

The Roots of Matza's split personality

Rabbi Maury Grebenau

Matza's seder portrayal

Towards the beginning of the seder we say the paragraph of *Ha Lachma Anya* over the Matza. Those words, usually translated as “this is the bread of affliction”, seem to characterize Matza as a reminder of our slavery. The phrase continues “that our forefathers ate in Egypt” which seems to cement that idea¹. From this introductory paragraph we might conclude that Matza is a symbol of slavery recalling the Matza that was eaten while the Jewish people were slaves in Egypt.

Later in the Haggadah we get to paragraphs that refer to Pesach, Matza and Marror, and Matza seems to have a very different characterization. Here, we say the following:

This Matzah that we eat is for what reason? Because the dough of our fathers did not have time to become leavened before the King of kings, the Holy One, blessed be He, revealed Himself to them and redeemed them.

We seem to be characterizing Matza as bread that reminds us of leaving Egypt and is a symbol of freedom. This reminds us of the story we are so familiar with of the dough baking on the backs of the Jews as they finally walked out of Egypt to freedom.

Back to the Torah

This tension does not begin with the Haggadah – it is also in the Torah. However, in Shemot, as the story of the exodus unfolds, you will be hard pressed to find the tension. Matza is continually referred to as a symbol of freedom. But if we are patient and wait till Devarim 16:3 we see the roots of the Haggadah's dual message. There the Torah uses the phrase *Lechem Oni* (which we might translate as “poor man's bread” or “the bread of affliction”) and also an allusion to the hasty redemption that caused the dough to bake before it had a chance to rise, all in the same verse.

לֹא-תֹאכַל עִלְיָו חֶמֶץ שִׁבְעַת יָמִים תֹּאכַל-עִלְיָו מִצּוֹת לֶחֶם עֲגִי כִּי בְּחַפְזוֹן יָצֵאתָ מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם לְמַעַן תִּזְכָּר
אֶת-יְוֹם יְצִאתְךָ מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם כֹּל יְמֵי חַיֶּיךָ

You shall not eat leaven with it; for seven days you shall eat with it matza, the bread of affliction, for in haste you went out of the land of Egypt, so that you shall remember the day when you went out of the land of Egypt all the days of your life.

Two Approaches

The Ramban and Seforno take one approach to understanding this verse and the potential contradiction and the Maharal takes a different approach. The Ramban and Seforno understand that, indeed, Matza symbolizes both slavery and freedom. Matza is meant as a dual symbol that recalls the full arc of our experience in being under the tyranny of Egyptian rule as well as our

¹ The Maharal (Gevurot Hashem) is unconvinced by this reading and comments that this could simply be read as a reference to the exodus with “in Egypt” meaning their experience when leaving Egypt.

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miraculous freedom by the hand of G-d. The comments of Seforno (Devarim 16:3) are particularly striking:

<p>Bread of Pain. Bread that was eaten in pain and there was not time to leave their dough until it rose because of the pressure of their taskmasters.</p> <p>For in haste you left. The reason to memorialize the quickness they ate the bread (in Egypt) is that [Hashem] switched the haste of pain for the haste of redemption, similar to the idea that “I will trade their mourning for joy.”</p>	<p style="text-align: right;">לחם עוני. לחם שהיו אוכלים בעוני ושלא היה להם פנאי להשהות עיסתם עד שתחמץ מפני נוגשים אצים:</p> <p style="text-align: right;">כי בחפזון יצאת. והטעם להזכיר חפזון הלחם הוא כי תמורת אותו חפזון העוני היה לך אח"כ חפזון הגאולה כענין והפכתי אבלם לששון (ירמיהו לא, יב):</p>
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According to the Seforno, the Matza symbolizes this divinely catalyzed transition from slavery to freedom and draws our attention to Hashem's kindness and involvement in shaping this reality. In the thinking of Ramban and Seforno, Matza becomes a symbol of the concept that light can come from the very depths of the darkness. From the same bread that was our sense of despair comes our salvation².

Maharal (Gevuras Hashem perek 51), rejects this approach and believes that Matza is purely a symbol of freedom³. He understands the word “Ani” to mean ‘simple’ or ‘pristine’ instead of ‘poor’ or ‘lacking’. He explains that the pasuk in Devarim is reflective of just one theme – that of redemption. We are told that Matza is simple bread and as such is a symbol of freedom. It is just flour and water without any other catalysts or forces acting upon it. Matza is free from outside forces, it is food of self-determination, the perfect meal to celebrate our freedom.

Matza's simplicity, explains the Maharal, rather than demonstrating some sort of lacking really demonstrates its elevated level. Just as the garments of the Kohen Gadol are white and simple when he enters the holy of holies on Yom Kippur rather than the more ornate gold garments he usually uses, here too simplicity implies elevation. Hashem too is “*pashut*” or as we say in the Shema every day Hashem is *echad* – a unified entity.

² It is interesting to note that Tosfot (Pesachim 35b s”v yotzin) seems to suggest that eating Matza at the seder is an act of aniyut. This may go even farther than the approach of Ramban and certainly Seforno. While the Seforno is suggesting that Matza is a symbol of slavery and its transition to freedom, Tosfot suggests that the experience of eating Matza can still be one steeped in slavery.

