

Chametz Umatzah

When my kids were in elementary school, they had a week, possibly around Christmas, when they learned about various cultures of the world. Among the festivities of the week, the school devoted a day to sampling the breads and pastries of world cultures.

My kids described the experience of being ushered as a ten-year-old into the school atrium, where the tables were laden with these exotic breads, and the first thought was, "Great, a food thing. I won't be able to eat any of this." And then, lo and behold, they noticed that they, the Jews, were represented among this handful of strange, foreign, other cultures. So there was one thing on this table they could eat: matzah.

Unlike the other kids, they get a full-size cracker of matzah, since nothing else in the line is certified kosher. And then this fourth grader has to figure out how to do netilas yadayim, to perform a ritual hand-washing, because for us, eating bread is a sacred act. "Teacher, can I go, umm, wash my hands?" "Why certainly," the teacher responds, impressed by the child's hygienic conscientiousness. And so the Jewish kids are powering through this loaf of what the Bible calls "bread of affliction," a dry cracker containing only one ingredient, wheat flour, which was most likely baked six months to a year ago, all the while having flashbacks of April, where for two nights in a row, at about 11:30 at night, they ate so much of this stuff they could feel it like a rock in their stomach. And the Gentile kids are all raving about it, saying "This matzah stuff is so good!"

Let's face it, there's something iconic about matzah, especially the square, crispy, Ashkenazi machine-made kind. Also, it's cheap, easy to acquire, doesn't require refrigeration, and never spoils. So I get why they picked it.

The irony is that matzah is nowhere near the list of the greatest Jewish glutinous culinary achievements; it's not a great first impression of Jewish culture. I mean, of all the Jewish breads to choose, why not challah, the delicious and moist cake masquerading as bread? Or how about something sweet, like babka, or rugelach, or hamantaschen, or sufганиot? I mean, Jews invented bagels for heaven's sake, add a little lox and shmear to make it authentic! You want something more exotic, how about laffa or malawach?

But no, they had to go and pick the one bread that we eat only because we have to and that we try our hardest to avoid for the other 98% of the year.

To be fair, Passover is foundational to Jewish identity. Over and over again, God invokes the exodus from Egypt as his basis for issuing commandments. Every time we say kiddush, whether it's for Passover, Sukkot, Shavuot, and in fact every Friday night we call those holy days a memorial of the exodus from Egypt. What's more, there is a commandment in the Torah for Jewish people to remember the exodus from Egypt every single day. Deuteronomy 16:3 says:

You shall eat no leavened bread with [the Passover sacrifice]. Seven days you shall eat it with unleavened bread, the bread of affliction-- for you came out of the land of Egypt in haste-- that all the days of your life you may remember the day when you came out of the land of Egypt. (Deuteronomy 16:3)

The Hebrew word translated “remember” is not referring a mental process; whenever the Bible says “remember,” the word means drawing attention to something through spoken words. And so as our prophets and sages developed our daily prayers, they made sure to include verbal acknowledgements of the exodus from Egypt in both the morning and evening prayers.

Today is the last Shabbat before the holy time of Passover, so it is important to take this opportunity to prepare our hearts and minds for this meeting with God, and I’d like to focus on one of the core symbols: matzah. But before we get too deep into things, I’d like to give a basic overview, considering that we have a lot of new faces and people with varying degrees of familiarity with the holiday. So if you’ve been doing this a long time, just bear with us as we review the basics.

Let’s take a look at Deuteronomy 16. I would like to read this from the ArtScroll Chumash, because I tried bringing this in from the ESV, but there were so many translation errors I would need to correct that it would detract from my point. Deuteronomy 16, page 1021 in the ArtScroll Chumash.

You shall observe the month of springtime and perform the pesach-offering for Hashem, your God, for in the month of springtime Hashem, your God, took you out of Egypt at night. You shall slaughter the pesach-offering to Hashem, your God, from the flock, and [also offer] cattle, in the place where Hashem will choose to rest His Name. You shall not eat leavened bread with it, for seven days you shall eat matzos because of it, bread of affliction, for you departed from the land of Egypt in haste—so that you will remember the day of your departure from Egypt all the days of your life.

