



PESACH MATZAH: BREAD OF SLAVERY OR BREAD OF FREEDOM?

SOURCE SHEET AND DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Introduction

Why do we eat matzah (unleavened bread) on the Seder night? Does it celebrate the redemption or remind us of slavery? **Is matzah the bread of slavery or the bread of freedom?**

Section I. Matzah: Bread of Affliction or Bread of Redemption?

Section II. The *Maharal* on Matzah

Section I. *Matzah*: Bread of Affliction or Bread of Redemption?

The centerpiece of the Haggadah is the Talmudic sage Rabban Gamliel's directive to explain the 3 main props of the Seder night: *Pesach*, *Matzah*, and *Marror*.

The reason behind the *Korban Pesach* (the Paschal lamb sacrifice) and *Marror* (bitter herbs) are fairly straightforward.

The *Pesach* sacrifice was offered because God skipped over (*pasach*) the Jews' houses on the night of the smiting of the firstborn, and *marror* is eaten to remember the bitterness of slavery in Egypt.

But the *Haggadah* seems to give us mixed messages about the reason behind eating matzah. On the one hand, it seems to symbolize the redemption:

Source 1. *Haggadah Shel Pesach - Rabban Gamliel on Matzah*

This matzah - why do we eat it? It is because our forefathers' dough didn't have enough time to leaven, until the King of kings, the Holy One, blessed be He, revealed Himself to them and redeemed them

מִצָּה זוֹ שְׂאֵנוּ אוֹכְלִים עַל שׁוּם מָה.
עַל שׁוּם שְׁלֹא הִסְפִּיק בְּצֶקֶם לְשֶׁל
אֲבוֹתֵינוּ לְהַחְמִיץ עַד שֶׁנִּגְלָה עֲלֵיהֶם
מֶלֶךְ מַלְכֵי הַמַּלְכִּים הַקְּדוֹשׁ בְּרוּךְ
הוּא וּגְאֻלָּם

On the other hand, we open the *Haggadah* with what seems to be an opposite description of matzah. We pick up the matzah and say:

Source 2. *Haggadah Shel Pesach- Opening of Maggid*

This is the bread of affliction (alternate translation: poverty) that our forefathers ate in the Land of Egypt.

הָא לַחֲמַא עֲנִיָּא דִּי אֶכְלוּ אַבְהֵתַנָּא
בְּאַרְעָא דְּמִצְרַיִם.

This description of matzah seems to be based on a biblical verse:

[Source 3. Devarim \(Deuteronomy\) 16:3](#)

Do not eat it (the <i>Pesach</i> sacrifice) with unleavened bread. For seven days you should eat <i>matzot</i> , bread of affliction (poor bread), for you left Egypt in haste - so that you will remember the day of your exodus from Egypt for all the days of your life.	לא תאכל עליו חֶמֶץ שִׁבַּעַת יָמִים תֹּאכַל עָלָיו מַצּוֹת לֶחֶם עֲנִי כִּי בְחֶפְזוֹן יֵצְאֶת מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם לְמַעַן תִּזְכֹּר אֶת יוֹם צֵאתְךָ מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם כָּל יְמֵי חַיֶּיךָ.
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Is *matzah* a symbol that God hastily redeemed the Jewish People, or is it the poor man's bread the Jews ate as slaves in Egypt? These two sides of matzah appear both in the *Haggadah* and in the Torah itself.

Isn't there a simple solution to this difficulty?

