

Parashah and Politics: How Torah Changed the World

Parashat Emor, Leviticus, Chapters 21-24 | May 18, 2024

By Rabbi Meir Soloveichik

Manischewitz on the Moon and the Purpose of Freedom

We begin today with one of the amazing nuggets of information from the chef and rabbi Gil Marks' *Encyclopedia of Jewish Food*:

In 1886, [a man by the name of] Rabbi [Dov Behr] Abramson from the Lithuanian town of Salant purchased the passport of a dead man to escape from Europe—and possibly conscription into the Russian army—the name on the document being Dov Behr Manischewitz. Using his new name, Manischewitz . . . immigrated to Cincinnati, where he served as a ritual slaughterer and part-time peddler. For his first Passover in America, with matzo impossible to obtain in his new hometown, Manischewitz made his own. Two years later, he started a small matzo bakery in his basement for family and friends. Demand grew both from the Jewish community and from an unexpected market. At the time, Cincinnati was a prominent starting point for pioneers heading West, who needed durable and nonperishable items to take in their wagons for the lengthy, dangerous trip. Matzo's keeping ability proved ideal for pioneers.

In other words, according to Marks, matzah in America took off because non-Jews, pioneers, bought it to eat on the American frontier.

Let us fast forward to December 1972, when the Apollo 17 mission landed on the moon, and Gene Cernan, along with his pilot Harrison Schmitt, became the last men to date to walk on the lunar surface. According to the transcript provided by NASA, Cernan, while on the moon, exclaimed the word "Manischewitz" no less than seven times. Why? The NASA website reports:

The B. Manischewitz Company has long been a major American producer of kosher foods . . . during Apollo 17, Gene often used "Manischewitz" as an exclamation or as a substitute for swearing.

How amusing, but how appropriate: matzah in America became the food of the American frontier, becoming so famous that it was even mentioned by the last man on the moon, as he walked in space—which, as we know, is the final frontier. All this is apt, for matzah is the original food of the frontier: it is matzah, unleavened bread, that is the symbol of Israelite freedom, for it was this bread that the Israelites baked and ate as they followed

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God into the wilderness, into the unknown. It is indeed the food of pioneers, and of faith, a reminder of the words of God to Jeremiah:

I remember the loving loyalty of your youth, your bridal love, that you followed me into the desert, into a land unsown. (Jeremiah 2:2)

But, strikingly, as Jewish a bread as matzah is, it is not the only bread of Judaism. And understanding the way that this is reflected in the cycle of holidays delineated in our reading provides us with a profoundly political lesson about our history, and about our current moment.

Let us see how this is so. *Parashat Emor* begins with life and death:

And the Lord said to Moses, Speak to the priests, the sons of Aaron, and say to them that none of them shall defile himself for the dead among his people, **except for his nearest of kin** . . . (Leviticus 21:1–2)

Priests that serve in the Temple are forbidden from participating in burials, as they would then experience defilement, and would thus be unable to minister in the sacred sphere. But—and this is critical—with the exception of the high priest, the *kohen* is indeed obligated to become impure by burying his closest kin. In fact, the rabbis derive the obligation to bury loved ones from this passage. In its approach to death, biblical Israel thus sets itself apart from the Egypt it has left. As Leon Kass put it,

Unlike the death-defying Egyptians, those ancient precursors of the quest for bodily immortality, the Children of Israel do not mummify or embalm their dead; we bury our ancestors but keep them alive in memory, and, accepting our mortality, we look forward to the next generation.

Fittingly, the reading soon after turns to the very essence of Jewish covenantal life: the calendar. The first of the holidays marks the Exodus from Egypt:

These are the appointed feasts of the Lord, the holy convocations, which you shall proclaim at the time appointed for them. In the first month, on the fourteenth day of the month in the evening, is the Lord's passover. And on the fifteenth day of the same month is the feast of unleavened bread to the Lord; seven days you shall eat unleavened bread. (Leviticus 23:4–6)

The festival of unleavened bread: here we are again introduced to matzah. It may seem odd that the festival of freedom would be named for food, and specifically for a form of bread that is unleavened. But this name is easier to understand when we realize that leavened bread, the bread that we are used to today, was once unique to Egypt, an Egyptian invention. As we have in the past, we can cite the Israeli botanist Tova Dickstein:

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. They learned that “starters,” left-over dough that started to ferment, when added to fresh dough and allowed to sit in a warm place for a number of hours,



