

The Ma'aseh Rokei'ah is preparing for another moment of redemption, one that is coming soon, maybe even tonight. We know from the biblical book of Malachi—the passage from the prophets read on the Shabbat before Pesah (3:4-24)—that Elijah is the prophet who will come to announce the final redemption. The Ma'aseh Rokei'ah keeps the door open on Seder night, not to let others in, but to ensure that the people inside can get out. His custom imagines that when Elijah comes to announce the redemption, there will be no time to waste. The open doors remind us—and the prophet—that we are ready and eager to be redeemed.

Taken together, these two customs have an important lesson to teach: the closed door that keeps out the hungry may also be holding us back from redemption. The Seder traditions teach us that Pesah is a time for open doors. Only when we are ready to open our doors to the hungry—when we have addressed the systemic hunger outside to a point where all who are hungry really do have a seat at the table—will we really be open to redemption. May it come speedily in our days. ♦

WAITING IS THE HARDEST PART

R. Micha'el Rosenberg

FOR MANY OF US, the worst eating day of the year is the day before Pesah, the 14th of Nisan. Though the holiday has not yet begun, after a third of the daylight hours have passed we are prohibited from eating any more *hameitz*. Challenging our attempts to have a filling meal further, on Erev Pesah we are also forbidden to have *matzah*:

תלמוד ירושלמי פסחים י"א, דף לז טור ב
אמר רבי לוי: האוכל מצה בערב הפסח כבא
על ארוסתו בבית חמיו והבא על ארוסתו בבית
חמיו לוקה.

Talmud Yerushalmi Pesahim 10:1, 37b

R. Levi said: One who eats matzah on Erev Pesah is like one who has sex with their betrothed in their father-in-law's house—and one who has sex with their betrothed in their father-in-law's house is lashed.

We do not receive any details about this provocatively phrased prohibition. Medieval and early modern authorities therefore disagree about exactly when it goes into effect. Many commentators take the language of “*erev ha-pesah*” in a straightforward way and accordingly rule that the prohibition goes into effect at dawn on the 14th.¹ R. Zerahyah ha-Levi (the

1 See, for example, Rema Orah Hayyim 471:2. Commentators do not take seriously the possibility that the prohibition would go into effect at sundown the night before, even though that is also, technically, *erev ha-pesah*. Though the Yerushalmi prohibits *matzah* only on the day before Pesah, customs extending the prohibition back further develop later; see, for example, Mishnah Berurah 471:12.

Razah),² however, argues that it only begins halfway through the day:

המאור הקטון טו:

ואע"ג דגרסינן בירושלמי: האוכל מצה בערב הפסח כבועל ארוסתו בבית חמיו. ה"מ משש שעות ולמעלה. אבל עד שש שעות מותר ודיקא נמי דמדמי ליה לארוסה.

Ha-Ma'or ha-Katon 15b.

Even though we read in the Yerushalmi: "One who eats matzah on Erev Pesah is like one who has sex with their betrothed in their father-in-law's house," these words apply [only] from six hours onward. But until six hours, it is permitted. And it is precise, for [R. Levi] compares it to a betrothed.

The Razah does not fully explain his reasoning, but he connects this lenient view to the metaphor, taking it seriously and not as a mere rhetorical flourish. His reasoning seems to be based on the idea that the prohibition on sexual relations with one's betrothed is exactly that—a prohibition on relations after betrothal, the first step in the halakhic marriage process, has already taken place. Likewise, the Razah contends, the prohibition on *matzah* goes into effect only once the Jewish people are "engaged" to *matzah*, that is, once we have a formal halakhic relationship to it. The prohibition on *matzah* therefore goes into effect only when the related prohibition on *hameitz* does, namely, halfway through the day.³

Irrespective of **when** the prohibition on *matzah* goes into effect, **why** should it be forbidden in the lead-up to Pesah? The Rambam provides two different ways of thinking about the reasoning behind the ban, though he presents them as if they are one:

משנה תורה הלכות חמץ ומצה וז"ב

אסרו חכמים לאכול מצה בערב הפסח כדי שיהיה הכר לאכילתה בערב. ...

וכן אסור לאכול ערב הפסח מקודם המנחה כמעט, כדי שיכנס לאכילת מצה בתאווה.

Mishneh Torah,

Laws of Hameitz and Matzah 6:12

The Sages forbade eating matzah on Erev Pesah so that there would be a distinction (heker) to its being eaten at night. ...

And so too a bit before [mid-afternoon] it is forbidden to eat, so that one will go into the eating of matzah with appetite.

The Rambam begins by saying that we want a clear difference between any mundane eating of *matzah* that might take place at some earlier time before Pesah, and our *mitzvah*-eating of *matzah* on the night of the Seder. He compares this ("and so too") to a similar but distinct ruling that one should not eat anything at all, *matzah* or otherwise, on the afternoon leading into the Seder.⁴ The Rambam describes the reason for this second ruling as "so that one will go into the eating of *matzah* with appetite."⁵ This reason overlaps with the first, but it is not identical: one could mark the difference between mundane *matzah* eating and ritually mandated eating without having to enter the holiday hungry. The Rambam's connecting these two rulings by means of the word *ve-khein* ("and so too") implies that we should take both seriously as explaining our required abstention from *matzah* on the 14th of Nisan.