³ The Maharal connects the three mitzvot of the seder night to the three things Hashem told Avrohom at the *brit ben habetarim* that would comprise the arc of the exodus story (Bereshit 15:13-14)

The Egyptians would enslave the Jews	וְעַבְדוּם וְעַנּוּ אֹתָם	Marror (embittered our lives)
Hashem will judge the Egyptians	וְגַם אֶת הַגּוֹי אֲשֶׁר יַעֲבֹדוּ דָן אֲנִי	Pesach (Hashem killed the firstborn Egyptians (and not us))
The Jewish people would leave Egypt	וְאֶחָרֵי כֵן יֵצְאוּ בְרַכְשׁ גְּדוֹל	Matza (a symbol of freedom)

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The pasuk also connects the *Lechem Oni* to *chipazon* – the quickness of the salvation – which is also connected to the same idea. Redemption is a spiritual matter and as such it is not bound by time and it occurs with alacrity.

The Matza they ate in Mitzrayim

Before the exodus occurs, we find that the people are already commanded to eat Matza with the Pesach sacrifice (see Shemot 12:18). During the first Pesach while they were still in Mitzrayim, they already were not allowed to eat leavened bread and the Ramban (Shemot 12:39) understands that the Jewish people intended to make Matzot in order to comply with this command. So essentially they were already commanded to eat Matza (and perhaps already ate it) as part of the first Pesach seder.

For the Maharal, this makes perfect sense. The mitzva of Matza stems from its simplicity not necessarily from the events of the exodus and the hasty exit. The fact that the command and concept of Matza predates the hasty exit is part of what is fueling the Maharal's approach. The Matza is meant to focus us on the freedom from Egypt and accentuate this arc of the story. This is what Shmuel (Pesachim 115b) means when he explains that *Lechem Oni* means, "bread that we say many things about."

Agency & Optimism

In one of the most popular books of 2016, *Hillbilly Elegy*, JD Vance, describes his upbringing in a small town in Ohio with an absent father, a drug-abusing mother and a culture of Appalachian values that seemed to almost preclude upward mobility. JD describes how he went to the Marines after high school and was able to learn critical life lessons and unlearn unhelpful mental models that were limiting his future prospects.

Vance recognizes that there were two things he now had that he did not have when growing up and he feels they allowed him to transcend the family disfunction and lack of a future that most of his peers suffered. These two things were a sense of agency and a sense of optimism. Because Vance now felt that he had the ability to positively shape his future through his actions and because he was able to see better opportunities in his future, JD was able to end up a happily married graduate of Yale Law school with a solid job – something that would have been a ridiculous dream when he was growing up. These two elements may be reflected in the approaches of the Ramban and Maharal.

The Ramban's conception of Matza as symbolic of the arc between the dark times and freedom relates to agency - there is an arc to our lives and we can make a difference. For the Ramban, Matza doesn't have a split personality, it is an inclusive arc of our story as Jews. Rav Soloveitchik, in *Kol Dodi Dofek*, speaks about the difference between *yeud* and *goral* as two different ways to relate to being part of the Jewish people. *Goral* is a sense of being acted upon without any agency, we are swept along with no say in the matter – this is fate. *Yeud* is a sense of active destiny as a nation, as active participants in the sacred mission of the Jewish people. This is destiny. Agency turns fate into destiny and it is literally baked in to the Matza we are eating.

The Roots of Matza's split personality

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The Maharal's insistence that Matza is a pure symbol of freedom reminds us of JD's other ingredient in his secret sauce - optimism. Even while still in Egypt we ate the bread of freedom, seeing a future that was much better than our current situation and letting that vision guide us forward.

A further comment of the Maharal also echoes the concept of optimism. In the Haggadah when the speech of the Bikkurim is being explained the Hagaddah comments on the following verse (Devarim 26:7):

וַנִּצְעַק אֶל־ה' אֱלֹהֵי אֲבוֹתֵינוּ, וַיִּשְׁמַע ה' אֶת־קוֹלנוּ, וַיִּרְא אֶת־עֲוֹנוֹנוּ וְאֶת עֲמָלְנוּ וְאֶת לַחֲצוֹנוּ

And we cried out to the Lord, the God of our ancestors, and the Lord heard our voice, and He saw our affliction, and our toil and our duress

The Hagaddah explains that this crying out is the same that is described as the sighing of the Jewish people due to the hard work brought on by the new king (Shemot 2:23):

וַיְהִי בַיָּמִים הַרְבֵּי־מֵהֶם וַיָּמָת מֶלֶךְ מִצְרַיִם, וַיִּאָּנְחוּ בְנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל מִ־הָעֲבוֹדָה וַיִּזְעֻקוּ, וַתַּעַל שׁוֹעֲתָם אֶל־הָאֱלֹהִים מִן הָעֲבֹדָה.

And it was in those great days that the king of Egypt died and the Children of Israel sighed from the work and yelled out, and their supplication went up to God from the work.

The Maharal comments that some believe the new king was worse than the old king and this what was made the Jews sigh. He finds this difficult to believe since the previous king was the one who enslaved them in the first place and had a clear history of mistreating them. Instead, he says that with the initial king the Jews had already given up hope. They did not express discontent or cry out to Hashem because they had accepted their misery as an unchangeable status quo. When a new king came there was a glimmer of hope: Perhaps he would be better than the last king. When their hopes were dashed, they sighed and cried out to Hashem. What the Maharal is saying is extraordinary and very much in line with the idea of optimism. It was only when we anticipated a brighter future that we were ready to be redeemed. When we were unable to conceive of a better tomorrow we did not cry out to Hashem, we did not take any steps to move forward.

Conclusion

Matza is one of the most ubiquitous symbols at the seder and one of the most well known among Jews and non-Jews alike. When we look at the pesukim and commentaries, the common narrative of dough baking on the backs of the Jews as they flee Egypt evaporates, giving way to a more nuanced story and some fascinating lessons. Maharal and Ramban both offer insights into the character of Matza as either a symbol of the arc from slavery to freedom or a pure symbol of freedom. The lessons are agency and optimism are important for us all personally and as values to pass on to the next generation at our *sedarim*.

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