

Matzah and Monotheism

Parashat Bo, Exodus, Chapters 12-14 | January 6, 2022

Among the many extraordinary anecdotes found in the treasure trove that is Gil Marks' *Encyclopedia of Jewish Food* is the origin story of the Manischewitz matzah company. The saga starts with a man named Rabbi Dov Behr Abramson. The encyclopedia informs us:

In 1886, Rabbi Abramson (d. 1914) from the Lithuanian town of Salant purchased the passport of a dead man to escape from Germany or to avoid being drafted into the Russian army for twenty years. The name on the document was Dov Behr Manischewitz. Using his new name, Manischewitz immigrated to Cincinnati, Ohio, and subsequently served as a ritual slaughterer and peddler. Two years later, because matzas were difficult to obtain in his new hometown, Manischewitz started a small matza bakery in his basement for family and friends. Demand grew, as matzas became particularly popular for their keeping ability with pioneers heading west by wagons and Cincinnati was the starting point for many pioneers.

It is the ultimate "only in America" episode. A Jewish immigrant, eschewing assimilation and remaining loyal to the faith of his fathers, makes matzah for his family, and ultimately builds a company by selling Jewish bread to non-Jewish American pioneers. Much has changed about matzah over the millennia; the very name once referred to a pita-like morsel made in a portable utensil, and now it is almost always associated with a brittle bread that can last for many months. But some aspects remain constant, in a way which Manischewitz's tale aptly embodies. Matzah does indeed symbolize the willingness to travel, to journey; it expresses our loyalty to family tradition, and it is indeed the true food of faith.

Following the plague of the firstborn, a terrified Pharaoh finally chases the Israelites out of Egypt. As Israel departs, Exodus emphasizes the food that they unintentionally ended up eating along the way:

And the people took their dough before it was leavened, their kneadingtroughs bound up in their clothes upon their shoulders...

And they baked the dough which they brought forth out of Egypt as unleavened loaves, for it was not leavened; for they were driven out of Egypt, and could not tarry, neither had they prepared any food for the journey. (Exodus 12:34, 39)

Departing the morning of the 15th of Nissan, Israel will reach the shores of the sea within a week, and the source of their sustenance during this journey will be matzah, or unleavened bread. It is this journey that will ultimately inspire the biblical name for the festival of freedom: *Chag HaMatzot*, "The Holiday of Matzah." But here is what seems initially odd. On the evening before the Exodus, while consuming the paschal lamb, Israel was already ordered to eschew leavened bread and eat only matzah along with the offering:

And they shall eat the meat that night, roasted with fire, and unleavened bread; with bitter herbs they shall eat it. (Exodus 12:8)

The herbs, as Rabbinic Judaism explains, are meant to serve as a reminder of the bitterness of slavery, but why unleavened bread? If matzah acquired its spiritual significance because it was baked in haste as Israel made its way out of Egypt, why is Israel ordered to partake of matzah *before* freedom descends?

As we explore this question, we must further note the fascinating fact that before the Exodus, Israel is informed

in advance that the future festival of freedom will not only involve matzah, but also an injunction to abstain from all forms of leavened bread. It is in examining the culinary details of these prohibitions that we must review the ancient art of breadmaking, for only then can we truly understand Scripture. Here is what Israel is instructed in Exodus:

For seven days ye shall eat unleavened bread; but by the first day ye shall put away any se'or from out of your homes; for all who eat chametz from the first day until the seventh day, that soul shall be cut off from Israel.
(Exodus 12:15)

As Gil Marks notes, if you look carefully at the verse, you will see two separate words that are used in two separate contexts. The first is *se'or*, which the Torah prohibits possessing, but never says anything about eating (“*but by the first day ye shall put away any se'or from out of your homes*”). And then there is another Hebrew word: *chametz*, ingestion of which is prohibited. All who eat *chametz* will be cut off from Israel. Marks’ *Encyclopedia of Jewish Food* allows us to truly understand what is going on here. *Se'or*, he explains, is a leavening agent utilized to create excellent leavened bread, whereas *chametz* is the result: delicious bread. What is this leavening agent known as *se'or*? It is the solution used to create sourdough, something that is known today as “starter.” In ancient times, there were two ways to produce leavened bread: dough could be allowed to sit and ferment, through the yeast that was all around it. But the fermenting of that dough could be hastened if one had a substance that had already been allowed to ferment for a very long time in advance, a substance that could then be added at the initiation of the kneading process. Marks explains the verses as follows:

Seor (from the Hebrew “to swell/to lift up”) is among the most commonly mistranslated and misunderstood words in the entire Bible. The noun seor is almost always rendered in English as “leaven,” a generic term meaning an agent that acts to produce a gradual change in another substance, which describes a host of leavening agents.

