



The Many Sides of Matzah: Understanding a Symbol

Parashat Bo, Exodus 9:1 - 13:16 | By Mark Greenspan

“Passover (Holy Days and Holidays)” by Rabbi Alan Lucas (pp. 202-220) in *The Observant Life*

Introduction

Passover is still many weeks away but our Torah portion draws our attention to the observance of this important holiday. The symbolic foods of this holiday are well known to most of us but they are not quite as simple as we often make them out to be. Take *matzah*, for example. Every child learns that we eat *matzah* as a reminder of the haste with which our ancestors left Egypt. And yet the people of Israel were already eating *matzah* even before they left Egypt. The Torah commands the consumption of *matzah* and *maror* along with the Passover offering on the night of the Passover but offers no explanation for this special food. The symbolism of *matzah* only emerged after the Exodus from Egypt. So what is the meaning and purpose of *matzah*? Is it the ‘bread of affliction’ or the ‘food of liberation’? It would seem that there are two sides to *matzah* both figuratively and literally and maybe even more! As a symbol it has more than one meaning and it challenges us to think creatively about the meaning of the holiday.

The Torah Connection

They shall eat the flesh that same night; they shall eat it roasted over the fire, with unleavened bread and bitter herbs.

- Exodus 12:8

This day shall be one of remembrance; you shall celebrate it as a festival to the Lord throughout the ages; you shall celebrate it as an institution for all times. Seven days you shall eat unleavened bread; on the very first day you shall remove leaven from your houses for whoever eats leavened bread from the first day to the seventh day, that person shall be cut off from Israel

- Exodus 12:14-15

The Israelites journeyed from Ramses to Succoth...And they baked unleavened cakes of dough that they had taken out of Egypt, for it was not leavened, since they had been driven out of Egypt and could not delay; nor had they prepared any provisions for themselves.

- Exodus 12:37-39

Professor Nahum Sarna writes:

Unleavened bread: *Hebrew matzot, (sing. matzah), is introduced without definition and without explanation. The implication, justified by biblical texts, is that matzah is already known and, hence, a product independent of the Exodus events. The contexts suggest a kind of flat cake that can speedily prepared for unexpected guests. The present verse witnesses the integration of the originally distinct matzot festival with the Passover celebration.*

- The JPS Torah Commentary

Matzah: *Just as the Passover offering taught the swiftness of God’s justice, so matzah teaches us the swiftness of God’s act. There was not even time for the people to allow their dough to rise when He redeemed them. The people could not tarry while the dough became leavened and there was no time for them to prepare provision for the journey. The dough they brought out of Egypt provided them with food for an entire month, from the 15th of Nisan until the fifteenth of the next month, when they came to ask God for food in the wilderness.*

- Perush Kadum, a Yemenite commentary pre-16th century

The Haggadah explains that we eat matzah to remind us of the haste with which we left Egypt. Yet we ate matzah prior to leaving Egypt. So how do we explain matzah? Rabbi Eliezer Ashkenazi, in his commentary Ma'aseh Adonai, explains that there are two separate reasons for eating matzah. We eat matzah throughout the week of Passover as a reminder that we were slaves in Egypt. But we eat matzah on the first night of Passover at the Seder as a means or reenacting the haste with which we left Egypt. On Seder night it is an obligation to eat matzah but during the week of Passover, matzah is a reminder of being enslaved in Egypt (and not a commandment). Matzah is lechem oni, the bread of affliction. We refrain from eating leavened bread and only eat matzah for seven days to symbolize the fact that the people of Israel were slaves in Egypt for a very long time. The seven days of Passover symbolize the seven days of creation and the fact that the Israelites were enslaved all seven days of the week. So we eat matzah Sunday for all the Sundays, Monday for all the Mondays, etc.

- Rabbi Yaakov Lorberbaum d.1832, Ma'aseh Nissim, Haggadah

Ha Lachma Anya: *At the beginning of the Haggadah, we open the story of the Exodus with a statement in which we call matzah, lacham anya, the bread of affliction, which our ancestors ate while they were in Egypt. Later, we explain the reason for matzah differently: our ancestors ate matzah when they left Egypt because they left in haste and the dough did not have time to rise. These two explanations seem to contradict one another. Rabbi David Abudraham, in his commentary, wonders why we begin the Seder by referring to matzah as 'the bread which our ancestors ate in Egypt.' If matzah was baked when our ancestors left Egypt, how can we then say that it also the bread which our ancestors ate before they left Egypt: "They shall eat the Passover offering with matzah and maror?" Why did the Israelites eat matzah before they left Egypt? It was a portent of what was to come for the Israelites. It was a sign that they would leave Egypt in such haste that they would not have time to bake bread or for their dough to rise.... There are other reasons that we eat matzah as well. The poor eat matzah because it takes time to digest so that they will not be hungry as often. Also, it is easy and quick to prepare so that those who return home would have something to eat quickly.*

- Rabbi Eliyahu ben Harosh d.1883, Kos shel Eliyahu on the Haggadah

Lechem Oni: *The purpose of matzah is to bring us to a state of submission and self-abnegation. It teaches us that everything comes from God and not through our own ability. This is a lesson we learn from the sages: "A person says, "I have learned wisdom and Torah, what need have I of in performing commandments?" The Holy One responds: 'Acquiring knowledge of Torah is a simple matter. Acting in a God-fearing manner is another matter! One who fears me and then performs acts of Torah, wisdom and Torah will be in his heart as it is written (Palms 111:10): 'The beginning of wisdom is fear of the Lord; they have understanding who perform His commandments.'" (Devarim Rabbah 11:6) Through humility and self-abnegation one comes to a state of fear of the Lord. All wisdom is already present in his heart but it is only through submission of one's ego that one becomes worthy of learning Torah freely. From matzah we derive fear of God from above and through fear and awe we merit the learning of Torah and other blessings.*

