seder became puzzling. After all, lettuce (*hazeret*) also appears in the Mishnah's list of vegetables that may be used to fulfill the obligation of eating bitter herbs, *maror* (2:6). For the later Babylonian rabbis, this created a problem: by eating lettuce at the beginning of the Seder, one would effectively be eating *maror* too early. The Mishnah captures this tension in its famous question: "Why do we dip twice?" (10:4).

Rather than eliminate the first dipping, our Rabbis devised two strategies that preserved fidelity to the Mishnah while reinterpreting its meaning. First, they encouraged the use of any vegetable for *karpas* other than those eligible for *maror*. This explains the wide range of *karpas* customs we see today—parsley, radishes, potatoes, celery—each family choosing something different to avoid confusing *karpas* with *maror*. Reflecting this, the word *karpas* according to Yerushalmi Shevi'it 9:1 (38c) means parsley.

Second, they infused the practice with a new layer of meaning. The Talmud (Pesahim 114b) explains that the dipping is done "so that it will stand out for the children," transforming a Greco-Roman dining custom into a ritual gesture aimed at one of the central goals of the Seder: keeping children curious and engaged so that we can tell them the story of the Exodus.

¹ See Joshua Kulp, *The Schechter Haggadah* (2009), p. 185.

² According to Rabbinic law (see, e.g., Berakhot 33a), a person who makes an unnecessary *berakhah* (known as a *berakhah le-vatalah*) violates one of the Ten Commandments: "You shall not take God's name in vain" (Shemot 20:7). Halakhic authorities take this seriously, and concern to avoid a *berakhah le-vatalah* is what undergirds the debates that follow.

How much *karpas* should you eat?

This turns out to be a detailed question in the history and *halakhah* of the Seder, and is closely linked with two laws of saying *berakhot* for eating food.²

The first area of *halakhah* that is relevant is the *berakhah aḥaronah*, the blessing after eating. Every act of eating has a *berakhah* before it in order to acknowledge God's role in preparing food for us, but not all eating necessitates a *berakhah aḥaronah* afterward. This after-blessing is linked to whether you have eaten a significant amount of food, rather than just a nibble or a taste. The minimum amount of food that requires a *berakhah aḥaronah* is a *ke-zayit*, about an olive's worth—not a lot, but also not nothing. Because of this requirement for the *berakhah aḥaronah* (which, for vegetables, is *borei nefashot*), the amount of *karpas* you eat might have consequences for the rest of the Seder: if you were to eat a *ke-zayit* of *karpas*, then a requirement for saying *borei nefashot* would seem to kick in.

The second area of *halakhah* around eating that matters here is that one *berakhah* can cover many different items of food. If the only thing you are about to eat is a plate of vegetables, you can say *borei peri ha-adamah* once and then enjoy the entire plate, without needing to add another *berakhah* until *borei nefashot* at the end—after which, if you wanted to eat a new plate of vegetables, you would have to say a new *borei peri ha-adamah*. Similarly, when a meal begins with bread (like the *matzah* at the Seder), you can say *ha-motzi* and then eat the entire meal, without worrying about specifically what other foods you are eating, and then say one *Birkat ha-Mazon* at the end. This also has consequences for *karpas*: since both *karpas* and *maror* are vegetables, can you say one *berakhah* before *karpas* and cover both? Or, since the *Maggid* and then the *ha-motzi* blessing for *matzah* occur between eating these two vegetables, perhaps a second *borei peri ha-adamah*

is required for *maror*—either because the *karpas* is considered its own mini-meal or because there has been too much happening in the meantime?

Over time, practices around *karpas* have adapted to keep in mind these rules and questions. In the early period in Bavel, at least one voice in the Talmud seems to assume that *karpas* was a substantial appetizer.³ This is also reflected in other early rulings: R. Sa'adia Gaon requires *borei nefashot* after *karpas* and the Rambam specifies it must be a *ke-zayit*.⁴

The Rashba,⁵ however, takes seriously the recasting of what was once a normal appetizer course into a specifically surprising practice to prompt children's questions. Given that *karpas* is not, according to this view, designed to be a substantial part of the meal (and the Talmud itself implies that there is no *berakhah aḥaronah* for it),⁶ the Maharil,⁷ in order to remove any doubt about the *berakhah aḥaronah*, suggests that you should specifically eat less than a *ke-zayit* of this first bite in order to make sure that no *borei nefashot* is necessary. This recommendation was taken up and codified in the Shulḥan Arukh (Orah Hayyim 473:6). Consequently, many Haggadot include the explicit instruction that less than a *ke-zayit* of *karpas* must be consumed.