Although seor is a leavening agent, not all leavening agents are seor. Rather, it refers to a specific leavening agent, known in English as starter, starter dough, or sourdough, and called biga in Italian, sauer Teig in German, and zeurteig in Yiddish. (The similarity between the Teutonic sauer and the more ancient Hebrew seor points to a connection.)

Starters are each unique, each particularly precious to the bakers who use them. Marks himself explains that:

A starter is a balancing act, a carefully developed and nurtured flour and water mixture possessing a natural culture of wild yeast and lactobacilli (bacteria). To use a starter, a predetermined amount of starter is mixed into a dough. Dough leavened with a starter requires a lengthy prefermentation process, a much longer time than that needed for modern commercial yeast. Making a starter can be a long and complicated process—it takes at least five days and commonly up to two weeks.

Marks also describes how once one has a starter, one can perpetually feed it and maintain it, with some starters being passed down throughout centuries.

We are now able to understand why the Torah prohibits the *possession* of *se'or*, starter, and the *eating* of *chametz*. Exodus never uses the verb “eating” in the context of *se'or*; a starter is not edible. But in being asked to rid one’s home of *se'or*, one is essentially assuring that one will not be able to create top-of-the-line leavened bread, *chametz*. It is an enormously sacrificial act to give up a starter, and that is what is being asked of the Israelites, once a year, every year.

But why? Why rid oneself of starter in order to mark the festival of freedom? Here, another sentence in Marks’ *Encyclopedia* is important:

The invention of the starter is generally attributed to the ancient Egyptians, who created and refined many of the bread-baking techniques still used today.

Starter, in other words, is an Egyptian invention. We are thus able to understand how bread was taken as the ultimate symbol of the power of the agricultural society that was Egypt, of its technological splendor. One image in Egyptian hieroglyphs is the cone, which is that shape because conical bread was a primary form for ancient loaves. The cone hieroglyph means “gift.” If you walk through the Egyptology exhibit in the Metropolitan Museum of Art and look at the hieroglyphics you will often see the *ankh*, symbol of life, paired with the cone of bread, so that together they mean “the gift of life.”

Leavened bread is the symbol of what marked Egypt as the most technologically advanced empire in all the ancient world; a culture that through its perfection of embalming mummification and sculpture believed that it could defeat death. Leavened bread, in other words, is first and foremost the symbol of Egyptian ingenuity.

We can now understand why even before the Israelites were asked to leave Egypt, they were told to rid themselves *chametz* and *se’or*. What they are being ordered to do has a symbolism that would have been immediately understandable to them. And so Moses himself says:

Unleavened bread shall be eaten throughout the seven days; and there shall no leavened bread seen with thee, and neither shall there be starter seen with thee in all thy borders.

And thou shalt tell thy son in that day, saying, It is because of that which the Lord did for me when I came forth out of Egypt. (Exodus 13:7-8)

Destroying *se’or* was essentially an eschewal of Egyptian culture, a reminder that Israel’s ultimate salvation as Abraham’s children would be found not in the technological achievements of the land of their captivity, but rather in the miraculous redemption of God, which would overcome all Egyptian ingenuity.

But there is more. Recall that when Jacob arrived in Egypt, his family was advised by Joseph to keep themselves apart, and that their shepherding way of life was an abomination to the Egyptians. As an agricultural society, Egyptians disdained the nomadic lifestyle that shepherds reflected. And this is linked to the matzah being eaten by Israel both before and after the Exodus. This point was made by Dr. Tova Dickstein of Neot Kedumim in Israel, who has a wonderful article on this subject:

The bread that the Egyptians ate was leavened bread. Egypt was known as a land of grain and bread. Long before the Israelites came to Egypt, Egyptians had learned the secret of leavening bread, even discovering the secret to what we now call sourdough...

In contrast, shepherds ate unleavened bread. Nomads cannot carry a heavy oven with them as they travel from place to place, nor can they wait for dough to rise, as was the case when the time came for the Israelites to flee from Pharaoh and the Egyptians.