No leaven of yours shall be seen throughout your boundary for seven days, nor shall any of the flesh that you slaughter on the afternoon before the first day remain overnight until morning. You may not slaughter the pesach-offering in one of your cities that Hashem, your God, gives you; except at the place that Hashem, your God, will choose to rest His Name, there shall you slaughter the pesach-offering in the afternoon, when the sun descends, the appointed time of your departure from Egypt. You shall roast it and eat it in the place that Hashem, your God, will choose, and in the morning you may turn back and go to your tents. For a six-day period you shall eat matzos and on the seventh day shall be an assembly to Hashem, your God; you shall not perform labor.

The holiday we typically refer to as Passover, the Torah calls “Chag HaMatzot,” or the festival of Matzos. When the Torah uses the term Passover or Pesach, it is always talking about a sacrifice, not a holiday.

We cannot offer any sacrifices today, and this passage makes it clear that the Passover lamb can only be offered in Jerusalem at the altar. God willing, if you join us on for afternoon prayers on Wednesday, we will go into great detail about how that offering was performed. In ancient times, people would eat the lamb with the matzah and bitter herbs as kind of a burrito. Keep in mind that until a few hundred years ago, all matzah was floppy like a tortilla; the idea to make it crispy like a cracker is relatively new.

So at Yeshua’s final seder with his disciples, and for that matter, every seder Yeshua attended, matzah was soft like laffa, not crackery.

When the Temple was standing, that burrito was served along with other sacrificial meat and side dishes on the first night of Chag HaMatzot, the seven-day festival of Unleavened Bread. And that meal is the starting point for what we now know of as the Passover seder. I said seven-day festival, but I should

mention that here outside the land of Israel, this holiday extends for an additional eighth day. I don't have time to get into the reasons for that now.

Why do we have a festival dedicated to flatbread? It makes sense to celebrate and commemorate the exodus from Egypt, the slavery, the showdown between Pharaoh and Moses and Aaron, the ten plagues, the blood on the doorposts, and the splitting of the sea. But if you were to summarize that whole event in one word, would you really arrive at "matzot"? Flatbread? Sure, unleavened bread appears in the story, but it's a relatively minor character. How did matzah end up claiming center stage?

At the Passover seder we have stacks of matzah on our tables because we all need to eat it. But the most common custom is for the leader to set aside three special symbolic matzot. There are many explanations for why three matzot, and perhaps there are multiple valid answers to this question. One of the most compelling, in my opinion, is that matzah has three distinct roles in the Exodus from Egypt:

As we just read in Deuteronomy 16, matzah is called "bread of affliction." Another possible translation is "bread of poverty." At our seder, the Haggadah instructs us to say "This is the bread of affliction that our forefathers ate in the land of Egypt." So it's clear that matzah symbolizes the slavery and suffering and poverty in Egypt.

And yet a rational explanation for why we eat matzah at our seder is not because it was slave food, but because God specifically instructed our ancestors to eat the Passover lamb with matzah. Exodus 12:8 says, "They shall eat the flesh that night, roasted on the fire; with unleavened bread and bitter herbs they shall eat it." So the matzah doesn't represent slavery, it represents our faith as we trusted in God to spare our houses as he struck down the firstborn of Egypt. We are eating it at our seder along with bitter herbs in imitation of that event.

But then again, this contradicts what we read in the Haggadah. There is a point in the Haggadah where we lift up the matzah and explicitly ask the question: This matzah, what does it symbolize? And the answer the Haggadah provides is: It represents the fact that there was not enough time for our ancestors' dough to rise before the king over kings of kings, the blessed Holy One was revealed to them and redeemed them. And then it quotes Exodus 12:39:

And they baked unleavened cakes of the dough that they had brought out of Egypt, for it was not leavened, because they were thrust out of Egypt and could not wait, nor had they prepared any provisions for themselves.

That also is a very compelling answer. They didn't eat matzah because they were forced or commanded to; it was the natural outcome of the circumstances. The matzah is at our seder to symbolize how instantly the redemption occurred. The matzah is really then the bread of freedom.

So which is it? Is it the bread of poverty and affliction? Is it the bread of faith in the midst of darkness? Or is it the bread of sudden freedom? The answer, of course, is that it represents all three, and this is a great explanation for why we have three matzot. Just as a poor man takes his loaf, tears it in half, and sets one part aside for tomorrow, we have one broken matzah. The two other matzot, the bread of faith and the bread of freedom, are complete and unbroken.

