

## Matzah- Three Messages for Us:

One of the central obligations of the seder night is to tell the story of the Exodus. In fact, the haggadah comes from the Hebrew root h-g-d, which means to tell. However, the form that this ‘telling over’ takes is not simply a verbal cataloging of events. We are not studying ancient history tonight, but are meant to integrate this narrative into our lives today. How do we do this?

We read in the haggadah that Raban Gamliel taught that anyone who has not discussed the three primary symbols of the seder- the paschal lamb, the matzah, and the bitter herbs, has not ‘fulfilled their obligation’. Many of the commentators remark that Raban Gamliel is not referring to the commandment to eat the paschal lamb, matzah, and bitter herbs, but rather he is referring to the mitzvah of *sippur yetziat mitzraim*, recounting the exodus from Egypt. In other words, it is not enough to simply recount the events; the story must be reenacted, drawing upon the rich symbols of the seder night. The reason for this is, that ‘each one of us must see himself as if he had left Egypt’ (*maggid section of haggadah*). The symbols are meant to transport us to a different time and place.

If this is true, when we sit down to eat our matzah, what are we supposed to think about? How do we answer the question of the child who asks us, ‘why do we only eat unleavened bread?’ Allow me to provide three answers: *matzah* is the bread of faith, the bread of affliction, and the bread of simplicity.

### The Bread of Faith

Rabbi Levi Yitzchak of Berdichev once reflected upon the fact that while in general the Torah calls the festival the feast of matzah (*chag ha-matzot*), we call the holiday Passover (*chag ha-pesach*). Why should this be? The reflection below grows out of his basic insight.

As you remember, God ‘passed over’ the houses of the Jews in Egypt during the tenth plague, the death of every first born Egyptian. At that very moment, God chose the Jewish people for its special mission to become a ‘light unto the nations’. However, the Jewish people in Egypt really were not so different than anyone else in Egypt. According to the rabbis, they were utterly immersed in the idolatrous ways of their Egyptian neighbors and unworthy of redemption. Nonetheless, through this great act of salvation God was making a statement about God’s faith in the *potential* of these people. Passover is a statement about God’s faith in us, even when our potential is not fully realized. We call the holiday Passover to recognize God’s graciousness and kindness.

At the same time, when the call to leave Egypt came, the Jews had no time to prepare bread, as they were ejected from Egypt within hours of the plague. They had no time to sit and consider their options, to plan ahead. Within hours, they were setting out into a desert to go to a promised land that would need to be conquered. They were following God’s promises to their forefather Abraham who was assured over four hundred years earlier that he would inherit the land of Israel, yet Abraham died never seeing this

promise fulfilled. They were following a God who had been silent for 210 years of slavery. Still, they believed in God, and saw the glorious future which as yet had been unrealized. *To follow God into the desert was the Jewish people's faith in God.*

In reality, this story is a metaphor for us. Living as a Jew through the vicissitudes of history is similarly an act of faith in the potential for a more redeemed world in spite of the obvious hardships. The Torah calls the holiday the Festival of Matzah to recognize the greatness of the Jewish people in still having faith in God.

The two names of the holiday reflect the faith of God in Israel, and Israel in God. Without either of these we would have never survived to this day.

### **The Bread of Affliction**

In the Haggadah we read, "This is the poor man's bread our forefathers ate in the land of Egypt. Let anyone hungry join us in our meal." The second line is attributed to Rav Huna, a great rabbi in the Talmud, who would walk out into the street during every meal, announcing his house was open to all (Taanit 20b). In fact, according to the *otzar ha-geonim*, a medieval work, it was customary in Babylonia for Jews to keep their doors open for the entire seder night! (Only because of the dangers of anti-Semitism was this custom changed.) What is the connection between the poor man's bread of Egypt and the posture of welcoming all into the house?

There is a hasidic story of a poor man that with God's help had made a huge fortune. The man lived in a palace with waiters attending him at every meal. His house was always opened to the community, and many unfortunate people would come to enjoy the delicacies he always had. Once a year he would take out his old rags, sit on the floor, and eat a simple meal. The servants were puzzled by his strange behavior. The rich man turned to them stating, "Every year I take a moment to remember where I have come from. I remember the time that I was hungry and in need, and then I remember why my house must always be open to those less fortunate than me, for I was that person."

When we eat the matzah, we must remember that we were slaves, and use this knowledge to make us more compassionate human beings.

### **The Bread of Simplicity**

Interestingly, the Bible is far more interested in the negative prohibition of eating chametz (leavened products) than the positive commandment of eating matzah. Consider the following facts: for seven days we cannot eat chametz, but according to the prevalent opinion, one must eat matzah only on the first night. We spend the night before Passover searching out chametz, and the following morning we burn it. If that was not enough, we then renounce all ownership of it, and even sell it for the week! If even a crumb of

chametz drops into a mixture, the entire mixture is chametz! Why this obsession with chametz?

Like Yom Kippur, which is the day of renewal for each of us as individuals, the holiday of Passover is the day of renewal for the Jewish people. On the fifteenth of the Jewish month of Nissan we were transformed from a group of individuals into a people. Just like Yom Kippur, Passover is a time of beginnings, and therefore a period of *teshuvah*, renewal. The rabbis saw chametz as a poignant symbol of the *yetzer hara*, the evil impulse. Chametz is a symbol of being 'puffed up', being arrogant and seeing oneself as the center of everything. On the other hand, matzah is a symbol of simplicity and humility.

To leaven dough, all one needs to do is mix flour and water and let it sit. Eventually, it will rise. On the other hand, to make matzah one needs to be constantly involved in the process- mixing, kneeding, and baking all within eighteen minutes! To make a kosher matzah, one needs to be keenly attentive to the process, and aware of the factors that can compromise the matzah.

The same is true with us as people. People have the notion that there are people who are 'naturally good', 'naturally pure', 'naturally righteous'. Nothing could be further from the truth. Like chametz, a person who is inattentive to their character traits and behavior will ultimately become 'puffed up' and arrogant. To stay fit one needs to be attentive to diet and exercise. The same is true with one's character. One needs to 'practice' and 'be attentive' to produce a personality and character which reflects simplicity and goodness. The Torah tells us that 'we should walk simply with the Lord', but upon reflection, this is harder than we think.

Chag Kasher V'Sameach, a Happy Passover to all.

*The Chaplaincy Program of the Greater Miami Jewish Federation for over forty years has provided care and support to those in need.*

*Please call us during business hours at 305-576-4000, and during nights and weekends at 305-562-1235. Please leave your name, location, the time of your call, and how we can contact you. We will return your call as soon as we can.*