



MIDEI CHODESH B'CHODSHO

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Mysterious Matzah

Matzah is mysterious...

This symbol is discussed twice over the course of the Seder. The two references, however, could not be more different.

In the opening paragraph of Maggid (the Seder's discussion of the Pesach story) matzah is referred to as *lachma anya*, the "bread of affliction" or "a poor man's bread" – clearly a symbol of *bondage and suffering*.

As Maggid draws to a close, however, matzah becomes synonymous with *redemption*:

"This matzah that we eat – for what reason [do we do so]? It is because the dough of our forefathers 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..."

Which is it? Is matzah a symbol of slavery or a symbol of freedom?

This contradictory nature of matzah, highlighted in the Haggadah, is actually first evidenced much earlier, in the Torah text itself.

On the one hand, the Torah twice testifies to the popularly accepted notion that matzah originates due to the speed of the Israelites' departure from Egypt:

"And the people took up their dough before it became leavened,"

"And they baked the dough that they had brought out of Egypt into unleavened cakes, for it had not fermented."

On the other hand, almost unnoticed, the Torah also testifies to the existence of matzah as a symbol prior to the moment of the Exodus. God's commandments concerning the Korban Pesach in Egypt include the following:

"And they shall eat that flesh on that night, roasted over the fire, *and matzot*; with bitter herbs shall they eat it." If the symbol of matzah is born only at the moment of the Exodus, as a result of the haste characterizing the Israelites' departure, how can matzah already be in existence as a symbol before that moment of redemption arrives?

It would seem that, unlike other static Seder rituals, the symbol of matzah is dynamic. While other symbols at the Seder represent either slavery or freedom, *somehow matzah represents both*.

But how can one substance simultaneously represent such vastly different states as slavery and freedom? What is the secret of the matzah?

Perhaps the answer is hinted at in another curious aspect of matzah...

The festival of Pesach is largely shaped by the antithetical relationship between matzah and its opposite, chametz (leavened bread). Hours and hours of preparation are spent to ensure that, by the time the festival begins, our personal worlds are chametz-free. Eating, benefiting from, or even owning chametz on

Pesach are biblically prohibited.

In order to enter the realm of matzah, we must completely leave the realm of chametz. Matzah and chametz simply cannot coexist.

And yet, these two “opposites” are remarkably alike. Their ingredients are, in fact, identical. The Talmud goes so far as to say that the only flour acceptable for the production of matzah is flour that has the potential to become chametz. Other authorities suggest that even the Hebrew terms chametz and matzah themselves reflect the fundamental similarity of the items they represent. matzah is spelled *mem, tzadik, heh*, while chametz is spelled *chet, mem, tzadik*. These terms are thus distinguished from each other by the variable of one letter alone. Furthermore, the differentiating letters *heh* and *chet* are themselves only separated by a tiny line which, when attached to the leg of a *heh*, turns that letter into a *chet*. This seemingly insignificant line, these scholars maintain, represents the small yet critical factor that separates the realms of chametz and matzah.

That single factor? *A split second of time*. A mixture of flour and water that remains untended for over eighteen minutes automatically becomes chametz. If we catch and bake that mixture within eighteen minutes or less, we have created matzah.

Here then, is a possible global approach to the mystery of matzah.

Just as matzah is defined physically by a split second of time, matzah philosophically represents a split second of time. Matzah captures the moment when everything changes. *It is the moment of transition from slavery to freedom*. By freezing this moment in time, this symbol alone is able to reflect elements

of both slavery and freedom.

Once a year, we enter the realm of matzah, a realm wholly defined by a moment of time. We do so not only to capture the transitional instant that launched our national history, but to remind ourselves that life is never static. The line separating “opposites” in our lives is often razor thin. Every moment of our lives can be a transitional moment – moving forward or, if we are not careful, slipping back. ■

Rabbi Goldin is the author of the OU Press volumes "Unlocking the Torah Text," and "Unlocking the Haggada."



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