Section II. The Maharal on Matzah

The Maharal of Prague, Rabbi Yehudah Loewe, of blessed memory (1525-1609), rejects the assumption we've been making, that matzah is referred to as *lechem oni* (the bread of affliction) because the Jews ate it as slaves in Egypt:

[Source 4. Gevurot Hashem Chapter 51](#)

This approach contradicts the biblical text and logical truth. For we don't find anywhere in the Bible, the Mishnah, or the Talmud that the Egyptians fed the Israelites matzah.	והם דברים שיכחיש הכתוב והאמת, כי לא נמצא בשום מקום לא בכתוב ולא במשנה ולא בתלמוד שהמצרים היו מאכילים את ישראל מצה.
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He quotes a Midrash that infers from a biblical verse that the Egyptians didn't feed the Jews at all, but had them fend for themselves. He also shows that if you assume "poor bread" means 'the bread the poor Jews ate in Egypt,' it is bizarre for the Torah to say, "For seven days you should eat *matzot*, **bread of affliction (poor bread), for you left Egypt in haste** - so that you will remember the day of your exodus from Egypt for all the days of your life" (Source 3 above, *Devarim* 16:3).

The Maharal's Solution

The Maharal therefore suggests an alternate definition of *lechem oni* (poor bread). He contrasts *lechem oni* with *matzah ashirah* (rich matzah) - matzah that is invalid for the Seder because it is made with additional ingredients: eggs, oil, wine, or the like. Matzah, says the Maharal, is not the bread of a poor person, but, rather, bread that shares a key characteristic of a poor person.

[Source 5. Gevurot Hashem Chapter 51](#)

... The poor person only has himself. He has no money, just himself and his body. Matzah, when	... העני שאין לו אלא עצמו ואין לו ממון רק עצמו וגופו, והמצה גם כן
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<p>all it has is the essence of the dough - water and flour - it is considered “poor bread.” If it has sourdough or leavening, their taste is something additional to the essence of the dough (which is solely water and flour)</p>	<p>כאשר אין בה רק עצם העיסה שעצמות העיסה הוא המים והקמח וזהו עצמות עיסה ובהוה לוחם עוני, ואם יש בו שאור או חמץ טעם השאור והחמץ הוא נוסף על עצם העיסה ...</p>
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Contrast the Maharal’s explanation of poor bread with the other commentators he rejected.

Why was **poor** bread chosen by God to be the bread of **redemption**?! Aren’t poverty and redemption opposites? The Maharal responds:

Source 6. *Gevurot Hashem* Chapter 51

<p>This is no difficulty. For poverty itself expresses [a key quality of] redemption. For redemption means not being connected to the other [who is enslaving]. A slave doesn’t stand independently; he is joined to his master. Similarly, something that is wealthy-like doesn’t stand on its own, for the wealthy person is connected to his possessions</p>	<p>הלא דבר זה אין קשיא כי העניות בעצמו הוראה על הגאולה שאין ענין הגאולה רק שיוצא ואין לו שום צירוף אל זולתו, לא כמו העבד שאינו עומד בעצמו ויש לו צירוף אל זולתו הוא האדון, לכך הדבר שיש בו עשירות אינו עומד בעצמו רק יש לו צירוף אל קנינו</p>
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Redemption meant disconnecting from Egyptian slavery. Redemption was matzah-like. **We became independent; we stood as our essential selves, just as matzah is the essence of bread - pure flour and water.**

Where in your life would you most want to return to the essence of who or what you are? To phrase it another way: What, in your life, is your flour and water - your matzah? What is your wine, oil, or eggs? And what is your leaven or sourdough - your chametz?

Based on this, the representations of the Seder night’s three core mitzvot are: **Marror** expresses the bitterness of exile; **Pesach** celebrates how God passed over the Jewish houses and saved the People of Israel, His firstborn son, from the plague of the firstborn that swept through Egypt - and **Matzah** expresses redemption, breaking the connection with Egypt, and leaving us with our essential selves.

There is a second aspect to matzah, says the Maharal; it is simple.