The key word in understanding the matzot that the Israelites baked when leaving Egypt is “haste”. In Genesis 18, when Abraham was visited by three angels, he instructed Sarah to quickly prepare “cakes”—round, flat unleavened breads. In Genesis 19, Lot quickly baked unleavened bread, matzot, for the angels whom he brought home from the city gate. Even today, nomadic desert Bedouins bake unleavened breads, similar to those baked by the Israelites as they left Egypt...

This helps us understand the severity of the prohibition against eating hametz on Passover. Eating matzot on the eve of the exodus was in and of itself symbolic of the transition from slavery to freedom;

from the culture of slaves whose lives depended on the Egyptian leavened bread to the culture of matzot—the bread of free shepherds, our early forefathers.

Eating hametz during the Festival of Freedom is a rejection of all that matza represents: the freedom given to the Children of Israel by the One God, the God of our forefathers the shepherds, Who brought us out of Egypt with an outstretched arm. Just as God revealed Himself to Abraham, and took him from his settled pagan homeland to embark on a nomadic journey as a shepherd, so too He revealed Himself to Abraham’s descendants in Egypt, and brought them from the most settled and civilized land of that epoch, to lead them on their journey, once again as nomadic shepherds.

So unleavened bread—bread made without starter, the basic mixing of flour and water, without the *se’or* that was seen as the embodiment of Egyptian invention—is the sign of willingness to rely on God. It is not enough for the slavery of the Israelites to end; the Israelites must reclaim their own identity and leave behind the Egyptian way of looking at the world. The Torah, in other words, is not only concerned with taking Israel out of Egypt, but also with taking Egypt out of the Israelites, restoring their Hebraic culture once again, linking them to their ancestry, their heritage, their way of life.

Of course, we must be careful not to claim too much. When Israel reaches the land, it too will set up an agricultural society. There, it will not eschew the technological innovations of other nations, and for most its year, it too will indeed partake of leavened bread products, and enthusiastically so. No one who knows of Jewish cuisine, Ashkenazic or Sephardic, could possibly think that we eat only matzah. But every year, Passover reminds us, as we have been emphasizing, that a life of technological achievement without spiritual longing and purpose is spiritually deficient. Leon Kass reminds us that ancient Egypt was admired for its technological brilliance, but it was also known for its pagan tyranny.

As he puts it, “Is Egypt, perhaps, a permanent human possibility and temptation? Is something like Egypt in *our* future?”

This is what matzah inspires us to ask. The Festival of Matzah reminds us for seven days that for all the technological brilliance of ancient Egypt, it is ultimately our reliance on the Almighty that allows us to endure. It was that faith sustained the Jewish people. The people who continued to mark the festival of freedom throughout the centuries even when they were anything but free.

A moving article in the *New York Times* by Joan Nathan described different ways in which Jews, during the Holocaust, struggled to still make matzah, to connect with the traditions of their ancestors. After citing several examples, the article concludes as follows:

But none of this compares with the ingenuity of Pearl Benisch, who lives in Brooklyn. She remembers Passover in the Bergen-Belsen concentration camp in Germany in the spring of 1945, just days before her liberation.

“We had nothing to eat but watery soup, with bread once a week,” she told me in a very quiet voice. “But I was one of the lucky ones. I was working in a place where we peeled potatoes and turnips. I cut three turnips in narrow rounds, covered them up with a piece of brown paper and hid them in my shoes.

“When we had our Seder in the peeling room with one woman keeping watch for the guards, the other women moaned that there was no matzo. I said, ‘they are here, they are under the cover.’ They opened the brown paper and there were the three round turnip matzos.”

Then, Mrs. Benisch, now in her late 80’s, paused and said in a whisper, “Only God can make matzo from turnips.”

Matzah is the food of faith, the food of Israelite identity, and therefore an embodiment of Jewish eternity.

Discussion Questions:

1. Rabbi Soloveichik explains how the elimination of *se'or* and eating of matzah is part of the process of “taking Egypt out of Israel.” What other aspects of the Seder are focused on reorienting us away from ancient Egypt’s culture and values?
2. It would seem that Jews eat matzah on Passover to commemorate the haste with which our ancestors left Egypt, but also, perhaps, to symbolically express our reliance on God rather than on Egyptian technological prowess. What is the relationship between these two explanations?

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