Deuteronomy 16:33 commands that “You shall not eat leavened bread with [the Passover lamb].” The word translated “leavened bread” here is *chametz*. Chametz is not easy to translate. It does not necessarily take the form of bread, and it is not leavened in the way we do in modern times.

Chametz is defined as the combination of certain kinds of grain with water, left to sit and ferment before baking. To make fluffy bread you normally ferment it; however, chametz is not about fluffiness, it’s about fermentation. It’s related to the word for “sour.” You can speed up the fermentation process by adding yeast, or as they did in ancient times, mix in a little piece of already-fermented dough. However, this is not strictly necessary. All that is needed in order to make leavened bread is flour, water, and time.

How much time? The first stage in the biochemical process of leavening probably starts the instant that water and flour combine. But Jewish law is always based on things a typical person can see and experience firsthand, so the sages approached it this way: at what point are there observable differences between a lump of dough that’s been sitting on the counter for a while and one that you just finished kneading? Those observable differences (such as a change of colors, the formation of cracks on the surface), may or may not be the result of fermentation, but that’s not the point. The point is that once you have observed a change, time is now an ingredient in your food, and Passover is all about time. Early Jewish authorities noted that significant changes are typically observable at around 18 minutes, which is the standard to this day. Thus, to make matzah kosher for Passover, one must finish baking it within 18 minutes of when it is done being kneaded.

On a practical note, that might mean things you don’t think of as leavened bread could still be chametz. For example, noodles, tortillas, or crackers. Or grain-based vinegar, which is a common ingredient in other foods, such as condiments. Or grain-based alcohol, which forms the base for flavoring extracts.

If you are not Jewish, don’t sweat it; this is not one of the laws that the apostles obligated Gentiles to observe. If you feel like trying it out or participating, that’s your decision.

If you are Jewish and are new to this idea, also, don’t sweat it. There is space for someone to learn and grow. It’s not all or nothing. Nonetheless if you’re wondering why observant Jews seem a little excessive when it comes this commandment, going so far as to take a blow torch to our kitchens and then envelop them in aluminum foil, it’s because the Torah states in Exodus 12, the consequences for eating chametz is to be cut off from Israel. It’s not something to be taken lightly.

The Torah wants us not only to scrupulously avoid eating chametz; it must not even be seen in our possession. Why is this such a serious prohibition? Let’s consider the symbolism of chametz and matzah. What are some ideas you’ve heard about what chametz and matzah symbolize?

- Sin? In 1 Corinthians 5:8 Paul says, “Let us therefore celebrate the festival, not with the old leaven, the leaven of malice and evil, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth.” Malice and evil are sort of generic words, but I find his opposite terms more interesting. You would think that if chametz represents malice and evil, then matzah would represent kindness and goodness. But no, sincerity and truth.
- In Luke 12:1 Yeshua warned his disciples, “Beware of the leaven of the Pharisees, which is hypocrisy.” If chametz is hypocrisy, that is to say performance for the sake of being seen, then matzah would be sincerity and humility.

- Pride and Humility. Chametz puffs up dough. Matzah remains lowly. When we read that matzah is the bread of affliction, another possible interpretation is that it is the bread of humility.
- Simplicity and complexity. Matzah is the simplest possible bread. That simplicity represents closeness to the source and to the divine origin of all things. In the same way, the high priest on the Day of Atonement removes his colorful, complex, lavish outfit and puts on simple white linen to enter the holy of holies. In that sense the simple matzah represents the simple unity of the spiritual world, and chametz represents the complexity and differentiation of the lower worlds.
- Yetzer Hara and Yetzer HaTov? One of the sages, Rabbi Alexandri, added a prayer after he recited the Amidah, and in his prayer he would say, "Master of the Universe, you know that it really is our will to do your will. But what prevents us? The s'or, the leaven in the dough. The commentaries explain that this is the Yetzer Hara. So then perhaps matzah is the yetzer hatov.
- Alacrity (zerizus) vs Laziness and procrastination (atzlus). Exodus 12:17 says, "You shall guard the matzot." Mechilta on this verse says, don't read this as guard the matzot, but guard the mitzvot. Just as you are not allowed to delay when you are making matzah lest it begin to ferment, in the same way when a mitzvah opportunity presents itself, do not let it ferment; do not delay in performing it.
- Corruption vs. Immortality. Fermentation is a form of decomposition. So perhaps we could see chametz as the mortal human body that dies and decays, and matzah as the immortal, incorruptible resurrected body that lasts forever. Matzah does not seem to decay. One time I bought a package of matzah from a kosher store right before Passover, and when I brought it home I noticed that it was labeled for Passover of the previous year. And honestly, I don't think I would have noticed the difference. However, this phenomenon only holds true regarding the modern crispy Ashkenazi matzah. The floppy, soft matzah that was common only a few hundred years ago does quite readily spoil.

