



### **Poor Man's Bread and the Community of Sharing**

We know that Passover has to do with liberation from Egypt and things that happened in the past. However, what does it have to do with politics and the social order of today? Everything!

As you know, *the seder*, which means "order" is a highly structured ritual drama. Each act is layered with symbolic meaning, and nothing is extraneous. For this reason, the act of *Yachatz* seems to be quite mundane. A piece of matzah is taken out before the participants and cracked in half. Half of it is put back to be eaten later, the *afikoman*. What could possibly be the meaning of this seemingly irrelevant act?

The seder calls matzah, *lechem oni*, poor man's bread. The rabbis comment that "Just as a poor person eats 'in pieces', so too do we eat 'in pieces'" (TB Pesachim 115b). That is to say, people who live with a sense of scarcity never know where their next meal might be, and are used to rationing resources.

Many years ago I worked in a Jewish elder hostel program for older adults, many of them Holocaust survivors or American Jews who had lived through the Great Depression. In the dining room we always placed baskets of fruits and snacks for the participants. We noticed that within an hour all the food was gone. In time, we began to realize that the participants were not only taking food for now, but were filling their bags with food for later. I am sure many of us have seen this same phenomenon. Now many of these people were upper middle class, wealthy enough to spend retirement years in elder hostel programs. Yet, the trauma of their youth, the fear of going without, continued to inform their lives even when there was plenty. *In essence, scarcity was no longer a*

*physical state, but a state of the mind.* It was that same mindset that caused the Jews to hoard the manna in the desert, even though within a day the remainder rotted. God sent food from the heavens, but what will happen tomorrow? After all, food does not fall from heaven every day!

It is this psychological dynamic which the Talmud addresses. The *matzah* harkens back to our ancestors in Egypt, a time of scarcity. We are commanded in the seder 'to see ourselves as having left Egypt ourselves'. The act of *yachatz*, of breaking the matzah and putting some back for later, in essence is a reenactment of this piece of Talmud. The 'poor man's' bread is not matzah, but *a cracked* matzah of rationed resources. The fact that this is the meaning of the action is evidenced by the very next thing we do. We are told to raise the cracked matzah and declare "This is the poor man's bread our forefather's ate in the land of Egypt."

What is surprising is the very next line in the haggadah. "Let all who are hungry come and eat!" This seems to be utterly counter intuitive. If I am living in a place of scarcity, I do not invite others to come and eat; in fact, I do the exact opposite- I conserve and even hoard. Often when people feel resources are limited, they do not turn outward but inward. What kind of message is this!

To answer this question, I would like to share a *true* story with you. In Brooklyn there is an organization which delivers food packages to Holocaust survivors, very much like the food distributed by our Jewish Community Services. On one occasion a volunteer could not deliver a package, and the organization called another volunteer, who reluctantly agreed to make the delivery. Upon delivering the package to the survivor, the volunteer noticed she was looking at her in strange way. Finally she asked her, "Is there a reason why you are looking at me?"

"I do not mean to be rude, but are you related to Mrs. Schwartz?"

Startled, the volunteer answered, "In fact yes, that was my mother, of blessed memory?"

The survivor turned white, "Please sit down for a few minutes. I would like to tell you a story. Your mother and I were together in the concentration camp. In fact, we were in the same barrack. One day your mother came to me almost delirious from hunger. She told me that if she did not get more nourishment she was sure she would not make it through another day, and begged me to give her

my ration. Now I am sure you know, we had absolutely nothing, and yet, when I looked into her eyes, I knew what your mother was saying was true. Although hungry myself, I gave her the small ration I had. The next day your mother came to me with tears in her eyes. She told me that I had saved her life, and that she did not know how she could ever repay this kindness.”

Hearing the story, the volunteer began to cry, as it dawned upon her that if it were not for this woman, she may have never been born.

The Holocaust survivor continued. “I live very modestly and have little. Life has not been easy for me. When you walked in I was reminded of this event in my life, an event that seems a lifetime ago. I see your mother standing before me again. Today- with you standing here before me and delivering this meal- the kindness has been repaid.”

This survivor embodied the message of the *haggadah*. “This is the poor man’s bread. Let all who are hungry come and eat.” The *haggadah* challenges us to go beyond our own suffering, our own needs, and to see the general good of all. It asks us to share whatever we have with others. It represents a vision fueled by the moral imagination that communities, countries, and our world can be transformed through hearts which beat in synchronicity with others, feeling the bonds that tie all of us together.

If we must do this in times of scarcity, how much more so in times of plenty! I must be frank with all of you. In the past few years we have heard much about recession, depression, and scarcity. However, when I reflect upon the slavery in Egypt, the Great Depression, or terrible events of the last century, I recognize that in fact scarcity is a relative term. There are some who will focus more on their financial balance sheets than the public good. There are those who are really suffering, who are out of work, cannot feed their families, and do not know where they will live. In difficult financial times is turning inward human and natural? Absolutely. Is it Jewish? Absolutely not. We stand for “Whoever is hungry let them come and eat.” We learned this lesson not only in Egypt, but throughout our history, and it informs our personal and communal values, the values we live out every day.

May this year bring us each the blessings of plenty, coupled with the imagination that indeed we can make a difference in the lives of our loved ones, our families, our country and the world. When we do this, we can say the ending of the *ha*

*lachma anya* with conviction. "This year we are slaves, but next year we shall be in Jerusalem."

Chag Kasher V'Sameach,

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