

Bread of Affliction or Bread of Exodus?

Rabbi Elchanan Adler

Undoubtedly the most celebrated symbol associated with Pesach is matzah. Throughout the Torah and in our liturgy the Passover holiday is referred to as “chag haMatzos.” Let us explore the deeper meaning and symbolism of the matzah that we eat on Pesach.

There are two sections in the haggadah which deal explicitly with the reason behind the matzah at the table. The first is “ha lachma anya” at the beginning of magid; the second is the section beginning “Raban Gamliel haya omer” toward the end of magid.

This is the bread of affliction that our fathers ate in the land of Egypt. Whoever is hungry, let him come and eat; whoever is in need, let him come and conduct the Seder of Passover. This year [we are] here; next year in the land of Israel. This year [we are] slaves; next year [we will be] free people.

הָא לַחְמָא עֲנִיָא דִּי אֲכָלוּ אַבְהֵתָנָא בְּאַרְעָא דְּמִצְרַיִם. כָּל דְּכָפִין יִיבֵי לִּי, כָּל דְּצָרִיךְ יִיבֵי וְיִפְסַח. הַשְּׁמָא הָכָא, לְשָׁנָה הַבְּאָה בְּאַרְעָא דִּישְׂרָאֵל. הַשְּׁמָא עַבְדֵּי, לְשָׁנָה הַבְּאָה בְּנֵי חוֹרִין.

This Matzah that we eat for what reason? Because the dough of our fathers did not have time to become leavened before the King of the kings of kings, the Holy One, blessed be He, revealed Himself to them and redeemed them. Thus it is said: "They baked Matzah-cakes from the dough that they had brought out of Egypt, because it was not leavened; for they had been driven out of Egypt and could not delay, and they had also not prepared any [other] provisions."

מִצָּה זוֹ שֶׁאֵנוֹ אוֹכְלִים, עַל שׁוֹם מָה? עַל שׁוֹם נִשְׁלַח אֶת הַסֶּפִּיק בְּצִקָּם שֶׁל אֲבוֹתֵינוּ לְהַחֲמִיץ עַד שֶׁנִּגְלָה עֲלֵיהֶם מֶלֶךְ מַלְכֵי הַמְּלָכִים, הַקְּדוֹשׁ בְּרוּךְ הוּא, וְגִאֲלָם, שֶׁנִּצְּאָמַר: נִי אִפּוֹ אֶת הַבְּצִק אֲשֶׁר הוֹצִיאוּ מִמִּצְרַיִם עַד שֶׁתִּמְצוֹת, כִּי לֹא הָיָה זְמַן, כִּי גִרְשׁוּ מִמִּצְרַיִם וְלֹא יָכְלוּ לְהַתְמַהֵמֶה, וְגַם צִדָּה לֹא עָשׂוּ לָהֶם.

These two references seem to reflect different, perhaps even contradictory, themes. The first refers to matzah as “lachma anya” – the bread of affliction which was eaten by our forefathers in Egypt. In this sense, matzah represents servitude and poverty. On the other hand, the second reference states that the matzah commemorates the circumstances surrounding the hasty manner in which we left Egypt – there was simply no time to bake the dough in the conventional

way by allowing it to rise; therefore, the Jews had no choice but to bake it in haste and hence, the matza end-product.

What, then, is the true reason for matzah? Is it a symbol of slavery or of freedom? Does it commemorate bread of affliction eaten by the Jews while enslaved in Egypt, or the bread of haste baked on their path to liberation?

A Dual Theme

A resolution to this quandary may be found by examining a passuk in Devarim 16:3:

You shall eat no leavened bread with it; seven days you shall eat unleavened bread, the bread of affliction; for in haste didst thou come forth out of the land of Egypt; so that you may remember the day when you left the land of Egypt all the days of thy life.

לֹא תֹאכַל עִלְיוֹ הַמֶּזֶם שֶׁבַעַת יָמִים
תֹאכַל עִלְיוֹ מִצּוֹת לֶחֶם עֲנִי כִּי בְּחֶפְזוֹן
יִצְאָתָּה מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם לְמַעַן תִּזְכֹּר אֶת
יוֹם יְצִאתְךָ מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם כֹּל יְמֵי חַיֶּיךָ:

In this passuk, the Torah mentions both of the aforementioned reasons for matzah. Apparently, matzah contains a dual motif – of servitude as well as redemption. (See the comments of Ramban to this passuk.)