When Yeshua held up the matzah at his seder and stated, "This is my body," it's fascinating to consider and compare how each of these potential interpretations compare to him.

But with each of these symbols we have to ask: why only Pesach. In other words, if pork symbolized sin, then I could understand, since we are to abstain from pork year round. But with chametz, there is nothing wrong with it whatsoever for the rest of the weeks of the year. If chametz symbolizes something inherently undesirable, then why do we accept it and even include it in our observance at other times?

Yeshua even taught this parable in Matthew 13:33: "The kingdom of heaven is like leaven that a woman took and hid in three measures of flour, till it was all leavened." If chametz is undesirable, why would he make such a comparison?

Do you all know the four questions? There is a point in the seder where it is customary to have the smallest child recite four specific questions to the leader of the seder. Technically they are not four questions, but four observations. "How different this night is from other nights!" the child says.

- On all other nights, we eat chametz and matzah. Tonight, all of it is matzah!
- On all other nights, we eat other vegetables. Tonight, maror, the bitter herb!
- On all other nights, we do not dip even once. Tonight, twice!
- On all other nights, we eat either sitting or reclining. Tonight, we all recline.

A fun fact: that last question was not one of the original four. In ancient times, people always reclined when eating a formal meal, so it would not have been noteworthy. We find in the Gospels, for example, any time people are sitting down for a meal, the text says they are reclining.

The Mishnah records that instead of this question in ancient times, the child exclaimed: “On all other nights, we eat meat that is roasted, stewed, or boiled. Tonight, it is all roasted.”

That last question is telling. Today, we do not eat roasted meat at the seder, because we want to avoid giving the impression that we are serving a true Passover sacrifice. But the child asking this question in the Mishnah is not only eating the Passover sacrifice, but he or she is also accustomed to eating sacrificial meals in general. That is why the child notes that on other nights, we eat chametz and matzah. When is it a mitzvah to eat both chametz and matzah? We read about it in this week’s parashah. The thanksgiving offering, the *korban todah*, is served with a combination of both chametz and matzah together. This is the meal the child of the four questions is used to eating.

If chametz isn’t categorically evil, then what is it about it that is incompatible with Passover? I would suggest that the symbolism of chametz and matzah on the most fundamental level of the Torah is not about sin or pride. It’s about time and timelessness.

The recipe for chametz is flour, water, and time. The recipe for matzah is flour and water, minus time. Matzah represents timelessness. And the relationship between time and timelessness is at the center of the exodus narrative.

How does the matzah of slavery, the bread of affliction represent timelessness? It’s because time is money. A slave owner doesn’t want his slaves to waste time preparing food, so he gives them matzah. Time is the essence of freedom; you could be the richest person in the world, but if someone else owns your time, you are a slave and you are utterly destitute.

The child asking the four questions hints at this by saying “tonight”: “*halailah hazeh*.” This is a key phrase the Torah uses in its explanation of the redemption. It occurs only three times in the entire Bible, all relating to Passover, and in fact, all of them in Exodus chapter 12. Two of them occur in the form “*balailah hazeh*,” meaning “on this night.”

Exodus 12:8 uses this phrase to refer to the time for eating the Passover sacrifice. “They shall eat the flesh that night [*balailah hazeh*], roasted on the fire; with unleavened bread and bitter herbs they shall eat it.”

Four verses later, Exodus 12:12 describes the slaying of the firstborn. “For I will pass through the land of Egypt that night [*balailah hazeh*], and I will strike all the firstborn in the land of Egypt, both man and beast; and on all the gods of Egypt I will execute judgments: I am the LORD.”

In verse 29 we see this confirmed, as the Torah tells us, “At midnight the LORD struck down all the firstborn in the land of Egypt.”