Eating *matzah* at the Seder, then, requires two things according to the Rambam. First, it must be clear that this is no ordinary eating, but rather, that we are doing it to fulfill a purpose other than sustenance. We must realize, and make clear to anyone observing us, that now we are eating the obligatory *matzah*, the bread of both our oppression and our redemption, to remember our enslavement and mark our emancipation.

Secondly, we must also desire the *matzah*—we must be hungry for it. We can understand this requirement in a number of ways, but however we do, we should not ignore the fact that it fundamentally requires us to relate to the *matzah* as exactly what it is in the here

² 12th century, Spain and France.

³ Although, as I mentioned above, practical *halakhah* requires abstinence from leavened products after four halakhic hours, this standard reflects Rabbinic stringency; as (some of) the Rabbis understand it, one is biblically prohibited from eating *hameitz* only from halakhic noon onwards. See Bavli Pesahim 28b.

⁴ Mishnah Pesahim 10:1; the *mishnah*'s ruling is adapted in the Bavli so as to allow for light snacking at that point in the day.

⁵ Based on Bavli Pesahim 99b.

and now: physical food that feeds our bodies. Even as our eating of *matzah* must be clearly other than the fulfillment of bodily needs, it must be eaten with physical hunger!

How are we to understand this tension—that the *matzah* we eat must serve both physical and spiritual needs? One thing we should learn from this perhaps surprising juxtaposition is that our spiritual lives and our physical needs are not in fact distinct: they go hand in hand. This reality is perhaps nowhere clearer than on the Seder night, when we fulfill the obligation to tell our story not only with words and ideas, but with the tangible foods we ingest.

We can understand the desire to try to separate these two aspects of our lives one from the other. We live in a culture that tends to suggest that there's something unholy about our physical bodies. This idea manifests in Jewish thinking at times as well. Consider the take of R. Moshe Yisrael, an 18th-century rabbi in Rhodes:

שארית ישראל, שבת הגדול ג

דמנהגו של הדיוט הלהוט אחר אכילה אין לו
סבלנות וחסיף ואכיל ולא בריך, וכענין שאמרו
בירושלמי [פסחים י"א]: האוכל מצה בערב פסח
כאילו בועל ארוסתו בבית חמיו, והמשל דומה
לנמשל דכל המצות שיש בהם הנאת הגוף יש
עושים אותם דוקא לשם מצוה ואין תכלית כונתם
להנאתן, ויש מהם עושים אותם להנאת גופם
דוקא, ומפני זה המשיל האוכל מצה בערב פסח
כבועל ארוסתו בבית חמיו.

לומר דזה האוכל מצה בערב פסח אף על פי
שאחר כך בליל הפסח אוכל מצה, מכל מקום
לא שלט בעצמו לסבול עד הלילה לאכול המצה
לתיאבון, וזה מורה שעושה להנאת גופו.

She'eirir Yisrael, Shabbat ha-Gadol #3

For the way of a commoner, desirous for food, is to have no patience, and they grab and eat and do not bless, as they said in the Yerusahmi [Pesahim 10:1], "One who eats matzah on Erev Pesah is like one who has sex with their betrothed in their father-in-law's house."

The metaphor resembles the described, for any mitzvah in which there is bodily benefit, some do it specifically for the sake of the mitzvah, and their purpose is not their own benefit. But others do them specifically for the benefit of their own body. Therefore, it compared the one who eats matzah on Erev Pesah to one who

has sex with their betrothed in their father-in-law's house, to say that the one who eats matzah on Erev Pesah, even though they later eat matzah on Seder night, nonetheless they failed to control themselves, to suffer until the night to eat matzah with appetite. And this teaches that they did it for the benefit of their body.

This approach not only distinguishes between actions performed to serve our own physical needs and those performed for some higher spiritual end, but actively denigrates the former as negating the possibility of the latter. I understand the sentiment; personal, physical enjoyment appears to undercut the sincerity of our desire to serve God and fulfill a mission in the world. At the same time, I'm increasingly wary of excessively body-negative theologies such as that expressed here. In this case, the talmudic insistence, codified by the Rambam, that we actually be hungry when we eat the *matzah* at the Seder suggests that physical satisfaction is not an alternative to spiritual service, but a piece of it.

R. Tzvi Elimelech Spira, the Benei Yissaskhar, understands the relationship between physicality and spirituality differently:

בני יששכר, ניסן ח

המצוה הראשונה (היינו מצות פריה ורביה)...
הוא בנין אב לכל המצות שהן צריכות שימור
והזדמנות רב כמו שהיה מכריז שלמה המלך ע"ה:
שומר מצוה לא ידע דבר רע (קהלת ח:ה) עיי"ש,
לפי"ז הכוונה שומר מצוה, היינו שעושה המצוה
במתינות (ע"ד: ואביו שמר את הדבר [בראשית
לז:יא]),

לא ידע דבר רע, דאם עושה שלא במתינות יכול
להתערב בתוכו רע ח"ו... משא"כ כשעושה
המצוה במתינות וישוב הדעת אזי לא יתערב
בהדעת רע רק טוב, וזהו שנצטוינו בתורה במצות
לא תעשה איסור אכילת חמץ....

