

The Bread of Affliction

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Each Pesach we begin our Seder with the familiar words:

This year we are here, next year in the land of Israel; this year we are slaves, next year, free men.

השתא הכא לשנה הבאה בארעא דישראל,
השתא עבדי לשנה הבאה בני חורין

The formula is ancient, preserved in its original Aramaic from a time when Aramaic was the vernacular. How many centuries has it been since Jews spoke Aramaic? And yet we continue to say the same words, the same prayer.

Actually, it doesn't sound like a prayer. A prayer would begin יהי רצון, or the Aramaic equivalent: יהא רעוא, let it be Your will – to bring us by next year to Jerusalem, to make us free men.

That is not what we say. We don't begin the Seder with a prayer. We begin with a confident statement of fact: This year we are here; but next year *we will be* in Jerusalem. This year we are slaves, but next year *we will be* free men.

And the years roll by, and the decades, and the centuries, and each year we are disappointed, each year our confident expectation fails to materialize. Last year we were here, and here we are still; last year we were slaves, and slaves we remain.

How is it then that we continue to make this confident prediction, year after year? Shouldn't we at least tone it down, allow for a little uncertainty? This year we are here, *perhaps* next year we will be in *Eretz Yisrael*; this year we are slaves, *let us hope* that next year we will be free men.

Why do we go on year after year, setting ourselves up for disappointment?

Another strange feature of this declaration is its opening: היא לחמא עניא, *this is the bread of affliction*. After all, the Torah describes the matzoh as the bread of redemption, the bread that the Jews baked on their way out of Egypt because they were hurried out of Egypt so quickly that there was no time for their bread to leaven. And later on in the Seder, too, we say: מצה זו שאנו על שלא הספיקו להחמיץ עד, *what does this matzoh signify?* And we answer: *עד*, because as they left Egypt there was no time for their bread to leaven, until the King of Kings revealed Himself to them.

Why do we begin the Seder by describing the *matzo*, that symbol of our redemption, as לחמא עניא?

A commonly given answer is that the matzo had two historical roles. It was, as the Torah says, and as we say later in the Haggadah, the bread of redemption that we baked on our way out of Egypt. But it was also, for centuries, the bread of affliction, the bread that we were fed as slaves in Egypt

when we were not allowed the luxury even of waiting for our bread to leaven before being hurried back to our labors. And so the matzo is both the bread of *geulah* and the bread of affliction.

But this answer, at first glance, seems unsatisfactory. Even if it is true, as a matter of historical fact, that the Jews ate matzo as slaves in Egypt, that is not the *reason* that we eat matzo at the Seder! The Torah makes clear that the reason we are commanded to eat matzo this first night of Pesach is to commemorate the bread that we ate when we were redeemed. So why do we begin the Seder by emphasizing matzo's other, more melancholy and less important, aspect?

Matzo is, indeed, the bread of *geulah*. That is how the Torah characterizes it, that is the reason we eat it at the Seder, that is its essential nature. And therefore when the Jews in Egypt during their long years of slavery, under the lash, ate matzo, they were eating the bread of *geulah*. With every bite of matzo that they ate, they were celebrating their *geulah*. Every meal that they ate in Egypt, where they were fed nothing but matzo, was a Seder.

Only they didn't know it yet.

Because the beginning of the process of *geulah* from Egypt was not the moment when Moshe arrived back from Midian. Nor did it begin when he smote the Egyptian overseer. It did not begin, even, when Moshe was born.

The process of *geulah* began the minute the Jews arrived in Egypt.

We see this in the beautiful Midrash which relates that Yocheved, Moshe's mother, was born בֵּין הַחַוּמוֹת, between the gates of the walls of the city when Yaakov and his children first arrived in Egypt. At that moment – the very moment of our entry into Egypt – the *geulah* began to unfold.

That *geulah* was a long, drawn out process, and for two centuries it was invisible to human eyes. No one realized the significance of Yocheved's birth. No one knew, for that matter, the significance of Moshe's birth and adoption by Pharaoh's daughter. The beginning of the slavery, its intensification, Pharaoh's decrees, were public knowledge that filled our hearts with dismay. But beneath the surface – far beneath – the *geulah* had already begun.

The great R' Yaakov of Lisa, the author of the *Nesivos haMishpat*, in his commentary on the Haggadah, records a beautiful insight. The Haggadah says:

Blessed is He who keeps His promise to Israel; for the Holy One, blessed be He, calculated the end, in order to do what He had promised to Avraham.

ברוך שומר הבטחתו לישראל, שהקב"ה חישב את הקץ לעשות כמה שאמר לאברהם

This is a difficult passage. What does the Haggadah mean by saying that He "calculated the end"? Why does He need to calculate?

R' Yaakov explains that all those years in Egypt the עולם של רבונו was busy bringing the *geulah* about. All those years, when all we saw was misery, He was directing the strands of history towards that end. And the slavery itself, with all its horrors, was a necessary part of that *geulah*, even if we could not – even if we cannot – understand it. All those year when we were calculating

how long we had been slaves, He was calculating how long until we would be free, how much longer the process of redemption would require.

And therefore every bite of לחם עוני, the bitter bread of slavery, was a bite of לחם גאולים, the bread of redemption. The same matzo that we experienced as the bread of affliction, was really the bread of freedom – but only He knew it.

And that is the lesson that the matzo teaches us, and the lesson with which we begin the Seder. As we sit down to the Seder we take the matzo, that symbol of our freedom which is the centerpiece of our Seder table, over which we will soon recount the story of our miraculous deliverance, and we say: *היא לחמא עניא*; this matzo was for many years the bread of our affliction. We ate it in abject despair, not knowing what it was. And all that time – it was really the symbol of our redemption. All that time – we were being redeemed. The mills of *geulah* ground slowly but relentlessly on and on.

Only the process was hidden, until that final moment when – עד שנגלה עליהם מלך מלכי המלכים – He revealed Himself to us. Until that time when He showed us that He had been there all the time – being *מחשב את הקץ*, calculating and counting down and bringing the redemption into being. The *גאולה* was there all the time, what we waited for was its revelation.

היא לחמא עניא, today, too, we eat the bread of affliction. When we read of bombs and mortars, of the shattered lives and bloodthirsty threats that have become our daily fare – then we eat לחם עוני, the bread of affliction. *היתה לי דמעתי לחם יומם ולילה*, our tears are our bread, by day and night.

השתא הכא, this year we are here, still eating the bread of affliction – and there is so much affliction for our people today.

And yet we know that *הקב"ה* is here too with us, being *מחשב את הקץ*, bringing the redemption closer and closer, and this bread, this matzo, is for us today, too – not only לחם עוני but also לחם גאולה, the bread of our redemption, which advances inexorably. And sometimes we are even vouchsafed a glimpse of that advance.

And so with that same faith that our ancestors showed when they first made this declaration, with the same words that they used then, with the same undiminished confidence, we declare: *לשנה הבאה בארעא דישראל*, next year in the land of Israel; *לשנה הבאה בני חורין*, next year indeed we will be free.