

THE BREAD OF FREEDOM

Rabbi Yitz Greenberg

Matzah is the hard bread that Israelites initially ate in the desert because they plunged into liberty without delaying, “since they were driven out of Egypt and could not delay; nor had they prepared provisions for themselves” (Exodus 12:39). However, *matzah* carries a more complex message than “Freedom now!” Made only of flour and water—with no shortening, yeast, or enriching ingredients—*matzah* recreates the hard “bread of affliction” (Deuteronomy 16:3) and meager food given to the Hebrews in Egypt by their exploitative masters. Like the bitter herbs eaten at the Seder, it represents the degradation and suffering of the Israelites.

Matzah is, therefore, both the bread of freedom and the erstwhile bread of slavery. It is not unusual for ex-slaves to invert the very symbols of slavery to express their rejection of the masters’ values. But there is a deeper meaning in the double-edged symbolism of *matzah*. It would have been easy to set up a stark dichotomy: *Matzah* is the bread of the Exodus way, the bread of freedom; *hametz* is the bread eaten in the house of bondage, in Egypt. Or vice versa: *Matzah* is the hard ration, slave food; *hametz* is the rich, soft food to which free people treat themselves. That either/or would be too simplistic. Freedom is in the psyche, not in the bread.

Halakhah underscores the identity of *hametz* and *matzah* with the legal requirement that *matzah* can be made only out of grains that can become *hametz*—that is, those grains that ferment if mixed with water and allowed to stand. How the human prepares the dough is what decides whether it becomes *hametz* or *matzah*. How you view the *matzah* is what decides whether it is the bread of liberty or of servitude.

The point is subtle but essential. To be fully realized, an Exodus must include an inner voyage, not just a march on the road out of Egypt. The difference between slavery and freedom is not that slaves endure hard conditions while free people enjoy ease. The bread remained equally hard in both states, but the psychology of the Israelites shifted totally.

When the hard crust was given to them by tyrannical masters, the *matzah* they ate in passivity was the bread of slavery. But when the Israelites willingly went from green, fertile deltas into the desert because they were determined to be free, when they refused to delay freedom and opted to eat unleavened bread rather than wait for it to rise, the hard crust became the bread of freedom. Out of fear and lack of responsibility, the slave accommodates to ill treatment. Out of dignity and determination to live free, the individual will shoulder any burden.

Rabbi Levi Yitzhak of Berdichev, whose analyses always portrayed the people of Israel in a favorable light, insisted that the willingness of the Israelites to enter the desert with hard bread continues to evoke God’s love. Levi Yitzhak asked: Why does the Torah continually call Pesah “*hag ha-matzot*,” the feast of unleavened bread, when the Jews call it “*hag ha-pesah*,” the feast of Passover? Because as lovers, they stress each other’s goodness. Israel praises God who passed over the homes of the Jews when destroying Egypt. God praises the Jews who went so trustingly out of the fertile plain of Egypt into a barren desert with meager food.

Tradition specifically requires eating unleavened bread on the first two nights of Pesah; during the rest of the holiday, the only requirement is not to eat *hametz*. Eating hard bread during the holiday of liberation stimulates appreciation for the flavor of freedom and summons up empathy for those still in need. At the Seder, the Exodus retelling opens with the Aramaic phrase, “*Ha lahma anya* / This is the bread of affliction which our ancestors ate in Egypt.” The moral consequence follows immediately: “Let all who are hungry enter and eat; let all who are in need come and join in the Pesah with us. This year, [we are] slaves. Next year, [may the slaves be] free.” ♦

Adapted from Rabbi Irving Greenberg, The Jewish Way: Living the Holidays (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1998), pp. 46-48.