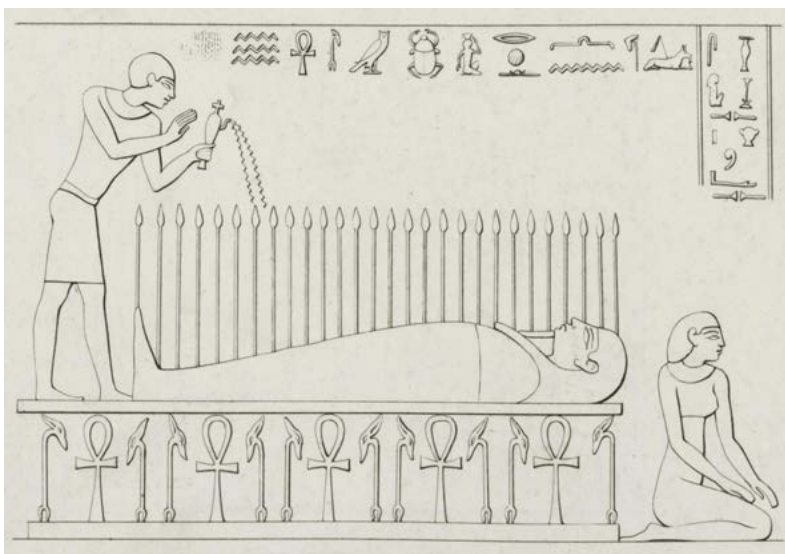
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would rise and, when baked, produced loaves of leavened bread. Bread can only be baked in an oven with a certain depth that can retain a consistent temperature throughout its interior. . . .

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.

Leavened bread, in other words, marked Egypt as the most technologically advanced empire in all the ancient world. It is first and foremost the symbol of Egyptian ingenuity, and a sign, for ancient Egypt, of immortality. A famous Egyptian image associates grain with the rebirth of the resurrection god Osiris. Beneath Osiris you see the Egyptian symbol known as the *ankh*, which means life:



Matzah, in contrast, is the food of faith, the food of the journey into the unknown; it is the reminder, one might say, of Israelite bravery and fortitude. It is therefore noteworthy that, as delineated in Leviticus, all breads offered on the altar of the Tabernacle and Temple were unleavened matzah, never *hametz*, leavened bread. From God's perspective, matzah is a testament to our courage, a sign of faith on the frontier; and no bread is more beautiful than that.

It is easy to misunderstand this rule that leaven is never offered on the altar. H.E. Jacobs, in his celebrated book *Six Thousand Years of Bread*, argues that Jews saw leavened bread as unworthy of sanctity:

How could one offer God something that was in a state of decay, of fermentation, of dissolution? . . . The Jew's sense of cleanliness and purity prohibited him from offering his God matter in dissolution.

Bread rises as it ferments, and this, for Jacobs, made it unworthy for the altar. It is a fascinating explanation—and utterly, entirely wrong. For while it is true that *hametz* (leaven) is not placed atop the altar, it is indeed



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brought in the presence of the Almighty. As our reading explicitly states, on Shavuot, 50 days after the festival of matzah, in the central symbol of the day, dough is fashioned into two loaves and deliberately leavened, baked, and brought before God in the Temple and waved before the altar:

You shall bring from your dwellings two loaves of bread to be waved, made of two tenths of an ephah; they shall be of fine flour; **they shall be baked with leaven**, as first fruits to the Lord. (Leviticus 23:17)

Leaven, then, is central to the celebration of Shavuot in the Temple. The festival of matzah is followed by the festival of *hametz*. As Rabbi Yoel Bin-Nun explained, Shavuot marks two moments: it is a commemoration of the giving of the Torah and a celebration of the first fruits of the Holy Land. Thus, by linking the Exodus—with its nomadic matza—to the *hametz* of Shavuot, we are taught that the purpose of the Exodus was receiving the Torah and entering the Holy Land.

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For the Israelites, as for the Egyptians, leavened bread remained a symbol of immortal life; but once Israel left Egypt, it took the symbol of life that lay at the heart of Egyptian society and made it its own. Tied to Shavuot, bread reminded the Israelites that, as Kass put it, it was not through mummification but through the Torah that true eternal life is acquired. As Rabbi Bin-Nun writes, on Shavuot,

the essential uniqueness of this day lies in the commandment of the two loaves, which are specifically *chametz*, with no matza at all—as a sign that the ultimate purpose of the Exodus from Egypt has been achieved.

The symbolism of these holidays, then, and of the foods they feature, can now become clear. Jews begin with the festival of matzah, whose bread symbolizes the courageous Jewish journey into the frontier. Shavuot reminds us that the Torah, and the fulfillment of God's promise to Abraham, was the purpose of the Exodus in the first place, that freedom was not an end in itself. Pondering the risen bread of Shavuot that follows the matzah of Pesach, one is reminded of Lieutenant-General Mark W. Clark, commander of the United States Fifth Army, who addressed Jewish soldiers attending a seder in Naples, Italy, in April 1944. Clark said:

Tonight you are eating unleavened bread just as your forebears ate unleavened bread. Because the Exodus came so quickly the dough had no time to rise. There was a time of unleavened bread in this war. The time when it looked as though we might not have time to rise—time to raise an army and equip it, time



to stop the onrush of a Germany that has already risen. But the bread has begun to rise. It started at Alamein. It was rising higher when the Fifth Army invaded Italy. It is reaching the top of the pan and soon the time will come when it will spread out and into a finished product—and the victory will be ours.