Consistent with the idea of matzah’s dual theme, Rambam’s version of the haggadah adds three words just prior to “ha lachma anya” – “bevehilu yatzanu miMitzrayim” – “in haste we left Egypt.” Thus, Rabbi Yosef Dov Soloveitchik notes, both reasons for matzah are explicitly stated at the haggadah’s outset. Our version of the haggadah, however, lacks this additional clause. Why at the outset of magid do we focus on the matzah as commemorative of slavery, and only later shift to its being a symbol of the exodus?

The answer is obvious. The Talmud tells us that recounting the story of the exodus requires that we “begin with disgrace and conclude with praise” (Pesachim 116a). The reason for this dictum can be explained as follows: just as light can only be appreciated through darkness, so can the joy of freedom best be felt by first focusing on the slavery which preceded it. It is therefore logical that the first reference to matzah, which appears just before the story is told, should focus on the slavery dimension. Only after the full story of the exodus has been recreated and brought to its happy conclusion does the matzah become a symbol of liberation.

R. Yitzchak Mirsky, in his sefer Hegyonei Halakhah, notes that the dual symbolism of matzah may also be reflected in the yachatz ritual performed just before declaring “ha lachma anya.” Dividing the middle matzah into two parts is a concrete demonstration of the dual themes of slavery and liberation which matzah symbolizes. The piece remaining on the table is the “bread of affliction” upon which we begin telling the story. The second half reserved for afikoman symbolizes the dimension of redemption.

Metamorphosis: From Sorrow to Joy

On a deeper level, there may be a close association between the matzah of affliction and the matzah of the exodus.

The Seforno, in his commentary to Devarim 16:3, provides just such a linkage. Both the matzah eaten in slavery and the matzah baked just before leaving Egypt were the result of external pressure. Throughout their period of enslavement, the Jews were denied the luxury of the extra few minutes necessary to bake leavened bread. To them, matzah became a daily symbol of their lowly status as slaves. In facilitating their release from slavery, Hashem sought to imbue this same symbol with a positive association. He therefore staged the hasty circumstances associated with the redemption from Egypt. In this way, the exodus transformed the experience of exile along with its main symbol, matzah, into a message of joy and hope¹.

From Servants of Pharaoh to Servants of Hashem

Rav Shimon Schwab (Sefer Mayan Beis Hashoeva) similarly suggests that the matzah of redemption sublimates the symbolism of the matzah of slavery. In Egypt, we were Pharaoh's slaves. Our time and energy was spent fulfilling Pharaoh's whims and desires. After the exodus, we were granted the opportunity to utilize our time and energy in the manner of free people. But this new freedom carried risks of its own, since mundane pursuits could thereafter become taskmasters as surely as Pharaoh was. Dedicating our time and energy to gaining affluence and influence would make us slaves to money and power. The pursuit of pleasure could make us slaves to pleasure. By dedicating ourselves to fulfilling Hashem's will, we express our true inner freedom to become avdei Hashem.

Matzah is the quintessential bread of slavery, for humans are forever enslaved, their time and energy dedicated to some set of pursuits. Freedom is the power to choose our master. Freedom is the ever-present opportunity to affirm our choice of Hashem as Master and to affirm our rejection of all other claims on our time and energy. In Egypt, matzah was the token of our servitude to Pharaoh. Now, matzah is the token of our servitude to Hashem.

The Midrash illustrates this point by drawing a parallel between the mitzvah of matzah and the mitzvah for slave-owners to release Jewish slaves after seven years. Failure to observe these two mitzvos, declares the Midrash, led to our first exile from Israel:

Judah was exiled because of "oni" – because they ate chametz on Pesach, and not matzah, which is called bread of "oni." And because of excessive work – because they forced their Jewish slaves to work, as it is written [that Yirmiyahu had to rebuke the Jews for failure to release their slaves] "after seven years, each man, release your brother who was sold to you..."

