

Maror: Grappling with Bitterness

By Julia White, 2021-2022 Kol Koleinu Fellow

The term Maror refers to bitter herbs, usually taking the form of horseradish or bitter lettuce. Traditionally, the maror represents the bitterness felt by Israelites during their period of enslavement in Egypt. However, John Ruch offers an alternative interpretation of bitterness in this religious context.

Religion has never been a part of my focus. In fact, I have a very bitter approach to most formal organized religions that seem to wind up killing lots of people because they don't wear the right shaped hats.

It seems that bitterness is felt both towards and within religious structures- often traversing the spectrum of religious observance itself. Pastor Monte McClain similarly shared with me the ways in which religious skepticism plays a largely unique role in Jewish practice, as well as the bitter legacy that we are left with when we fail to question the structures around us.

"I grew up in the Presbyterian church and I don't know that it was discouraged, but it was not necessarily encouraged to be [questioning] like that"

He was particularly insightful in identifying the bitter legacy of a community in which questioning is frowned upon. He clarifies that this lack of questioning is more of a refusal than an inability, as "questions are thought of as coming from changes in the larger culture and the risk of the church faith assimilating or adapting to cultural changes". I mentioned to Monte that, from my perception, this inability/refusal to question has caused historical rifts (as described below) that can be seen in the polarization of Christianity today.

Evangelical and Fundamentalist streams grow out of the refusal to assimilate or adapt to such change, historically this dates back to the Civil War (around Racism) and the theory of evolution and growth of scientific thinking about 100 years ago (specifically the Scopes Monkey Trial).

John and Monte are both grappling with the abuses and cruelties that are committed when we follow religious leaders blindly, without asking questions. However, while John has extrapolated bitterness towards organized religion as a whole, Monte focuses on grappling with the bitterness of this legacy while remaining engaged in faith.

In addition to bitterness towards the oft-misused power and legacy of the religious structure, the loss of faith that may come after witnessing intense tragedy can evoke intensely bitter resentment towards the divine being that was supposed to protect its followers from harm. Of course, the most acute example of this is shown through Holocaust survivors. I have come across a phrase over the course of my research that was anonymously carved into one of the cell walls at the Mauthausen concentration camp in Austria. The phrase is as follows: Wenn es einen Gott gibt muß er mich um Verzeihung bitten, which translates as If there is a God, he must ask my forgiveness.

While my knowledge of German religious translations is severely limited, I found it striking that Gott (God) remains capitalized. Grappling with bitterness gives us an environment in which to question, disagree, or even resent faith, but it does not necessarily preclude faith itself, in environments where questioning is permitted. There is hope and dialogue in the grappling, whereas bitterness itself is a brick wall.