



JEWISH COMMENTARY

The Matzah Bakery of Dnipro

MEIR Y. SOLOVEICHIK

AS I WRITE THESE words, the war in Ukraine continues, producing images harrowing, terrifying, and at times inspiring. The outcome, at this point, is uncertain. Yet I am certain that this Passover, as I sit at the seder, one image will be on my mind. It is a video of a Jewish bakery in Dnipro, Ukraine, with the war already begun, working to produce *shmurah* matzah, the unleavened bread eaten at the seder Passover evening, bread that is still baked by hand. The *Jerusalem Post* profiled the bakery, explaining that these Jews bake not for themselves, but for the Jewish world. “The bakery was established more than 20 years ago in the city of Dnipro in the Dnipropetrovsk region, bordering the separatist province of Donetsk,” the *Post* reported. “A few months ago, a branch of the Ukrainian Matzah Bakery was also opened in the city of Uman.” It continued:

“The two bakeries employ about 90 people, most of them members of the local Jewish community,” said the new branch manager, Mendy Stumble. “The bakery’s target this year is 100 tons of handmade matza. Most matzahs

are exported to the former Soviet Union, Western Europe and other countries. A small portion of the Matzah are intended for use by the 160 communities united by the Jewish Federation of Ukraine.”

The story highlighted simultaneously the crisis in which the several hundred thousand Ukrainian Jews now find themselves—along with everyone else in the country—but also the miracle that is the rebirth of religious fortitude, and Jewish faith, in a land where once all such faith was forbidden.

Anyone familiar with history must be surprised by the fact that today, the Jewish community in Ukraine bakes matzah on behalf of much of the Jewish world. I remember the shock in discovering this myself when, shopping before Passover several years ago, I pondered the supermarket’s list of prices of what is known colloquially as “hand matzah.” I recognized the names of Hasidic bakeries in Borough Park and Williamsburg. And then, I suddenly saw: “Ukraine.” Intrigued, I discovered an article that described how the bakery sustains Jew and non-Jew alike:

Production costs and taxes in Ukraine are so low that the factory can still afford to charge customers significantly less than its competitors in the West....Rabbi Meir Stambler, the

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owner of the matzah factory, notes that even as the Jewish law requires that the handling of matzah and its ingredients be done by Jews only, the factory also employs more than a dozen non-Jews who perform other tasks, including distribution, and this, he says, means the bakery “not only puts matzah shmurah on Jewish tables, but also helps build bridges and do mitzvot [good deeds] with non-Jews.”

This is the bakery that is continuing to bake with war upon them. Strikingly, as Dovid Margolin has written, in the early Soviet era, the Jewish community of the region was led by Rabbi Levi Yitzchok Scheneerson, the father of the late Lubavitcher rebbe, and it was this rabbi’s dedication to ensuring the kosher status of the matzah made there that landed him in Stalin’s prison. Now the Jewish community of that very same site makes matzah for the Jewish world.

Since then, I have often gone out of my way to purchase this matzah of Ukraine for Passover. To me, the historical poetry was profound. Matzah is the food of freedom, eaten as a reminder of the Israelites hurriedly preparing bread for their journey without waiting for it to rise, as liberty suddenly descended and they hurriedly departed Egypt.

But matzah embodies something more. The reading of the Haggadah at the seder begins by holding aloft the purported bread of freedom and announcing (in Aramaic) *ha lachma anya*—this is the bread of affliction that our ancestors ate in the land of Egypt. We are remembering the first Passover celebration, when unleavened bread was eaten with the paschal lamb by ancient Israelites in Egypt, during the plague of the firstborn. Freedom would not arrive until the morning; death stalked outside, and the Israelites were still enslaved. Nevertheless, the Israelites that fateful night were still sustained by their bond to God and to one other; and suddenly, by morning, they were baking matzah in freedom.

The “bread of affliction” prayer was recited at the opening of the seder by Jews who, for centuries throughout the world, celebrated the festival of freedom when they were not free, yearning for another liberation yet to come. Matzah thus embodied the essence of Jewish resolution and hope. Hence the prayer concludes: “Now we are here; next year, the Land of Israel. Now we are slaves; next year, free individuals.” Could there be any greater embodiment of the spirit of this opening prayer than the fact that Jews living in a land where Judaism had been banned for decades would suddenly serve as a source of matzah for the world?

As war threatened these very same Jews, another

reflection of Jewish resilience was made manifest in their continuing to produce the bread of faith. And as the crisis worsened, a usually fractured Jewish world came together to support and sustain the Ukrainian Jewish community, to support those staying in Ukraine, to welcome those fleeing, and to help settle those who have arrived in Israel.

Here too the poetry is profound. Many Sephardic Jews precede the reading of the Haggadah with a re-enactment of the Exodus in which one seder celebrant places a matzah on his back and is asked, *Where are you from?* “I am from Egypt,” comes the reply. Another question is asked: *Where are you going?* And the answer: “I am going to Jerusalem. Will you come with me?”

Matzah represents the Jewish journey of generations and how the hope for redemption bound Jews to one another. We would be remiss if we did not reflect, this year, on the vindication of these hopes. Speaking after the war in Ukraine began, Natan Sharansky, who was born in the region, noted that growing up, the ethnic identities listed on one’s Soviet passport—words such as “Russian,” “Ukrainian,” or “Georgian”—made little difference. But one appellation was the kiss of death: “When it came to a university application, for example, no one tried to change his designation from Russian to Ukrainian because it did not matter. However, if you could change your designation of ‘Jew,’ it substantially improved your chances of university admission.”

Sharansky, who is greatly concerned about all that is unfolding in the land of his birth, could still not refrain from reflecting with wonder. According to reports of those who heard him, Sharansky essentially said this: “This week I was reminded of those days, when I saw thousands of people standing at the borders of Ukraine trying to escape. They are standing there day and night, and there is only one word that can help them get out: ‘Jew.’ If you are a Jew, there are Jews outside who care about and are waiting for you. There is someone on the other side of the border who is searching for you. Your chances of leaving are excellent. The world has changed. When I was a child, ‘Jew’ was an unfortunate designation. No one envied us. But today on the Ukrainian border, identifying as a Jew is a most fortunate circumstance. It describes those who have a place to go, where their family, an entire nation, is waiting for them on the other side.”

This year, here; next year, the Land of Israel. The crisis continues, and the attention of the West is rightly upon Ukraine and battles unfolding there. That must not stop us, this Passover, from reflecting on the resilience of Jewish faith, from reminding ourselves of Jewish bonds of brothers, and from marking miracles in our own age. §▶