גלתה יהודה מעוני – על שאכל חמץ
בפסח ולא מצות לחם עוני. ומרב
עבודה – על שהיו משתעבדים בעבד
עברי כמש"נ מקץ שבע שנים תשלחו
איש את אחיו אשר ימכר לך וגו'.

¹ This idea also explains why the Jews were commanded to eat matzah on the evening prior to their departure. As Avudraham explains, this was meant as a harbinger for the next morning's events.

What does matzah share in common with the mitzvah to release Jewish slaves in a timely manner?

Rabbi Matisyahu Solomon (Matnas Chaim, Moadim) explains that both mitzvos symbolize the ideal of total commitment to Hashem. Matzah reminds us that we chose, and constantly choose, to dedicate ourselves to Hashem. As surely as we were Pharaoh's servants in Egypt, we are Hashem's servants at present. Releasing Jewish slaves similarly affirms this ideal. The Jewish slave's efforts must be used to fulfill his owner's will. Yet every Jew ought to be free to devote every fiber of his being to fulfilling Hashem's will. By releasing his Jewish slaves at the appointed time, as by eating matzah, the slave-owner acknowledges this ideal of undivided dedication to Hashem.

Humility Within Freedom: Getting Back to Basics

We might suggest an additional explanation for the link between the dual aspects of matzah by examining the difference between the symbols of chametz and matzah. Chametz suggests haughtiness; matzah symbolizes humility. Chametz shows itself for what it is not – it is just fluff! Matzah is what it appears to be, without any pretensions.

It is easy to see why matzah is associated with slavery. A slave is naturally humble. He has nothing to boast of. He has little sense of self. However, once liberated and given a chance to express his potential in the world, it is easy for the slave to become arrogant, self-centered and status-conscious. Therefore, the Jews needed to preserve the symbol of matzah even after their liberation, so that they could retain an appropriate measure of humility even after their liberation.

Hence, matzah remains a symbol of destitution specifically on the festival commemorating our freedom. The kitel is a similar symbol. The kitel is a white garment, traditionally used as a burial shroud. The kitel is also traditionally worn by the head-of-family at each seder. The kitel is present as a symbol of our mortality at the ceremony that emphasizes our transcendent freedom. The matzah and the kitel both remind us to maintain our humility in the face of our newly acquired freedom.

Matzah as the Paradigm of Jewish Experience

Jewish history is cyclical, replete with ups and downs. For example, Yaakov and his family were invited to Egypt as honored guests, but ultimately they were downtrodden and enslaved. Similarly, Ashkenazic Jews were invited to Western Europe in the 11th and 12th centuries, where they enjoyed comfortable and protected lives. Gradually, the surrounding culture and government grew hostile, until these Jews were oppressed or expelled. Fleeing from France and Rhineland, the Ashkenazim settled in Poland and Ukraine, whose rulers offered them generous benefits. Within a few centuries, these countries too had cultivated a tradition of oppression, climaxing in the devastating Chmielnicki massacres of 1648-1649. Migrating from the hostility

of Eastern Europe, the Jews experienced a similar cycle of invitation and oppression that culminated in the Holocaust. Even with the emergence of the modern state of Israel, we as a people continue to experience our collective ups and downs.

Whenever and wherever we live, we belong to a community which defies traditional historical hallmarks. Even if we live in comfort or luxury for a time, malice and oppression may lurk just around the corner. When we suffer persecution, salvation can come in the blink of an eye. Ours is a cyclical destiny which spans past, present, and future.

Matzah, too, transcends specific contexts, eras, and locales. In Egypt, the matzah we ate as bread of affliction recalled our past and foreshadowed the future. In the second Beis haMikdash, the matzah we ate as bread of redemption recalled and foreshadowed past and future oppression. Through matzah, we commemorate and connect to the totality of Jewish experience, to the highs and lows of our communal story. Ultimately with the speedy coming of mashiach we will rest in Hashem's protective wings and shall dwell in eternal bliss. Nonetheless Matzah will continue to remind us of the darkness which preceded the light.