The Exodus was only the beginning; the courageous journey into the desert had a goal. That purpose is marked by the bread that finally rises, on Shavuot, when the Torah was given.

Today, without the Temple, Jews everywhere know of the unleavened bread of liberty, but many are unaware of the leavened loaves of Shavuot. But it is together that these breads remind us that a polity, and a people, can only truly thrive if freedom is not enough, if it utilizes that freedom to seek a larger purpose.

Recently, writing in *Commentary*, John Podhoretz reflected on the fact that for all the international opprobrium directed at Israel throughout the decades, the country has continued to thrive. It has addressed adversity, he reflected, because unlike many countries, it innately understands that it exists for a profound purpose, one very ancient indeed. Here is part of how he put it:

In 1967, Israel had a GDP of \$4 billion and was among the poorer nations on the earth. By 1977, its GDP had quadrupled to \$16 billion. In 1988, it tripled the 1977 number and reached \$50 billion. It hit \$100 billion in 1994 and \$200

billion in 2007. By 2023, Israel's GDP was \$535 billion, and it was, depending on how you count, the 25th-, or the 27th-, or the 30th-richest country on earth. All in all, Israel boasts an economy 125 times larger than it was before the Six-Day War, with a per capita income of \$47,000 a year.

Thus the two breads of our reading—the matzah of liberty and the hametz of Shavuot—are meant to be taken together in tandem.

So maybe there is a certain type of rueful wisdom to be taken from these undeniable statistics. . . . Maybe the thing is, Israel is a nation that has had this miraculous rise because it has a purpose, which is something most other countries do not have. . . .

Israel is engaged in a purpose that is both world-historical and outside history. It exists as a refuge and haven and homeland for the world's most stateless people, and its claim to statehood is not just due to its need for protection but based in part on a literally transcendent claim.

Thus the two breads of our reading—the matzah of liberty and the *hametz* of Shavuot—are meant to be taken together in tandem. The matzah reminds us of the fortitude, and courage, of our ancestors, and the *hametz* of



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Shavuot reminds us that there was a larger purpose to the Exodus in the first place. Both breads are profoundly relevant to our time, for this is a moment that demands Jewish courage, Jewish fortitude, and Jewish purpose.

As Gene Cernan stood on the moon and prepared to board Apollo 17 for the journey home, with his pilot Harrison Schmitt already inside the ship, he spoke the last words said on the lunar surface since:

this is Gene, and I'm on the surface; and, as I take man's last step from the surface, back home for some time to come—but we believe not too long into the future—I'd like to just [say] what I believe history will record. That America's challenge of today has forged man's destiny of tomorrow. And, as we leave the Moon at Taurus-Littrow, we leave as we came and, God willing, as we shall return: with peace and hope for all mankind. Godspeed the crew of Apollo 17.

It is striking that a reference to matzah as well was made by this man on this extraordinary journey, for matzah remains, from God's perspective, the ultimate embodiment of the power and courage of the human spirit, of the willingness of a people to journey into the unknown, into the frontier, with trust and faith in God. But the leavened loaves of Shavuot remind us that there is a larger purpose to our story, a destiny, linked to Sinai and the Holy Land.

Harrison Schmitt went into politics, and became a senator for New Mexico. In the next election, his challenger faced a problem: how does one run against a national hero, one of the last men to walk on the moon? In a flash of brilliance, he ran the following commercial: "Harrison Schmitt: what on earth has he done for you lately?"

The joining of Pesach to Shavuot, of faith on the frontier to the Torah and the Land of Israel, of freedom to Jewish destiny, inspires us to remember the courage of our ancestors marked by the matzah, as well as the destiny of our people reflected in the leavened loaves, and to ask ourselves: what can we do for the future of Jews and Judaism, at this most critical time? We find ourselves situated between Passover and Shavuot, and we find ourselves in a moment demanding courage and purpose: it is a time when our choices can truly impact the future that is to come. May we respond to it in a way worthy of the faith of those that came before, whose faithful journey through history continues through us.

Additional Resources

Leon Kass on Judaism and Immortality, "L'Chaim and Its Limits: Why Not Immortality?" *First Things*, May 2001. [Click here to read.](#)

Rabbi Yoel Bin-Nun on the Offering of the Two Loaves, "The Meaning of Shavuot and Its Unique Offering," Adapted from an Article in *Megadim* 13, 1991. [Click here to read.](#)

John Podhoretz on Israel and the World, "Israel's Splendid Isolation", *Commentary*, May 2024. [Click here to read.](#)



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