



## BREAD FOR THOUGHT

In August 2019, a physicist and bread enthusiast in Pasadena, California named Seamus Blackley baked a loaf of bread using 4,000-year-old yeast extracted from an ancient loaf of Egyptian bread.<sup>1</sup> Yeast, of course, is a leavening agent that produces carbon dioxide when it metabolizes carbohydrates, creating bubbles that help otherwise dense bread expand into a fluffy loaf. As we observe Pesach and the command not to eat leavened bread (chometz), it is interesting to note that it was the ancient Egyptians who are credited with discovering the leavening process and producing leavened breads, probably with the help of the beer they liked to drink, or with the addition of spontaneous

sourdough to the baking process. From ancient Egypt, the use of sourdough as a leavening agent later spread throughout Greece and the Roman Empire. Egyptian pride in their bread-making process is memorialized in wall paintings found in numerous Egyptian tombs, which testify to the production of both leavened and unleavened loaves.<sup>2</sup> Histories of ancient bread-making cite the Torah's description of Pharaoh's baker imprisoned with Yosef and the Torah's distinction between matzah and chometz as evidence of the importance of bread-making in ancient Egypt, and the presence of both leavened and unleavened breads. Thus, the removal of chometz on Pesach can signify the removal of

something quintessentially Egyptian from our midst.

On a deeper level, we can draw a lesson from the distinctive baking processes of matzah and chometz. The Shelah ha-Kadosh explains<sup>3</sup> that abstaining from eating leavened bread on Pesach signifies our belief in Hashem as the creator, who brought forth the world *ex-nihilo*, *yesh me-ayin*, from no pre-existing matter. Chometz, as noted above, was always baked using a starter or sourdough from an older batch of dough, paralleling the mistaken belief in an eternal world and no creator. In contrast to chometz, matzah is a new creation, so to speak. The combination of only flour and water to create matzah, with no leavening agent added, symbolizes

the creation of Heaven and Earth from nothing. The flour parallels the dust of the earth, and water, the moisture of the Heavens, all created *yesh me-ayin*.

The Shelah further notes that after the initial creation of matter Hashem formed the rest of creation from that matter, a process referred to as *yesh me-yesh*. The distinction between *yesh me-ayin* and *yesh me-yesh* is reflected in the special obligation to eat matzah on the first night of Pesach, because matzah symbolizes the initial stage of creation: that of *yesh me-ayin*. For the rest of the week of Pesach, we are not obligated to eat matzah, but only to refrain from eating chometz, symbolizing the subsequent days of creation that utilized already-created matter — *yesh me-yesh* — as stated in the verses:

בְּרֵאשִׁון בְּאַרְבָּעָה עָשָׂר יוֹם לַחֹדֶשׁ בְּעֶרְבֹת תֹּאכְלוּ  
מִצַּת עַד יוֹם הָאֶחָד וְעֶשְׂרִים לַחֹדֶשׁ בְּעֶרְבֹת.  
שִׁבְעַת יָמִים שְׂאֹר לֹא יִמְצָא בְּבֵיתְכֶם כִּי כֹל  
אֲכַל מִחֻמֶּצֶת וְנִכְרַתָּה הַנֶּפֶשׁ הַהוּא מֵעַמֵּת  
יִשְׂרָאֵל בְּגֵר וּבְאֶזְרַח הָאָרֶץ.

*In the first month, from the fourteenth day of the month at evening, you shall eat unleavened bread until the twenty-first day of the month at evening. No leaven shall be found in your houses for seven days. For whoever eats what is leavened, that person shall be cut off from the community of Israel, whether he is a stranger or a citizen of the country.*

On still a deeper level, the Shelah explains that Adam ha-Rishon was like matzah, a new creation without parents. Through his sin, the *yetzer hara* — compared to the leaven — entered him, clouding his mind and introducing death to his body. The Torah, here, as well as in the subsequent verse (Shemot 12:20), uses the word *machmetzet* to describe chometz:

כֹּל מִחֻמֶּצֶת לֹא תֹאכְלוּ בְּכֹל מוֹשְׁבֵיתְכֶם תֹּאכְלוּ  
מִצּוֹת.

*You shall eat nothing leavened; in all your settlements you shall eat unleavened bread.*

The word *machmetzet* (מחמצת) itself hints at the introduction of death to the world after the sin of Adam. The center of the word spells chometz (חמץ) surrounded by a *mem* before it and a *tav* after, to spell *met* (מת), or death. Chometz signifies the contamination of our beings through sin brought about by obeying the *yetzer hara* now within us, which can lead to our downfall. For this reason, before Pesach, we gather and burn

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## As we eat our matzah, we choose life and aim to live lives of righteousness.

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the leaven in our homes signifying the removal of the *yetzer hara* that contaminated Adam. In contrast to the destruction wrought by the *yetzer hara* — symbolized by chometz — matzah symbolizes the *tzaddik*, whose good deeds and correct beliefs earn life in the World to Come. The Alshich ha-Kadosh explains<sup>4</sup> that the *tzaddikim* are therefore referred to as *chai* — living, a word with the numerical value of 18. Matzah likewise has the numerical value of 18 when calculated by the *mispar katan*<sup>5</sup> (5-ה, 9-צ, 4-מ). As we eat our matzah, we choose life and aim to live lives of righteousness.

On the seder night, we are elevated and pristine after having removed the chometz from without, and we focus on the chometz within. We are granted extra help on that auspicious night called *leil shimurim*, a night where Hashem grants us protection against the *yetzer hara* and other spiritual forces that wish us harm. On that special night we are granted the strength to break free from whatever holds us back from actualizing our potential, just as Hashem liberated us from the confines of Mitzrayim, as the *pasuk* (Shemot 13:14) states:

וְהָיָה כִּי יִשְׁאַלְךָ בְּנֶךְ מָחָר לֵאמֹר מָה זֶה  
וְאָמַרְתָּ אֵלָיו בְּחֹזֶק יָד הוֹצִיאָנוּ ה' מִמִּצְרַיִם  
מִבְּיַת עֲבָדִים.

*And when, in times to come, your son asks you, saying, "What is this?" you shall say to him, "It was with a mighty hand that the Lord brought us out from Egypt, the house of bondage."*

Matzah is referred to as “bread of faith” in the Zohar, and as we fulfill this mitzvah let it reaffirm our faith in Hashem as the creator and ruler of the world, as well as our faith in our own abilities to overcome both internal and external obstacles that may be holding us back.

### Endnotes

1. <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/08/08/science/egyptian-yeast-bread.html>.
2. *Flour and Breads and Their Fortification in Health and Disease Prevention*, Second Edition, Edited by Victor R. Preedy and Ronald Ross Watson (Academic Press, 2019) 178.
3. *Mesechet Pesachim, Perek Torah Ohr*, 11.
4. Alshich on Shemot: 13:11-17.
5. *Mispar katan* is a form of *gematria* where the zeroes are dropped from the value of all letters valued above 9.