As we can see here, time is of the essence in the Passover story. Even the word *seder* means “order” or “sequence,” alluding to the concept of time. And *Pesach* doesn’t exactly mean “pass over,” it means “skipping.” This is a play on words, because it refers not just to space, but also to time. *Seder Pesach* is kind of an oxy-moron, because it literally means “sequence of skipping.”

In keeping with the theme of timelessness, the Passover lamb is unique because it must be eaten in a shorter window of time than any other sacrifices. In our parashah today we read that a peace offering (a korban shelamim), must be eaten within two days and one night. A special kind of peace offering, called the korban todah, the thanksgiving offering, must be eaten within one day and one night. But the korban Pesach, the Passover offering, even though it is much like the other two offerings, can only be eaten within that one night; anything left over must be burned. So the Passover offering and the matzah eaten with it share in common the elimination of time.

The Haggadah tells us “In every generation a person is obligated to see himself as if he were personally freed from Egypt.” In other words, at our seder, we are not simply remembering or celebrating redemption. We are being redeemed. Around our table time has collapsed, and we are in Egypt. Our shackles are breaking. And the king over kings of kings, the blessed Holy One is being revealed upon us. At our seder, we are in a state of timelessness.

And finally, the connection of the bread of freedom to timelessness is clear. The bread had no time to rise because redemption came suddenly. We left Egypt in haste. The message behind this is clear: no matter how things may appear, salvation from Hashem comes in an instant. There is a common Jewish saying that expresses this idea, although no one seems to know exactly where it came from: 'ישועת ה' כהרף עין, the salvation of the LORD is the like the blink of an eye.

In trying to research the source of that saying I discovered a similar turn of phrase in the ancient nusach, the prayer tradition, of the Land of Israel. For the second blessing of the Amidah, the blessing of resurrection, it reads as follows:

אַתָּה גִבּוֹר, מְשַׁפֵּיל גָּאִים, תִּזְק וּמְדִין עֲרִיצִים, חַי עוֹלָמִים, מְקִים מְתִים, מְשִׁיב הַרוּחַ וּמוֹרִיד [הַטַּל]
[בְּחֶרֶף: הַגִּשֵׁם], מְכַלְכֵּל חַיִּים, מְחַיֶּה הַמֵּתִים כְּהֶרֶף עֵין יְשׁוּעָה לָנוּ תִצְמִית. בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה ה' מְחַיֶּה הַמֵּתִים.

You are powerful, bringing down the arrogant, you are strong and bringing tyrants to justice, the life of all worlds, who upholds the dead, who makes the wind blow and sends down the rain, who sustains the living, resurrects the dead, in the blink of an eye you make salvation sprout for us. Blessed are you, Hashem, who resurrects the dead.

This reminds me of how Paul used the same phrase to describe the resurrection, in 1 Corinthians 15:

51 Behold! I tell you a mystery. We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye [k'heref ayin], at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we shall be changed.

Here is a fun fact: According to Jewish Law, Jewish fathers are required rush home after the Passover evening prayers to begin the seder. This is not just a practical law about starting on time, but it is meant to symbolize God rushing in to redeem his people.

The Torah tells us that we left Egypt in haste. But in some ways it was the slowest haste you could imagine. It took almost a year to for the ten plagues to unfold upon Egypt. And then on the night of the tenth plague, at midnight, Israel was set free. Deuteronomy 16:1 taught us, “God brought you out of Egypt by night.” We ate our Passover lambs with sandals on our feet, with our staffs in our hands, and we were no longer slaves. And yet, we remained there, redeemed, in Egypt, until morning. We didn't actually leave until daytime, as it says in Numbers 33:3:

They set out from Rameses in the first month, on the fifteenth day of the first month. On the day after the Passover, the people of Israel went out triumphantly in the sight of all the Egyptians.

For the last 2,000 years, we have been in that strange no-man's-land between exile and redemption. Yeshua came at midnight of history, and we've been standing here, staff in hand, sandals on our feet, waiting for the morning light. Learn the lesson from matzah, the bread without time, that redemption will come to us suddenly, k'heref ayin, in the blink of an eye, and everything will change.

I want to bless you that you would have a Passover holiday full of light and blessing, filled with the presence of Hashem, filled with memory of our Master Yeshua the Messiah, that at this holy moment Hashem would grant you peace and spiritual insights, and that in the process of serving him you would be redeemed from anything that is holding you in bondage. And may we see our master coming to us soon.