And yet, it is also impossible to deny the evidence of the other (and mostly earlier) practice, reflected in the Talmud, R. Sa'adia Gaon, the Rambam, and the early Haggadot. Even when intended to prompt children's surprise, and despite the halakhic questions about saying *borei nefashot* or not, *karpas* was—at least according to some people at some times—a substantial appetizer course.

Can you eat appetizers during the Seder before *matzah*?

The Mishnah (Pesahim 10:1) prohibits eating on the day leading up to the Seder from Minhah until nightfall,

3 The question put in the mouth of Rav Hisda in Pesahim 115a: "After one fills their belly with lettuce, do they then recite another blessing over it?"

4 Siddur Rav Sa'adia Gaon, p. 136 (Iraq, 882-942); Rambam, Mishneh Torah, Hilkhot Hameitz u-Matzah 8:2.

5 Responsa Rashba, ha-Meyuḥas le-Ramban #202. R. Shlomo ben Avraham (Catalan, 1235-1310).

6 When outlining the procedure for eating a non-lettuce vegetable for *karpas*, the Talmud (Pesahim 114b) says that you should "bless on other vegetables *borei peri ha-adamah* and eat, and then bless *al akhilat maror* and eat." There is no *borei nefashot* in this procedure, because otherwise the *maror* should trigger a new blessing of *borei peri ha-adamah*. See also Rashi and Rashbam's comments on Pesahim 114b, s.v. *peshita*.

7 Responsa Maharil #25. R. Ya'akov ben Moshe Moelin (Germany, c.1365-1427).

and Rashi's explanation is that the *mitzvah* of eating *matzah* is best fulfilled hungrily (commentary on Bavli Pesahim 99b). During the talmudic period, however, the prohibition on eating would end at nightfall and participants in the Seder would partake in appetizer courses (i.e., *karpas*)—including fruit, vegetables, and even meat—before eating *matzah* (Tosefta Pesahim 10:5; Bavli Pesahim 107b). However, since the Maharil and Shulhan Arukh held that one should not eat more than a *ke-zayit* of *karpas*, many *poskim* prohibit eating from the beginning of the Seder until eating *matzah* at the beginning of the meal.

Use your judgment here. If you are especially hungry—for example, if you're a firstborn who has been fasting since sunrise—or if eating a small amount would improve your ability to concentrate during the Seder, it is appropriate to serve a light appetizer course.⁸ The key is moderation, so as not to spoil your appetite for *matzah*. But it is certainly permitted to eat a fuller *karpas* course than one small bite of celery.

And what about the question of the *berakhah aḥaronah*? In the end, it comes down to whether the *karpas* is truly part of the Seder meal or whether Maggid separates it from the meal proper. If Maggid consists of a full separation (after all, it is usually quite long!) then it is its own mini-meal, and if you eat a *ke-zayit* you should probably say *borei nefashot* before embarking on Maggid. But if *karpas* is the first part of the meal that includes Maggid, then the *borei peri ha-adamah* made at the beginning, knowing that *maror* will be coming down the line, can run through the interruptions; therefore, no *berakhah aḥaronah* is necessary, even if you eat more than a *ke-zayit*. Whether the Maggid constitutes a separation is a medieval debate.⁹ But given that one of the most important modern *poskim* thinks that no *borei nefashot* is necessary for *karpas*, even if you eat

more than a *ke-zayit* (since, at the end of the day, the *karpas* can be covered in the general Birkat ha-Mazon), it is reasonable not to worry about including this extra liturgy which is otherwise unmentioned in almost all Haggadot.¹⁰

From the first bite of the Seder, we are pulled into an important debate over its form and function: On the one hand, the Mishnah, early Haggadot, and some halakhic authorities envision a Seder that begins like any festive meal—with a genuine appetizer of vegetables. On the other, the Rashba, Maharil, and Shulhan Arukh reframe *karpas* as a ritual of deliberate minimalism: less than a *ke-zayit*, its function only to spark children's curiosity and draw them into the story. This tension captures the dual nature of the Seder itself. It is both a meal and a narrative, an act of eating and an act of remembering. Too much food too early risks dulling the appetite for *matzah*, the core *mitzvah* of the night. Too little, however, risks leaving us hungry, distracted, and unable to tell the story. ♦

8 Yalkut Yosef Pesah vol. 3 p. 235 and Nitei Gavriel Pesah 80:4 suggest that those who cannot concentrate on the Haggadah due to hunger should eat a small portion of food after reciting Kiddush, then say *borei nefashot*, and then eat less than a *ke-zayit* at *karpas*.

9 See discussion in Tur and Beit Yosef Orah Hayyim 474.

10 Mishnah Berurah (Orah Hayyim 176:2).