Source 7. *Gevurot Hashem* Chapter 51

<p>You should also know that matzah, poor bread, is related to redemption. For the poor has nothing and has the quality of simplicity, for he stands by himself. Poverty is considered a lack in</p>	<p>ועוד תדע איך המצה שהיא לחם עוני שייך אל הגאולה, וזה כי העני שאין לו דבר וזה ענין פשיטות כאשר הוא עומד בעצמו, ודבר זה עם שהוא חסרון נחשב</p>
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<p>this world, which is a world of complexity, and complexity is valued. But simplicity is highly valuable in the [higher] world of simplicity ... Redemption involves rising out of the world of complexity into the world of simplicity. God therefore commanded to eat matzah, the simple bread, that is nothing but pure, essential, simple bread.</p>	<p>בעולם הזה שהוא עולם ההרכבה ומעלתו בהרכבה, מכל מקום הפשיטות מעלה הוא מצד עולם הפשוט ... ולא היתה הגאולה מצד העולם הזה שהוא עולם המורכב רק מצד עולם העליון הפשוט. ולפיכך צוה לאכול מצה לחם עוני שהוא לחם הפשוט שהרי אין בו דבר רק עצם פשוט.</p>
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An analogy, says the Maharal, is the once-a-year simple white clothing of the *Kohen Gadol* (High Priest). Every day of the year except for Yom Kippur, the *Kohen Gadol* wore eight ornate - complex and complicated - garments. They were made of a variety of materials; had many colors; and served a number of spiritual functions.

On Yom Kippur, the day that the *Kohen Gadol* entered the Holy of Holies - on the day he was elevated to the higher world of spiritual simplicity - he wore pure white garments.

On Pesach night the entire Jewish People are redeemed and elevated to a higher plane of existence, a world of simple, powerful, spirituality. Our food on that night is pure, simple matzah - essential bread, just flour and water.

Three Questions to Meditate on:

1. The poor person is not connected to anything; he has no possessions; and matzah, likewise is not connected to anything but its own essence - flour and water. But isn't connectedness good - even great? Don't we want to be connected - to God, to the Jewish People, to our friends and family?
2. What is the difference between the two adjectives "simple" and "simplistic"?
3. If matzah is so great, why aren't we commanded for matzah to be our sole food? We even use *chametz* for *mitzvot*: we eat beautiful challahs that have risen so nicely every Shabbat; and there are two chametz-based sacrifices, the thanksgiving offering and the two breads of Shavuot.

Quick Summary

Though there are commentators who see matzah as both the bread of affliction and the bread of freedom, the Maharal disagrees. In his eyes, matzah is not the bread of poor men - the bread that the Jews were fed in Egypt by their taskmasters - but the bread that itself is poor. Like the poor man who is unattached to any possessions and is just himself and his body, matzah is unattached to anything else - not to oil, wine, or eggs (that would characterize it as rich matzah, unfit for the Seder night) - and is certainly not combined with yeast or sourdough, which would be a foreign element and alter it.

Matzah as merely flour and water is the appropriate symbol of freedom for two reasons. First, at the moment of freedom we became disconnected from the Egyptians that enslaved us - like matzah that is not connected with anything other than itself. Second, at the Exodus we were lifted up from this world of complexity and combinations to the upper spiritual world that is pristinely simple - like matzah that is characterized by its simplicity, just simply pure flour and water.

Additional Resources

“Hearing the Matzah: If Matzah Could Talk, What Would We Hear?” by Rabbi Berel Wein

<https://www.aish.com/h/pes/t/g/48958916.html>

“Sharing the Bread of Affliction,” by Rabbi Dr. Jonathan Sacks, of blessed memory

<https://rabbisacks.org/credo-freedom-is-born-in-the-sense-of-solidarity-that-leads-those-who-have-more-to-share-with-those-who-have-less/>

“Judaism: What It Means to Be Truly Free” (100 sec. video) by Rabbi Michel Twerski

<https://youtu.be/DeffgRvIP6c>

"Matzah: Bread of Poverty, Bread of Emancipation," By Rabbi Shaya Karlinsky

<https://torah.org/learning/maharal-pesach2/?printversion=1>

“The Passover Seder Experience Handbook,” an Olami Morasha Syllabus class

<http://nleresources.com/olami-morasha-syllabus/jewish-calendar/the-passover-seder-experience-handbook/#.YEDh0IRR02w>