- Rabbi Yerachmiel Danziger d. 1910, Yismach Yisrael on the Haggadah

Professor Nahum Sarna writes:

The Festival of Matzot: *The paschal sacrifice is characteristically rooted in the life of the pastoral nomad who follows the lunar calendar. The matzah is grounded in the life of the soil and the farmer, which is governed by a solar calendar. Since the two festivals occurred in close propinquity to each other, and both coincided with the time of the Exodus, all three elements merged and were fused into a unified entity. The pre-Israelite ingredients stripped of their former content and were invested with completely new associations and meanings connected with the events of the Exodus.*

- The JPS Torah Commentary

Reflections

Above you will find four different explanations for matzah. They are taken from four different *Haggadah* commentaries that I have translated over the past several years. Rabbi Eliyahu ben Harosh was a North African scholar who passed away at the end of the nineteenth century. *Perush Kadum*, originally in Arabic, was carried to Israel by the Jews of Yemen in the form of a manuscript. Rabbi Lorberbaum offers a more standard commentary seeking the *p'shat* or simple meaning of the text. And Rabbi Danziger was the leader of a Hasidic sect in the nineteenth and early twentieth century. All four commentators puzzle over the same question. Is *matzah* 'the bread of affliction' which our ancestors ate while they were slaves or is it the product of their haste in leaving Egypt? Does it symbolize slavery or freedom? In commanding the people to prepare for the meal on the night of redemption the *Torah* offers no explanation for *matzah*; we are simply told to eat the Passover offering together with unleavened bread and bitter herbs. Apparently these foods were not symbolic of anything yet. It was only after the people left Egypt that they came to see the unleavened bread as a symbol of their flight from slavery.

But before we get down to the *drash* (the homiletic explanations) for *matzah* we must look at the *p'shat*, the literal or contextual explanation. If we read these verses by themselves without presuppositions what do they tell us about Passover? Nahum Sarna points out these verses assume prior knowledge of *matzah*. There is no need to explain the meaning of *matzah* or its purpose because our ancestors already were aware of it. It is only afterwards in the later verses that the *Torah* explains the religious significance of unleavened bread: *matzot* were cakes quickly baked as the Israelites fled from Egyptian bondage. In fact the two major aspects of Passover probably predate our holiday: originally there was both a Passover Feast and a Feast of *Matzot*. Our ancestors combined these two holidays and included them in the story of Passover. The double explanation of the *matzah* thus grows out of the most ancient origins of the holiday.

But there is so much more to *matzah* as a symbol. Does it presage Israel's coming redemption as the *Kos shel Eliyahu* suggests? Or is *matzah* a powerful symbol of the two aspects of Passover: slavery and freedom, as we learn in the *Ma'aseh Nissim*? Rabbi Danziger in the spirit of Hasidic exegesis suggests that *matzah* is symbolic of submission and humility. In fact the expression *lechem oni* could be translated as 'the bread of humility' a reminder that our lives are not in our hands alone. Finally *Perush Kadum*, the Yemenite commentary, suggests that the two primary symbols of Passover (the *Pesach* offering and the *matzah*) embody the two aspects of God in this story: justice and mercy. The offering is a reminder of God's judgment of Egypt while the *matzah* symbolizes God's swift act of redemption for Israel. It is fascinating that these interpretations all began with two well-known symbols which our ancestors transformed into powerful statements of faith and redemption.

Halakhah L'ma-aseh

1. *There are few aspects of Jewish observance as complicated as preparing for Passover. The Torah, at Exodus 12:15-20 forbids the eating of leavened food popularly called hameitz, during the entire festival. But the situation is even more stringent than that, for the halakhah forbids not only eating hameitz but even deriving benefit from it or permitting the presence in our homes of any hameitz that belongs to us during the entire festival.*
- *The Observant Life*, pp. 203-204
2. *The forbidden substance, hameitz, is defined as any food containing the five species of grain: wheat, barley, oats, spelt, and rye, that has been made wet with water and left unbaked for more than eighteen minutes.*
- *The Observant Life*, pp. 204

3. *To the original five grains Ashkenazic custom adds rice, corn, millet, and certain kinds of legumes, generally called kitniyyot.*
- *The Observant Life*, pp. 204
4. *Since the possession of any amount of hameitz at all is considered a violation of the law, great effort is made to remove all food substances that contain hameitz from the home before Passover. After intense cleaning and the removal of all visible hameitz, a search, popularly called b'dikat hameitz is undertaken the night before Passover after sundown.*
- *The Observant Life*, pp. 204
5. *The next morning we participate in a ceremonial burning of a small amount of hameitz that was found during the search the night before.*
- *The Observant Life*, pp. 204
6. *Finally there is the custom of selling the hameitz...*
- *The Observant Life*, pp. 205

Questions to Ponder

1. Nahum Sarna suggests that Passover is an amalgamation of two pre-Israelite holidays with the historic element of the Exodus. This is the perspective of Biblical scholarship. How might this influence the way we, as practicing Jews think about and observe Passover?
2. *Matzah* has two aspects to it: slavery and freedom. What other Passover symbols allow us to see this holiday from both perspectives?
3. In what ways are the Passover sacrifice and the *matzah* symbolic of justice and mercy?
4. Why do the *Torah* and by extension the rabbis go to so much bother in the stringencies with which they present the laws of *hameitz*? Why are these laws stricter than the regular laws of Kashrut?
5. We see that each generation came up with its own interpretations of *hameitz* and *matzah*? What might be a contemporary way of interpreting these symbolic foods?

Adapted from Torah Table Talk by Mark Greenspan