והנה נצטוינו: ושמרתם את המצות (שמות יב:יז)
(קרי ביה גם כן מצוות כמו שאמרו רז"ל [מכילתא
פ' בא ט']) היינו שתעשו המצוות במתינות
ושמירה וישוב הדעת בכדי שיהיה כולו טוב, (על
כן אמרו רז"ל: [ירושלמי פסחים י"א] כל האוכל
מצה בערב פסח כאילו בועל ארוסתו בבית חמיו.)

Benei Yissaskhar, Nisan #8

The first mitzvah (i.e. the mitzvah of reproduction)... is a paradigm for all mitzvot,

namely, that they require care (shimur) and great timing, as King Shlomo, peace be upon him, announced: “One who keeps the commandments will not know any bad thing” (Kohelet 8:5). According to this, the meaning of “keeps the commandments” (shomeir mitzvah) is that one does the mitzvah with appropriate caution (metinut) (like the verse: “His father kept the matter in mind [shamar et ha-davar]” [Bereishit 37:11]).

“Will not know any bad thing”—for if one does it without appropriate caution, evil could become intermixed with it, God forbid... which is not the case when one does the mitzvah with appropriate caution and a settled mind. In that case, no evil will be intermixed in one’s mind, only goodness. And this is why we are commanded in the Torah with the prohibition on eating hameitz...

And behold, we are commanded: “Protect (u-shmartem) the matzot” (Shemot 12:17) (which we also read as mitzvot, as our Sages of blessed memory said [Mekhilta Massekhta de-Pisha 9]), i.e., that you should perform mitzvot with appropriate caution and care (shemirah) and a settled mind, so that it will be entirely goodness.⁶ (Therefore, our Sages of blessed memory said: “One who eats matzah on Erev Pesah is like one who has sex with their betrothed in their father-in-law’s house” [Yerushalmi Pesachim 10:1].)

The Benei Yissaskhar understands the prohibition on eating matzah on Erev Pesah as reflective of a general injunction: even with regard to religiously-praiseworthy actions, one must wait for the right moment, and until one is in the right of state of mind, rather than jumping feverishly into them without thought and reflection.

In some sense this is in tension with the second reason given by the Rambam. For the Rambam, we wait to eat the matzah both to mark it as distinctive, but also so as to eat it with hunger. Generating and building up bodily desire is the reason we wait, and therefore is in some

sense essential to the mitzvah. This way of thinking about matzah conjures an image of eating it, if not ravenously, then at least with excitement and zeal.

The Benei Yissaskhar paints a very different picture. Instead of digging in hungrily, in a way that highlights our bodily appetite for the religiously mandated matzah, our waiting highlights our patience and ability to make thoughtful, considered choices, rather than rash, impulsive ones. The Benei Yissaskhar’s vision also steers clear of the explicit body-negativity that we find in R. Moshe Yisrael’s explanation. We are not denying that we get bodily pleasure from the matzah; we are simply doing so in a way that is considered and contemplative.⁷ The Benei Yissaskhar in this particular passage is not so much expressing disdain for the body as recognizing that, when we listen only to our bodily instincts, we move too fast. Observing mitzvot calls for us to slow down, to get into a state of mindfulness whereby we not only make good choices, but perform those good choices with a settled mind, so that we can fully appreciate what we are doing. The waiting, the delaying—these are essential to the performance of the mitzvah.

The length of the Seder—and especially of the part before we begin our meal with our eating of the matzah—have understandably become an object of some derision. Why, we ask, is this taking so long? Whether we are motivated by our hunger or our desire to observe the mitzvot of the night (which, to be sure, include the Maggid section that takes up the bulk of the time until we eat the matzah), it’s tempting to want to get on with it. We know what we need to do, so let’s do it. The prohibition on eating matzah on Erev Pesah reminds us that simply **doing** the mitzvah can be an impediment to actually **observing** it. Without taking the time to think about what we’re doing and why we’re doing it, our mitzvot become mere actions. As Tom Petty said, the waiting is the hardest part. The Benei Yissaskhar tells us: it’s also the most important. ♦

6 The Benei Yissaskhar’s use of this midrash is in fact surprising, since the point there is that just as matzah should not be left to linger, so too mitzvot should not be left to linger, but rather performed immediately—nearly the opposite of the Benei Yissaskhar’s claim!

7 To be sure, the Benei Yissaskhar’s understanding of this prohibition **could** be read in a more body-disparaging sense, both because the “intermixing of evil” could be read as referring to bodily desires, and because the text on which he bases himself indeed takes it in that direction. See R. Menahem Azaryah mi-Pano, Asarah Ma’amarot, Hakor Din 3.11. I nonetheless take seriously the Benei Yissaskhar’s choice not to center this sort of degradation of bodily desire, focusing instead on seriousness rather than asceticism.